



Loose Id

OLD POISON

Josh Lanyon

Dangerous Ground 2: Old Poison

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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Romantic Suspense

Previous Title: Dangerous Ground

Special Agents for the Department of Diplomatic Security, Taylor MacAllister and Will Brandt have been partners and best friends for three years, but everything changed during a weeklong camping trip. Now Taylor and Will are trying to see if true love is in the cards or if it's just sex. Really, really good sex, granted!

But when Taylor receives a cobra bottled in rice wine for the birthday he nearly didn't live to see, Will fears that something in Taylor's past—something Taylor won't talk about—is going to put an end to their chance of a future romance. Or any future at all.

Publisher's Note: This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices, violence.

Chapter One

That prickle between his shoulder blades meant he was being watched.

One hand on the mailbox, Taylor glanced around. There was a woman pushing a kid in a stroller down the long, shady street. She was moving in the opposite direction. There was a guy in a parked Chevy reading a newspaper. Old Mrs. Wills was in her garden. She was shading her eyes, staring at him.

Taylor raised his hand in greeting.

She fluttered a hand back in hello.

The guy in the Chevy turned the page of his newspaper, remaining mostly concealed behind the tall pages.

A comfortable, quiet street in a small beach community. Old houses beneath old shade trees. But it was a neighborhood in flux. Old residents dying off, new residents not staying longer than a couple of years.

Taylor pulled the mail out of his box. The usual circulars and catalogs of junk he never bought and didn't want. And a birthday card. From Will.

Taylor studied the pale green envelope for a long moment. He was aware of a tightness in his chest, a confused rush of emotions. Amusement, sure, but uppermost...a sort of...a feeling he couldn't begin to describe.

That neat, careful cursive with which Will had spelled out Taylor's name and address. Not like Will's usual hand. Not that Will's usual hand was sloppy; Taylor was the one who had to translate his hieroglyphics for the front-office staff. But there was something painstaking and self-conscious about the writing on the envelope.

There was something else in the mail slot. Taylor pulled out a slip informing him that he had a package in the side locker of the mailbox stand. He unlocked the long cabinet, and sure

enough there was a rectangular parcel addressed to him. He tucked it under his arm, slammed the metal door shut, and crossed the street.

The guy in the Chevy remained well buried behind his newspaper.

Taylor cut across the patchy, threadbare lawn of his house, took the three front porch steps in one, and let himself into the house.

He locked the door behind him, looking down at the green envelope. Just the fact that Will had mailed him a birthday card. They'd be seeing each other that night—barring Will getting delayed on his current case—but Will had taken the time to pick a card and mail it. It was so...

It touched Taylor more than he wanted to admit. Of course this was a special birthday. Not one of the “0” birthdays; Taylor was thirty-two years old as of four o'clock that morning. It was special because ten weeks earlier Taylor had been shot in the chest and had nearly died.

It had been very close. The closest he'd ever come to checking out. He was still stuck on desk duty, although—thank Christ—this was the last week of that. He'd passed his fitness exam that very afternoon and Monday he'd be back in the field, partnered with Will again. Life would finally be getting back to normal. The new normal. The normal of him and Will as a...well, couple.

Partners and friends for three years, and lovers for little more than one month. Taylor was still afraid to trust it. It seemed dangerous to be this happy, like it was tempting fate. He couldn't quite forget that Will hadn't wanted this change in their relationship, that love had taken him unwilling and off guard.

He tore open the envelope.

It was the usual kind of thing. Sailboats, smooth water, and cloudless blue sky. Happy Birthday to My Sweetheart in sunshine yellow script.

His throat tightened. Hell. He'd never been anyone's sweetheart before. No one had ever sent him a card like this. Will had even signed the inside Love, Will.

There was a parcel too. A brown cardboard box. The kind of thing wine was shipped in—or good booze. The label was typed. Taylor used his pocketknife to slice through the tape sealing the box shut. Inside was a Styrofoam shell to protect the glass contents. He pried it out, and sure enough it was a bottle. A wine bottle with a yellow seal. He nearly dropped it.

There was a cobra inside the wine bottle.

Black-brown hood flared, fangs bared, the coiled cobra stared blindly through the clear rice wine.

What the fuck?

It was dead, of course. Dead and pickled. Asian snake wine was an authentic Asian beverage supposedly valuable for treating everything from rheumatism to night sweats. It was also supposed to be a natural aphrodisiac with mystical sexual properties, although what the hell was natural about a cobra in a wine bottle?

Feeling slightly queasy, Taylor set the bottle on the kitchen table.

No way had Will sent that. He searched through the box's packing materials to see if there was a card or a note. Nada.

Weird.

A joke maybe. Probably. He had a few friends at the Bureau of Diplomatic Security who would find this kind of thing amusing. Except it was an expensive joke. These specialty wines weren't cheap. And most of his pals at the DS were.

He contemplated the bottle for another second or two, but he had things to get ready before Will arrived. He wanted this to be a very good weekend.

* * * *

Taylor was not going to be happy.

Will tried to tell himself that Taylor's happiness was beside the point. Not that it didn't matter to him, but it couldn't be Will's first consideration when it came to work. Taylor was a professional. He needed to understand that this was (a) not Will's choice, (b) all part of the job, (c) no big deal, (d) all of the above.

The long red snake of taillights slithered to another halt line in front of him. Will sighed and tapped the brakes, rolling to a stop. He turned up Emmylou Harris on the CD player. On the seat next to him, Riley, his five-year-old German shepherd, licked his chops nervously. Riley liked traffic even less than Will did.

Traffic on the 101 was always a bitch these days, and it was especially a bitch on Friday evenings when half the Valley residents seemed to be pouring out every side street and crevice of the smoggy basin for a weekend in the mountains or at the beach.

It could take an exasperating hour just to travel from his Woodland Hills home to Ventura. Lately Taylor had been hinting that they should move in together. Will had ignored the hints.

Not that he didn't like Ventura. He did. Living that near the beach would be great, in fact. And not like he and Taylor didn't get along well. They had always got along well, even before they moved the relationship from best friends and partners to lovers.

Lovers.

Not a word Will would typically have used to describe one of his relationships. But then he wouldn't generally describe his relationships as...relationships.

The cars in front of him began to move again, brake lights flicking off, turn signals flicking on. The sea of traffic rolling forward once more.

And then...stop.

"Goddamn traffic," Will growled, and Riley flicked his ears.

Will closed his eyes, picturing his eventual arrival, savoring it, momentarily shutting out the smog and exhaust and noise of Friday evening on the 101, seeing Taylor's face in his mind: that weirdly exotic bone structure; wide green eyes that looked almost bronze; a wicked angel's full, sensual mouth; the soft, dark hair with that new—since the shooting—streak of silver.

He did not want to fight with Taylor over this thing with Bradley. He especially did not want to fight with him tonight when he had been looking forward to this evening—this weekend—all day.

They needed this time together. It had been a rough couple of weeks with Will working late most nights and Taylor increasingly frustrated with desk duty. Taylor wasn't the most patient guy in the world at the best of times. And this had not been the best of times for him.

Will had planned on a long weekend of spoiling him rotten, starting with dinner at Taylor's favorite Japanese restaurant. But now...

So did he tell Taylor the bad news up front or did he wait till Taylor was properly fed and fucked?

Emmylou sang, "I'm riding a big blue ball, I never do dream I may fall..."

"What do you think?" he asked Riley.

Riley flicked his ears and stared out the window, panting softly.

"You're no help," Will grumbled.

* * * *

Will parked behind Taylor's silver Acura MDX in the narrow side driveway and got out of his own Toyota Land Cruiser. Evenings were damp this close to the beach. The air smelled of salt and old seaweed—corrupt yet invigorating.

He let Riley out of the passenger side of the SUV. Riley trotted down the driveway to the large, overgrown backyard, barking a warning to the neighborhood cats.

Will slid the gate shut. The house was an original Craftsman bungalow. It had been in terrible shape when Taylor bought it two years previously. Actually, it was still in terrible shape, but Taylor was renovating it, one room at a time, in his spare hours.

Will got his duffel bag off the backseat and the heavy, blue-and-gold-wrapped birthday present. He felt self-conscious about that present; he'd spent a lot of time and a fair amount of money on Taylor this year.

Hard to forget that Taylor nearly hadn't lived to see this birthday.

Speak of the devil. The side door opened, and Taylor came down the steps, an unguarded grin breaking the remote beauty of his face. There was a funny catch in Will's throat as he saw him alive and strong and smiling again.

"How was traffic?"

Will opened his mouth, but the next instant Taylor was in his arms, his mouth covering Will's in unaffected hunger. They were safe here. The cinder-block wall was high, and the bougainvillea draping over the edge of the roof neatly blocked out the view of this driveway from the street.

"Man, I missed you," Taylor said when they surfaced for air.

"You saw me this morning."

"For three minutes in front of Varga, Jabowitz, and Cooper. It's not the same."

"No," agreed Will, "it's not the same." His gaze rested on Taylor's face; his heart seemed to swell with a quiet joy. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks." Taylor's smile widened. "Hey, I got your card."

“Oh.” Will was a little embarrassed about that card. To My Sweetheart or whatever it said. Kind of over-the-top. He'd bought it on impulse. Taylor was smiling, though, and with no sign of mockery, so maybe it was okay.

“Is that for me?” Taylor asked as Will retrieved the tote bag and parcel he'd dropped when Taylor landed in his arms.

“Nah. I'm heading over to another party after I get done here.” Will shoved the blue-and-gold present into his hands. “Yes, it's for you.”

“Okay if I open it now?”

“You're the most impatient guy I ever met.” Will was amused, though.

“Hey, I waited three years for you,” Taylor threw over his shoulder, heading up the stairs into the house.

“Yeah, remind me again how you whiled away the hours in that lonely monastery as you waited?”

Taylor's chuckle drifted back.

Will heeled the side door shut and followed Taylor through the mud porch and into the kitchen.

This was one of the first rooms Taylor had renovated: a cozy breakfast nook with built-in window benches, gleaming mahogany cabinets and drawers with patinated copper fixtures, green granite counters, and gray-green slate floor. The numerous cabinets were well designed and well organized. The care and priority given the kitchen might have deceived someone into thinking cooking played a role in Taylor's life. In fact, the kitchen had been designed to please Will—the only person who had ever cooked a meal in that house.

There was a German chocolate cake on the table in the breakfast nook. Will's card was propped next to it with a couple of others: To Our Son, To My Son, To My Brother, What is a Brother? Happy Birthday, Uncle. Greetings from the whole tribe. To the side of these was a wine bottle-shaped science experiment gone awry.

“What the hell is that?” Will peered more closely at the pickled contents of the wine bottle. What it was, was a fucking cobra. The cobra stared back sightlessly at him, fangs bared.

"It's my snake. I've been waiting all day to show it to you." Taylor wiggled his eyebrows salaciously.

"Funny," said Will, glancing at him. "Where did you get it?"

"It came in the mail."

"Who sent it?"

Taylor shrugged.

"You don't know?"

"The card must have got lost."

They both studied the bottle.

"What is the liquid?"

"Rice wine."

"Is it poison?"

"It's not supposed to be. In fact, it's supposed to be a cure-all—and an aphrodisiac."

"I bet bourbon works just as well, and you don't have that nasty cobra aftertaste."

Taylor's smile was preoccupied. Will gave him a closer look.

"You don't have any idea who would have sent something like this?"

Taylor shook his head. Will laughed and threw an arm around his wide, bony shoulders.

"Spooked?"

"Nah." But Taylor's brows were drawn together as he continued to gaze at the bottle.

"Weird, though, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Taylor had some weird friends. And weirder acquaintances. He had been in the DS longer than Will, signing on right out of college, and he'd been posted to Tokyo, Afghanistan, and briefly, Haiti. The next time he was posted overseas it would be as a regional security officer responsible for managing security operations for an embassy or for a number of diplomatic posts within an assigned area. That was one reason Will was hesitant to move in with him. Not a lot of point in setting up house when one or both of them could be stationed overseas within a year or so.

Taylor didn't see it this way, of course. Taylor's idea was they should move in together immediately and they'd deal with the threat of a future separation when—if—it happened. He'd always had a tendency to leave tomorrow to take care of itself, but getting shot had cemented his determination to live every day as though it were his last.

Will understood that. He even agreed with it, in principle, but what happened to him when Taylor was posted overseas for three-or-so years? Things weren't as simple as Taylor liked to pretend.

He glanced at Taylor's profile. He was frowning, and Will did not want him frowning on his birthday.

"Hey," he said softly. Taylor's head turned his way. "Want to open your present?"

"Sure." Taylor started to pull the gold ribbon on the parcel he was carrying. Will put his hand over his.

"Your other present," he said meaningfully, and Taylor started to laugh.

* * * *

Will stretched out on Taylor's wide bed in the cool, dark room that looked out onto the overgrown garden with the broken birdbath and the tumbledown garden shed, and he rested his face on his hands and spread his legs.

So gorgeous. So casually, unconsciously gorgeous. Wide shoulders, strong, lithe torso, long legs. There was a tiny velvet mole above his left butt cheek and, on his right shoulder, a small griffin tattoo that he'd acquired the night before he went into the Marine Corps. Will, his brother, Grant, and their three cousins all sported those griffin tattoos on their right shoulders. Some kind of male-ritual, family-bonding thing.

Taylor had heard this from Will. He'd never met Will's family. Never met the brother or the cousins or Will's dad, who had been a sheriff in a small town in Oregon. Maybe one of these days.

He stroked a slow hand down the long, sleek line of Will's back, and Will shivered. Taylor bent his head and kissed Will right over the tiny velvet mole. Will shivered again.

Anticipation or something else?

Taylor enjoyed being fucked.

In fact, he enjoyed it so much, it made him uneasy. He'd never told Will that, but Will probably knew. Will was scrupulous about keeping the scales perfectly balanced, because they always took turns. However, though that particular evening was Taylor's turn to be fucked, Will—in honor of Taylor's birthday—offered his own taut, tanned ass up for Taylor's pleasure.

And it was Taylor's pleasure. Doubly so because he sensed that Will didn't enjoy being fucked nearly as much as he did, and he was humbled to receive this gift. Taylor had never let anyone shove his cock in his ass besides Will; Will was more fair-minded and had probably taken turns with his other lovers.

Taylor didn't like thinking about Will's other lovers.

He took his time preparing, squirting the exotic oil he'd purchased—ginger, jasmine, rose, black pepper, sandalwood, and ylang-ylang in a slick, silvery liquid that warmed his fingers. A sweet scent like spicy flowers.

“What's that?” Will asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Passion oil. You'll like it.”

Will resettled his chin on his folded arms. “You're into some strange shit, MacAllister.”

True enough. He'd done some wild things when he was younger. Will didn't know the half of it. But in other ways he'd been very conservative. In fact, the first time he'd let Will fuck him, something had seemed to snap in his brain; made him fear he was having some kind of psychotic break. Alerted him to the fact that he probably had one or two sexual hang-ups after all. Before Will, it was unthinkable that he'd let anyone take him. Occasionally one of his lovers would ask to fuck him, and if they pushed it, that was usually Taylor's cue to end the relationship. His relationships never lasted long anyway.

Will was the exception. In every way. Though Taylor had always tried to be an inventive and skilled lover, he took special pains that everything be good for Will.

He slipped his fingers down the crevice between Will's butt cheeks, seeking the tight pink bud of his anus. Splitting the peach: that's what the Chinese Taoists called this. Such romantic terms for everything: blowing the flute and clouds and rain and jade stalk. Funny stuff but...maybe sort of nice, too.

Ever so delicately he circled Will's opening, then slipped the tip of one oily finger inside, careful and slow.

Will held very still, goose bumps rising over his smooth, tanned skin.

Taylor pushed inside, closing his eyes at the dark felt grip around his finger. His heart pounded hard, his own cock lifted—arisen, angry, those old Chinese would have said, but Taylor was anything but angry. Happy, excited...he stroked and pressed...satiny inside and satiny out.

“Does that feel good?” he murmured.

“Sure.” Will sounded a little winded.

Taylor silently cued Will to move onto his knees; even here they communicated silently, deftly. He guided his cock, already pearling and damp, and pushed slowly, inch by inch, into Will. “Are you—”

“Go,” Will jerked out. “Do it.”

Was Will loving it or just wanting it over with? Taylor was never quite sure, but he couldn't stop himself at this point. Will was pushing back against him, rocking into him. Taylor thrust back, and they settled into a quick, efficient rhythm.

Oh yes. More. More of this. Harder. Deeper. Faster. Taylor's eyes shut tight. Just feeling, feeling that gorgeous drag on the thick, pulsing shaft of his cock, feeling the heat and snug darkness, feeling everything.

Will grunted as Taylor changed angle, tried to hit the sweet spot just right.

“Good, Will?” gasped Taylor.

“Yeah. Good.”

So good—but it was good all the ways they did it. And they had done it nearly every conceivable way. At least all the ways that Taylor figured wouldn't shock or dismay Will. Very much a meat-and-potatoes man, Will.

Will's harsh breaths were coming in counterpoint to his own. The rich, rolling sweetness tingled through Taylor, and he cried out as Will's body seemed to spasm around his own and he began to come in hard, hot jets clouds and rain, firing the cannon, surrender, and die...

Chapter Two

“Something on your mind?” Taylor asked as they were leaving for dinner.

“Who me?”

“Nah. The monster in your pants. Yeah, you. You seem kind of quiet tonight.”

“Nope.” But Will made an effort to snap out of his reflections.

They chatted about Will's case as they drove over to the restaurant. Taylor didn't ask about Monday, didn't mention it, so Will didn't have to evade or lie; he wouldn't have been able to lie, anyway. Even if he had a hope of getting away with it.

Which he didn't. He glanced at Taylor's profile and smiled inwardly.

To look at Taylor MacAllister, you would never think he was a dangerous man.

Correction. If you knew enough to recognize that easy, sure-footed way Taylor moved, the confidence with which he carried himself, the cool, direct way he met your eyes, you'd recognize that here was a guy who could handle himself in any situation. But that required being someone of experience yourself, someone who wasn't fooled by the fact that Taylor looked deceptively slender and graceful—almost pretty. The truth was, he was all wiry muscle and bones harder than unalloyed titanium. He was tough and relentless and utterly fearless.

He frightened Will. He frightened him because even after being shot—twice, if someone wanted to get technical about it—Taylor seemed to have no sense of his own vulnerability. Or he just didn't care.

When they arrived at the Red Dragon restaurant at nine o'clock that evening there was an altercation going on in the parking lot. Three Hispanic youths—baby faces and gang tattoos—appeared to be hassling a young black woman. One of the punks was sitting on the hood of the woman's Sebring convertible. Another was lounging in the backseat, drinking a can of Tecate beer—and that was the woman's mistake for leaving the top down and the car unattended while she went inside to get her carryout. This was not a nice neighborhood.

The third asshole was blocking the girl's retreat. He didn't look too dangerous to Will, although the girl—young woman—was plainly upset. She was trying to escape to the safety of the restaurant, and the punk jumped in front of her, grabbing his crotch and flicking his tongue in and out lizardlike. He was still keeping a hands-off distance from her, though, and the posturing seemed mostly about amusing his compadres in the convertible. He was probably not more than eighteen. The other two looked of a similar age.

Just pulling into the parking lot signaled the end of playtime, and if more was called for—

Taylor swung sharply next to the convertible and was out of the Land Cruiser before Will had his seat belt unbuckled.

Will heard Taylor's flat, hard, "What's going on here?" which promptly changed the entire dynamic of the situation.

It might have changed for the worse anyway, of course, but Taylor, sleek and beautiful and deceptively slight in his tight jeans and green silk shirt—with the expensive car and pugnacious attitude—triggered all their cholo insecurities and hostilities.

Will scrambled out quickly, cursing the fact that neither of them was armed because they were going out to dinner and alcoholic beverages were sure to be consumed, and they shouldn't have to carry when they were just going out to eat, for chrissake.

"What's goin' on here is none of your business, culeros," the punk hassling the girl said, drawing himself up to all his compact, muscular five-eight. The kid on the hood of the car rolled off and started for Taylor. The kid in the back raised his arm as though threatening to throw his beer can.

Will was closer. He grabbed the kid's arm, yanked it back hard, surprising a yowl of pain out of him. "Don't be a litterbug," Will warned.

The kid snatched his arm to his chest, rubbing it and glaring. The one who had previously been lounging on the convertible hood stopped midtrack, eyeing Will warily.

"What are you supposed to be, cops?"

"Something like that," Taylor said. "What are you supposed to be, gangbangers?"

"Something like that."

Taylor laughed. The kid opened his mouth, then read something in Taylor's face that shut him up, already backing down, looking for a way out.

"Out of the car," Will instructed the kid in the backseat.

The kid climbed awkwardly, one-handed, joining his glaring, resentful cohort. "Come on, Jorge," he called to the third gangbanger.

Jorge, the kid who had been hassling the girl—who had remained wide-eyed and silent, clutching her carryout bags throughout this intervention—was a different animal.

"You're no cop!" Face twisted in a sneer, he advanced on Taylor. That put him in Will's path. Will planted his hand in the kid's chest, shoving him back a step.

Furious, Jorge looked from him to Taylor. "What is this? What are you? Two jotos, eh? Yeah, I bet you are."

"Want to find out the hard way?" Taylor inquired.

"No, you don't," Will answered as Jorge opened his mouth. "Believe me, you don't."

After a trembling pause, Jorge flung away, hands raised in the air in a grand "don't touch me!" gesture. He started walking, furious, head down, and his minions raced down the street after him, shouting back obscenities at Taylor and Will.

Game over. But what if they'd been carrying? What if Larry, Moe, and Curly had whipped an arsenal out of their falling-down pants and opened fire at Taylor? It gave Will chills to think about it.

The girl launched into tearful thanks and explanation, and it was a few more minutes before they were finally in the restaurant, apologizing for being late for their reservation.

"You really pushed that, you know," Will said from behind his menu once they were seated and the waiter had departed with their drink order.

Silence on the other side of the table. Finally Taylor lowered his menu. "You think we should have stood by and watched them carjack her?"

"Of course not." Will couldn't help adding, "They weren't going to carjack her."

"You don't know that."

True. Will's instinct was that they were just having fun hassling her, but it could have turned ugly fast—it nearly had. Jorge had turned out to be harder and more reckless than Will had initially reckoned. If Jorge had been packing, he probably would have pulled his weapon.

Into Will's silence, Taylor said carefully, “You think I mishandled the situation?”

“Of course not. I don't have a problem with what you did. I have a problem with the way you did it.”

Taylor's brows were drawn together in a narrow black line. His eyes glinted like old jade in the soft lighting. “How's that?”

“You didn't talk to me. You didn't wait to see if I was with you. You didn't—”

“Since when do we need to discuss our every move?”

It was Will's turn to be nonplussed. There was truth to what Taylor was saying. They usually knew exactly what the other was going to do without discussing it—half the time with no more than a glance between them. They had been reading each other's thoughts for years. That was part of what made them such an effective team.

Taylor had always been a little quick off the mark, a little hot tempered. Will had taken a tolerant view of it and watched for Taylor's cues so he could back his play.

Watching Will, apparently reading his surprised recognition, Taylor said quietly, “You know what? I haven't changed, Will. You have.”

* * * *

The mai tais came in small red urns carved with dragon heads. Taylor rarely drank hard liquor, and then he stuck to Rusty Nails, but Will seemed to think the evening called for the Red Dragon mai tais, and who was Taylor to argue? The mai tais were sweet and citrusy and very cold. Under their influence, Will finally relaxed and forgot about the incident in the restaurant parking lot.

Something was going on with Will. Something more than the usual thing going on with Will—which was confusing enough. Taylor watched for the visual cues of Will's eyes, his hands, his mouth. Will was the stoic type, so every little gesture, every microexpression, meant something.

From the point that they had moved from being partners to lovers, Will had had problems. Initially Taylor had put it down to the old thing about Will feeling guilty for Taylor getting shot. He'd been convinced that Taylor had stopped a bullet because he didn't love him—not the same way Taylor did Will.

Taylor had been shot because he was careless. End of story.

They'd worked through that, for the most part, during the now-famous camping trip from hell. A week in the High Sierras—in freeze-your-ass-off April, of all times—where they'd managed to fall afoul of murderous hijackers looking for the ruins of a crashed plane—and two million dollars.

They'd survived that, come out of it stronger than ever, come out of it lovers as well as friends. Will had stopped feeling guilty, and he trusted Taylor to be able to handle himself again—and yet something had changed.

“How's the tea-smoked duck?” Will inquired.

Taylor picked up a bite with his chopsticks. “Great. Excellent.”

And it was. The best Japanese food in town. Will had taken the trouble to call ahead so that Taylor could have his favorite tea-smoked duck, which had to be prepared the night before. Taylor was particular about his Japanese food, having lived in Tokyo for two years.

He preferred not to think about Tokyo, though.

“You want another drink?”

Taylor hesitated, and Will said, “Go ahead. I'll drive home.”

Home. That sounded good. Taylor wished... Whatever. This was good too.

He nodded yes to another drink. Refocused on Will. Yeah. Whatever was going on with Will tonight wasn't just the dustup in the parking lot. “Did you get a call about testifying in the Black Wolf hijacking case?”

“Yep.” Will met his eyes, smiled faintly.

“Don't ask me to go camping again,” Taylor warned him.

“Good things come to those who camp.” Will batted his eyelashes. There was nothing remotely camp about Will, and Taylor nearly choked on his duck.

“Ha,” he managed. “Anyway, next vacation it's my turn to pick where we go.”

“Well, this wouldn't be a vacation, MacAllister. We'd be testifying in a federal case.”

“I'm going to remind you of that when you start packing the fishing poles.”

Will grinned, conceding the point, and returned to his wild salmon. He was not much of a fan of Japanese food.

Taylor bit back a smile, watching him. “How's the fish?”

“Fine.” Will gave him one of those looks that turned Taylor's bones to jelly. “I'm looking forward to dessert.”

Taylor said blandly, to cover the fact that his cock was instantly hard and aching, “I hear the green-tea ice cream is something else.”

“Maybe we can get it to go.”

Taylor smiled into his mai tai.

* * * *

When they got back to Taylor's house, Will fed Riley, and Taylor cut the birthday cake.

“We're not singing 'Happy Birthday'?” Will asked, accepting the paper plate with the generous slice of cake Taylor handed over.

“Go right ahead,” Taylor invited. Taylor couldn't carry a tune to save his life, but Will liked to sing, and Riley—after a couple of beers—was known to howl along.

“Maybe later,” Will promised. He was anxious to see Taylor open his birthday present. Anxious and nervous both. He'd never bought anything this expensive for anyone, and this particular item was pretty far out of his realm of expertise.

He was relying on this gift to go a ways toward fixing the damage when Taylor heard what Will kept putting off telling him.

Taylor got a glass of iced water, took the wrapped parcel into the den, and sat down on the long sofa beside Will. He gave an experimental tug to the golden coil of ribbon and gave Will a half smile that seemed to flutter in Will's chest like a butterfly.

“Well, go on,” he said.

Taylor held the box up and shook it gently. “Emmylou Harris's greatest hits?” he guessed.

“You must think I'm pretty cheap. That would be her entire collection. And all her collaborations.”

Taylor raised his brows. Guessed again. “Porter Cable Speed-Bloc sander.”

Now that was a very good guess. That was the gift Will had originally planned to give him. In fact, that was the gift Taylor had admitted he'd like when Will dropped a couple of casual hints about upcoming birthday requests.

But this was a special birthday.

Will kept his expression blank.

Taylor smirked. Mr. Know-It-All was in for a surprise. He pulled the gold ribbon off the box, tore the cobalt blue paper away, opened the oversize, unmarked cardboard box, and lifted out the flat wooden box.

He shot Will a puzzled glance, opened the box, and stared.

Will waited tensely, watching Taylor's profile. He saw Taylor's Adam's apple jump as he swallowed.

He said at last, almost inaudibly, “Will.”

Will relaxed, pleased with himself. He could see Taylor struggling to stay stoic and knew he'd scored big-time.

Inside the box was a Japanese percussion pistol. The black wood grip was carved in the shape of a dragon head with a gleaming brass eye. The dragon had a large pearl in its fangs. The long, narrow brass barrel was ornately engraved with kanji on a textured background.

Taylor said disbelievingly, “Where did you find this?”

“I've got a few contacts. You like it?”

Taylor nodded. He still hadn't faced Will, so Will made it easy on him by hooking an arm around Taylor's neck and pulling him over. Taylor grabbed him fiercely, didn't say a word—pretty much a first.

Will's heart seemed to light up. He'd hoped this was the right thing. Taylor had a small but pricey collection of vintage Japanese weapons. A couple of samurai swords, a pistol—but nothing as nice as this.

“You shouldn't have,” Taylor said, voice stifled by Will's shoulder. “Must have cost you a fortune.”

Nearly three thousand bucks, as a matter of fact. And worth every penny to see Taylor MacAllister finally at a loss for words.

Will kissed Taylor's ear, which was all he could reach. “Happy birthday, sweetheart,” he said, and he was astonished to find his own voice husky, choked.

Taylor sat up, swiftly dipping his head to his forearm, then studying the pistol with awe. “How old is it?”

“Eighteenth century. The details are on the bottom of the box.” Will turned his attention to his cake, which was moist and delicious and lavishly frosted with gooey pecans and coconut.

“Beautiful,” Taylor murmured, and Will tended to agree.

* * * *

It was even better the second time.

They weren't in any hurry now. They had the whole weekend ahead of them, and they'd already taken the edge off their urgency before they'd gone to dinner.

“What would you like?” Will asked, clearly still in a generous mood.

Taylor said the truth. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Fucking. A present you give yourself,” Will deliberately misquoted, and a giggle—borne of one too many mai tais—escaped Taylor.

He'd have been happy to be taken on the sofa in the den, or the kitchen table, or even the freshly sanded floor in the hallway, but Will opted for the bedroom and all its comforts, including the mysterious bottle of passion oil.

Taylor lay on his back, shivering enjoyably as Will's blunt, oily finger slowly traced the crack of his ass.

“I like that.” He was more vocal than Will, offering feedback whether solicited or otherwise. But Will had never seemed to mind.

“Yeah?” There was a smile in Will's voice as his fingers pierced Taylor, slowly, sweetly, slipping the warm, flowery oil into his tight little hole. “And this?”

“That too.” Taylor closed his eyes tight, savoring that slippery-fingered invasion. Will was good at this, good at making a sensual delight of preparation, and Taylor wanted that stroking touch to never end. It made him feel like he was melting inside, all the walls, all the barriers dissolving in a wet, hot thaw.

“More,” he whispered as Will's fingers gently withdrew. “More.”

Will settled over him and Taylor spread his thighs, wriggling and shifting to accommodate Will's muscular length. Taylor smiled up at Will, and Will smiled back. He sang softly, “They say it's your birthday.”

Taylor obligingly did the guitar riff in his cracked tenor.

“It's my birthday too, yeah.”

Another riff from Taylor as his restless hands caressed Will's buttocks in air guitar, drawing Will down. His hips raised to meet the frustrating, tantalizing prod of the blunt head of Will's cock as it grazed the entrance of his body.

“I'm glad it's your birthday,” Will growled. “Happy birthday to you.”

His cock finally rifted Taylor, shoved deep inside, stretching him wide open and then filling him up with a sweet, fierce throbbing. Taylor arched up to meet it, gave a deep, groan of pleased pain. Will's muscular body pressed Taylor deep into the bed, pushing deep inside him, and Will's warm breath tickled Taylor's ear as they began to the old rock and roll, slow, sensual strokes in the push-pull argument over whether it was better to give or receive.

Energetic, forceful, but affectionate. This thrust-and-parry debate of cock and ass was no longer about winning or control. It was now teamwork to make it last as long as possible—unfortunately, in Taylor's opinion, never quite long enough.

He gave a shout as that hot tingle began in his groin, that wild electricity in the base of his cock, that fluttering in his chest like there was too much sensation, too much emotion to contain in one body. His balls drew tight, his entire body clenched tight, his fingers sank into Will's broad back, and he began to come in great beautiful straining pulses.

He smothered his yell against Will's shoulder.

A few sweating, spent seconds later he felt Will shoot into him, deep inside him.

Afterward, they watched the 1932 film *The Mistress of Atlantis* about two best friends and foreign legionnaires who fall victim to the evil queen of the lost city. For a time they amused each other commenting on the movie. Then Will dozed off and Taylor ate some of his birthday cake while his eyelids grew heavier and heavier.

The last thing he remembered hearing was hearing Lt. Saint-Avit running through the streets of Atlantis shouting for his missing comrade...

Chapter Three

“What on God's earth is this?”

Will stepped out of Taylor's bathroom holding a blue bottle of oil labeled UP. He read aloud, “Australia's Number One Erectile Performance Oil. Take control of your erection today.”

“Hey!” Taylor yelped, casting his Levi's aside. “Put my UP down.” He was in the bathroom in two long-legged steps.

“My my. I've never noticed you having any problem keeping your up, up.”

“I don't. It's just a-a performance enhancer.”

Will scrutinized him. This was a new side of Taylor. Not that Taylor didn't go in for some screwball things.

He was blushing now—and rightly so—as he snatched at the bottle Will held. They wrestled briefly; then Taylor grabbed the bottle and tossed it under the sink.

“I was looking for shaving cream,” Will told him mildly. “I forgot mine.”

“I use an electric razor; you know that.”

He did know that. He knew pretty much everything about Taylor, but every so often Taylor surprised him. Like with the UP oil. The funny thing was, the idea of that oil vaguely excited him too. Firmer, fuller, harder. More responsive erections. That all sounded pretty good. The idea of Taylor, damp from his shower, massaging that oil into the shaft and head of his penis every morning; his hard, thin hands moving briskly on himself—or no, moving slowly, languidly on himself—

Will gulped. For chrissake! They'd just spent the night and the morning fooling around. It was like being seventeen again. He asked briskly, “Anyway, where do you want to go for breakfast? Or lunch?”

Taylor, still uncharacteristically rattled, was squeezing past him out of the bathroom, muttering about coffee mugs and soap foam. It was, well, endearing.

Will caught him by the arm. “Hey. MacAllister.”

Taylor stopped. Faced him.

Will opened his mouth, but he lost his nerve. Couldn't say it.

“What?”

You know I...

Taylor raised his brows.

Will shook his head and turned back to the mirror. He gave his reflection a sheepish look.

* * * *

They had brunch at Café Verve, eating out on the crowded sidewalk patio beneath the yellow umbrellas.

Verve was their favorite place for breakfast, as they did biscuits with milk gravy, something Will was partial to. Taylor opted for a veggie omelet and black coffee.

It was a sunny, pleasant morning. The sun was shining, the sky had that extra blue tint to it that spring brought. They talked leisurely of this and that, and then Taylor brought up work and the following week.

Will had put all thought of that aside—or mostly aside—so as to not spoil Taylor's birthday, but he had known he was going to have to bring it up at some point that day. Now the moment was on them; there was no putting it off, as much as he hated to spoil this lovely morning.

He waited till Taylor paused, and then he said, “Listen, I have to tell you something.”

Maybe the bad news was written in his face, or maybe it was something in the tone of his voice. The line of Taylor's body stayed relaxed and easy, but Will could feel his tension like a fine wire drawn tight between them. “Yeah?”

“On Monday”—Will took a deep breath—“you're working with Varga.”

For a second he thought Taylor hadn't heard him or hadn't understood. He continued to stare at Will, narrow-eyed, as though a pirate ship had appeared on the horizon. Then he said flatly, “Was that your idea?”

“My idea? No, it wasn't my idea.” Will was both taken aback and indignant. “Of course it wasn't my idea.”

Taylor didn't say a word, just stared at him with those wide green eyes. Such an odd color. Like old, oxidized pennies.

“Why the hell would you think it was my idea?”

“You said from the first that it would be a bad idea to try and balance being lovers with being partners.”

“That's right, but we went ahead with it, didn't we.” It wasn't a question.

“But you're not happy about it.”

Will kept his voice down, but it wasn't easy. “What are you talking about?”

Taylor bit out, “You're not happy with it. You wish it hadn't happened. You'd have preferred that things stay the way they were.”

Startled, because there was truth to that, Will didn't have an immediate answer.

Taylor's face grew tighter, all stark bones and shadowed planes in the bright Ventura sunlight.

“Yeah, but it did happen,” Will said in a low voice. “And there's no going back from it.”

Taylor hadn't moved. In fact, he was so still, he barely seemed to breathe. No reaction at all. And that wasn't like him.

Suddenly awkward, Will said, “Anyway, the reteaming is just temporary.”

“Who are you partnered with?”

Fuck. Well, there was no getting around it. It was just that Taylor was taking it even worse than Will had imagined he would—and Will hadn't even got to the really bad part yet. Bad from Taylor's point of view, anyway.

“I'm not—I'm working a visa fraud case. Illegal aliens using forged docs to unlawfully gain employment to naval bases in the region.”

“Naval bases,” Taylor said slowly. And then, dangerously, “Who are you working it with?”

Will said, careful to keep any inflection from his voice, “I'm acting in liaison with the navy. With David Bradley.”

For one taut second Taylor didn't move, and then he was up and out of his seat, striding for the gate that led from the patio to the sidewalk.

"Taylor!"

Uncomfortably aware that they now had the attention of most of the diners on the patio, Will threw a bunch of bills down and took off after Taylor.

Instead of heading for the car, Taylor was cannoning down the pavement, head down like a bull—yeah, like the bullhead he was. Will, unwilling to bowl right through people, lost valuable seconds trying to catch him. No way in hell was he going to run after Taylor.

He couldn't believe this. Where the hell did Taylor think he was going? Was he planning to walk home? Catch a taxi? Who the hell knew? Did he?

Will's gut was churning. It was partly anger, largely directed at himself for not finding a better way to break it to Taylor, but most of it was that sick feeling that came anytime he knew he'd hurt Taylor. Taylor had a rep for being a tough bastard, and he was, but...

God only knew what he made of something like this, and Will couldn't help but remember the last time Taylor had thought Will was getting serious about David Bradley.

He darted around two middle-aged women with piles of shopping bags between them, dodged a kid on a skateboard—illegal here, by the way—and sidestepped a couple of guys on cell phones who sounded like they were talking to each other.

Taylor was still flying down the street, charging along in his white-faced fury. Will put on a burst of speed as Taylor reached the corner of the sidewalk, pausing—amazingly—the few seconds before the crossing light turned green.

The light turned, the perky pedestrian symbol glowing white-green, and Taylor stepped out ahead of the rest of the people milling on the corner. At the same time, a battered Chevy pulling away from the curb accelerated, tires squealing as the driver tried too late to make the light.

A woman on the corner screamed in warning. Will saw Taylor's head jerk up, too late, to see the car bearing down on him.

* * * *

Oh yeah. That. Speeding cars coming his way.

Taylor had barely time to recognize his serious miscalculation when something significantly big and muscular hurtled full bodied into him, knocking him halfway across the intersection. He landed hard and unprepared, the breath knocked out of him, hands and knees burning as asphalt scraped away skin.

He felt the hot breath of the car rushing past, tires squealing, the smell of rubber and exhaust and hot tar.

Sluggishly, he was aware of people screaming. But I had the right-of-way, he thought. That was shock, though, not logic. Will was beside him, getting to his knees, which took care of Taylor's immediate concerns. He'd known the minute that solid mass of bone and muscle had crashed into him that it had to be Will.

"The sonofabitch didn't stop." Will swore bitterly, examining his bloody elbow.

"Why should he? He didn't hit us." Taylor staggered to his feet, offered a hand to Will, who took it and let himself be pulled up.

They examined each other quickly, awkwardly—it was hard to forget what had precipitated that close call. Wincing at more than scrapes and bruises, Taylor considered his own grazed hands. Will must have noticed, because he reached out, catching Taylor's wrists and studying his palms.

After what seemed a smoldering sort of moment, he released Taylor, saying curtly, "You'll live."

"Thanks to you," Taylor admitted. No point in pretending otherwise. He owed Will that one.

Will was apparently too pissed to want to take credit. He turned away, heading back across the intersection, asking whether anyone had managed to get a license-plate number. The witnesses—those who had stuck around—were already disagreeing about whether Taylor had stepped out before the light turned green.

This was not the place to conduct an inquiry, and Taylor couldn't understand Will's insistence on trying. As there were no longer any pedestrians sprawled in the intersection, the opposite street traffic was now trying to make its left-hand turn and impatient motorists were laying on the horn. He followed Will to the curbside, frowning, as Will tried to insist on someone supplying a make on the car or some kind of ID on the driver.

A brown Chevy, according to Will. Why did that ring a bell?

Either nobody could or would volunteer any part of a license-plate number. The crowd had already dispersed as people remembered they had places to be and things to do. It wasn't as though there had actually been an accident; it was just another close call, and they happened every day.

Within a matter of seconds it was just Taylor and Will standing on the sidewalk while pedestrians streamed like ants around the obstruction they created.

“Are you okay? Are we done here?” Taylor asked, seeing that Will was still quietly fuming. He knew what Will wanted, of course. What Will wanted was to yell at him, for nearly getting himself flattened like Wile E. Coyote. Taylor understood that impulse perfectly well because he felt the same way anytime Will had a close call on the job. Ordinarily Will would fire off a few well-chosen volleys, but they had been arguing when Taylor stepped in front of the car, and Will was restraining himself at the expense of his blood pressure.

Taylor understood all this in a matter of seconds. That's how it was with him and Will. They always knew what the other was thinking. Except Taylor hadn't known about David Bradley or the fact that he and Will weren't going to be working together, and the memory of that left him bewildered and off balance. How long had Will known? Why hadn't he told him? And how did he just happen to be working with David Bradley of all people?

“Let's go,” Will said curtly, wiping again at the blood on his elbow.

He led the way in a forbidding silence down the crowded street to where they had parked earlier that morning. Somberly aware that he could have got them both injured or even killed—and in such a stupid way—Taylor followed docilely, unspeaking.

A few feet from the SUV, Will pressed the key fob to unlock the car. They both got in. The leather was warm from sitting in the sun. Emmylou Harris jerked into “Together Again” as though she had never been rudely interrupted.

Will didn't start the engine.

“You want me to drive?” Taylor asked. His hands were in worse shape than Will's, but Will seemed more shaken by their near miss.

“No.” Still Will made no move.

Taylor was painfully conscious of Will's nearness, his still-not-quite-even breathing—although that was emotion, not physical stress. He said, “Why didn't you tell me about Bradley?”

“I did. What do you think that was?”

In Taylor's opinion, Will's terse tone was defensive. He tried to keep the accusation out of his own. “How long have you known?”

“End of day yesterday.” Will gave him a hard look, which Taylor turned to meet. “I didn't tell you last night because I was afraid you'd react exactly like you did, and I didn't want to ruin your birthday.”

Taylor nodded curtly. He deserved that for flipping out, but it had shaken him badly, the entire conversation. Including the part where Will admitted he'd have been happier if they'd never become lovers. That still hurt too much to examine, so he put it aside to enjoy later.

“How long are we working apart?”

Will shook his head.

Taylor stared out the window at the shady street, the shop windows full of overpriced junk.

Will said, “It won't be for that long. They've got you and Varga doing protection detail on the wife of some East African minister.” He added, “Cooper plans on filling you in himself, so don't let on I told you.”

Taylor nodded absently. “Maybe it's the first step to splitting us up permanently. Maybe he knows about us.”

Will shook his head.

“You don't know that for a fact.”

“He doesn't know.” Will's eyes met his. “I haven't told him. You haven't told him. No one else knows.”

“Come off it,” Taylor scoffed. “We work for one of the largest and most efficient security agencies in the world. You think they don't occasionally run a check on their own employees when something flags? And we've sent plenty of flags up in the last few months.”

Will was silent. At last he said, “I don't think so. I can read him pretty well. I didn't get any impression this was anything but expediency. Bradley and I have worked together—and well—in the past.”

Taylor didn't want to hear the answer, but he asked anyway. "Did you ask for this assignment?"

"Absolutely not." Will turned to face him. "Tay. No. I did not ask to work with Bradley. I don't want to work with anyone but you. I don't want to be with anyone but you. Why don't you believe me?"

Tay. The only time William called him that was in bed. Hearing it in this context was disconcerting but reassuring.

"If you tell me, I believe you."

But Will was still not over being angry. "Why would I have to tell you this? It ought to be obvious by now. We're practically living together."

"Yeah, but we're not living together," Taylor said. "And you don't want to live together. And you said yourself you'd be happier if we had left things alone."

Will groaned and dropped his head back, staring at the roof of the car. "I don't believe this. You're acting like a—"

"Like a what?" Taylor kept his voice even, but now he was getting mad all over again.

Will had the smarts to correct quickly, although he was still blunt. "You're acting jealous and insecure and irrational."

Taylor weighed his words, but he had gone this far, he might as well shoot his wad. Will apparently thought he was acting like a queen as it was. He said, "That's because I've got more invested in this relationship than you. We both know the bottom line is I care more for you than you do for me."

Will's profile could have been cut from stone. "I'm not even going to answer that." He jammed the key into the ignition and turned it. The engine roared into life.

* * * *

It was okay once they were back at Taylor's. Taylor, apparently realizing he had gone too far, was low-key and nonconfrontational. They took turns in the shower, took turns squirting each other with disinfectant and taping on Band-Aids on. Taking care of each other, that's what it was about.

Will's shirt was torn, so he borrowed one of Taylor's. It was too tight, which suited the general atmosphere pretty well.

Not that it was that different from usual. They generally worked on the house or watched a game on TV and had a few beers, fucked, napped, caught up on the newspapers, maybe rented a movie. They would have talked or not as they felt like it. Their weekdays were action-packed enough; on the weekends they liked to unwind and rest. There was no one Will wanted to unwind and rest with more than Taylor.

This was not turning out to be the most restful weekend they'd spent, but it wasn't bad. They worked at sanding the built-in shelves and counters, the fireplace, the tapered columns that divided the living room from the dining room. It was slow going, because Taylor liked everything to be perfect, but one day it was going to be a very valuable property with the gleaming resanded hardwood floors and funky art tiles and big stone fireplace—all in walking distance of the beach. As they worked they recovered some of their usual harmony.

When they finished in the front room, uncovering what appeared to be genuine oak beneath layers of navy, green, and finally white paint, they showered again and then ate their leftovers from the night before.

A framed Japanese print of a samurai on horseback had been propped in the doorway for safekeeping while they worked in the front room. Looking at it, and seeking a neutral subject for dinnertime discourse, Will asked, "What was it like, being in Tokyo? You never talk about it."

Taylor, whose own attention had been on the bottle of Asian snake wine sitting on the kitchen counter, gave him a blank look. He raised a shoulder. "Nothing to tell."

Now that was odd. Taylor always had something to say. About everything. How could he possibly have spent two years in Japan and not have anything to recount. Nothing?

"Did you like it?"

"I liked the country, yeah."

He hadn't liked the assignment. Interesting.

"Well, I know you like the food. Is it true they have octopus pizza?"

Taylor snorted, expertly wielded his chopsticks to take a bite of rice-crust duck. Will considered the chopsticks. Taylor was...prone to enthusiasms.

He had liked Japan. He collected Japanese weapons, watched Japanese movies, had a couple of Japanese art books and a couple of Japanese prints on the walls. Japan had been important to Taylor. But he never talked about it.

Never.

“Are there really over fifteen hundred earthquakes a year?”

“They have a lot of earthquakes. A lot of volcanoes too.”

“Is the sun really red?”

Taylor smiled faintly. “They paint it that way.”

“What about the gay samurai? Is that true?”

Taylor's face changed. He scowled, selecting another bite of duck. “What's with all the questions, Brandt?”

“I'm just making...just curious. It's a part of your life I don't know anything about.”

“You don't need to know anything about it.”

That took Will a second to absorb. “Okay,” he said evenly.

Taylor flicked him a look under his lashes. “Sorry.”

Will nodded coolly. He was used to Taylor's ratty temper—and more curious than ever now.

Taylor sighed. “It wasn't a great time for me, okay? I was twenty-four, it was my first overseas posting and I was homesick and lonely. Japan is...different.”

As opposed to Afghanistan? Or Haiti? Taylor didn't mind discussing either of those postings.

He said slowly, “Sure.” It was weird thinking of Taylor as homesick and lonely. But he'd been in the DS ten years; safe to say he hadn't started out a worldly, all-knowing sonofabitch. Will had taken a different career path. College, then the marines, then the DS. So far he'd had one overseas posting—Afghanistan, though years after Taylor had been there. When he'd returned to the States, he'd been partnered with Taylor.

He opened his mouth to ask, well, he wasn't even sure what he was going to ask, but he never got the chance because Taylor rose abruptly, saying, “You feel like watching TV?”

Not waiting for Will's reply, he took his plate in the den and turned on the news; they generally avoided the news on the weekends. They got enough bad news about the world in their day jobs. Will listened to the blast of international bad news from down the hall.

"What do you think?" Will asked Riley. Riley cocked his head, tongue lolling.

"Me too," Will said.

* * * *

In bed that night it was complicated. And quiet.

They were being too polite with each other, but better that than the alternative.

By now they were comfortable enough that they knew where the other wanted to go without having to read a road map. Will wanted to fuck Taylor, but he was afraid it would be a mistake to ask that tonight. He'd said a couple of things he regretted earlier that day, implying that Taylor was behaving like a jealous teenager. Taylor was always very generous in the bedroom, and Will didn't want to be viewed as taking advantage of that tonight.

The fact was, he did enjoy topping more than bottoming. Not a big deal, just a personal preference. In particular he enjoyed topping Taylor. Having Taylor submit to him was the sweetest thing in the world because it was entirely voluntary. Taylor matched him strength for strength, so that willing capitulation seemed so tender, so generous, so loving.

He wanted—needed—Taylor to offer, but Taylor didn't. Neither did he ask for a repeat of the night before. Instead, they settled for some energetic rubbing and stroking. Friction. It's a good thing. And it was good; it was a very enjoyable substitute for the real thing. The other thing. Through the net of his eyelashes Will watched Taylor's mobile, exquisitely pained face; it never ceased to thrill and amaze him that it was Taylor on the other end of this. Taylor. Beautiful and intense in sex as he was with everything.

Did Taylor honestly believe he had more invested in this relationship than Will? Because that was funny. Sometimes it scared Will how much he felt for Taylor. Nobody should need anyone that much.

It wasn't safe.

Chapter Four

“What do you think I should do with this?” Taylor asked, holding up the bottle of snake wine.

It was Monday morning—and all too soon. They'd managed to fall back into sync on Sunday, and they'd spent the remainder of their weekend companionably working on stripping and sanding the last of the front room woodwork.

Will studied the cobra weaving gently in the bottle as Taylor tilted it. “Mix it with orange juice?”

“Funny.”

“Probably chock-full of vitamin C and antioxidants.”

“I'll stick to my Flintstones Plus.”

“You mentioned something about it being an aphrodisiac.”

Taylor extended the bottle. “Feeling insecure?”

“You complaining?”

Taylor's sexy mouth quirked. “No way.” He added thoughtfully, “I was thinking maybe I could call the bottling company and see if they can tell me who ordered it.”

Will's grin faded. “Are you worried about this?”

“Nah.”

But now Will was frowning, his investigatory instincts roused. “How much is something like this bottle worth?”

Taylor bridled. “How would I know? It's not like I hand these out every Christmas to friends and family.”

“Take a guess. You prowl around Chinatown and places like that.”

“I don't know. Sixty bucks. A hundred bucks?”

His hand hovered over the trash bin; then he set the bottle on the counter. "This probably qualifies as toxic waste."

* * * *

They left the house at the same time, Will opening the side door of the SUV for Riley to jump in. He was stopping by his house in Woodland Hills to drop the dog off and then heading down to San Diego. San Diego and David Bradley. Taylor was determined to be practical about that; he believed Will when Will said he hadn't volunteered for the assignment with Bradley.

Granted, Will hadn't refused the assignment either. But Will never refused assignments.

Either way, this was good-bye, probably for what was going to be a long and stressful week. It was a five-hour drive to San Diego, and Will would be working late most nights, so it was unlikely they'd spend any real time together before next weekend.

Taylor was determined not to be an asshole about it. He'd already been there and done that on Saturday.

"Bye," he said briskly as Will leaned in to kiss him. "Talk to you later."

Will's mouth was firm, his kiss a statement that everything was good and normal between them. Taylor turned away, going to his Acura and unlocking the door, sliding behind the wheel.

He spotted a folded sheet of white paper beneath the wiper blades, and he leaned over, tugging it free.

Japanese kanji. Precise black characters on a field of white.

He stared at it for a long time.

Vaguely, he was aware of Will getting back out of his vehicle, the scrape of boots on cement.

"What's up?"

Taylor looked up blankly. How the hell did Will know there was a problem? He did, though.

Without speaking he handed the folded sheet to Will.

Will scanned it. "What do you make of it?"

Taylor shook his head.

"Do you know what it says?"

Another shake. His oral Japanese wasn't great; his written, even worse. He knew the necessary minimum to find his way around the city and work efficiently within the confines of the American embassy; that was about it.

"Advertising flyer from the Red Dragon?" Will suggested.

"We took your car."

Will considered this and shrugged.

Well, he had a point. The alternative was too bizarre to consider. Taylor got out of the Acura, circled it, checking his vehicle to see if someone had backed into him or scratched his paint job on Friday while he'd been out shopping, and maybe he hadn't noticed.

Everything looked fine.

Riley poked his nose out the window of Will's Land Cruiser, snuffling at him.

"Hey, Riley," Taylor murmured absently. He returned to Will, who was watching him curiously. He retrieved the note from Will's hand—Will letting go reluctantly.

"Everything okay?" Will asked.

"Of course." Taylor opened the Acura door, climbed in, shoved the note into his glove compartment. In his rearview he watched Will walk back, get inside the navy blue Land Cruiser. Taylor pressed the automatic opener, and the security gate slid slowly open across the driveway.

Will nodded to him in his rearview before putting his vehicle into gear. Taylor nodded back.

It was weird, though. If that note hadn't been there on Friday afternoon—and Taylor was pretty sure it hadn't—someone had climbed over the gate and bypassed Will's Land Cruiser to tuck this note on Taylor's windshield.

Why?

* * * *

Denise Varga was small, dark, and bellicose. She had probably had to fight—and fight hard—be taken seriously in the mostly all-male world of international security, and it had left a sizable chip on the shoulder of her Anne Klein onyx suit. She made a point of never making the simple, courteous gestures of one coworker to another in case anyone mistook her for a woman. She charged out of doors first, letting them slam in her male coworkers' faces, she never made or

bought anyone coffee when she got her own, she interrupted and talked over and contradicted. It was hard working with her. It felt like penance.

Taylor would have preferred to work on his own, but that idea was shot down instantly by Assistant Field Officer Director Greg Cooper, who welcomed Taylor back to active duty and informed him he'd be working with Special Agent Varga until further notice.

"Further notice?" Taylor had repeated woodenly.

"We'll see how it goes," Cooper said, shuffling papers.

Taylor was smart enough to nod and keep silent. If Cooper did suspect that Will and Taylor's relationship had changed, and that that change might ultimately conflict with their loyalties to the DS, any objection would hammer the last nail into the coffin of their partnership.

He listened unemotionally to their briefing, let Varga do all the bitching about the fact they were being landed with a low-profile babysitting job. Varga was taking it personally, as she did pretty much everything. She didn't actually accuse Cooper of sexism, but she wasn't far from it. Taylor actually closed his eyes at one point, anticipating the explosion.

When he opened them again, Cooper was watching him, and he had the impression the AD was trying to keep a straight face. Cooper wasn't too bad a guy, even if he did play it—every play you could think of—strictly by the book. He heard Varga out unemotionally, was not swayed an iota, and sent them on their merry way.

In the car—Varga's car, which Varga insisted on driving—she announced, "I know you don't want to work with me, MacAllister. For the record, I don't want to work with you either."

"Who do you want to work with?" Taylor asked out of curiosity. That seemed to take Varga by surprise.

She said shortly, "I'd prefer to work alone."

Taylor nodded politely and settled in for what was sure to be a long, long week.

They had been assigned to protect Madame Sabine Kasambala, the very young and very beautiful wife of a cabinet minister of the African island nation of Comoros. Comoros had about as screwed up a political situation as could be imagined, and it seemed to have revolutions about every fifteen minutes as far as Taylor could make out. Death threats were routine, even de rigueur, and Madame was far less interested in arrangements for her safety than possible diplomatic discounts the DS might be able to arrange for her with Beverly Hills boutiques.

Varga's stony professionalism scored zero points with their charge, and it was left to Taylor to try and charm Madame into cooperating. He was not particularly good at working the charm; that was generally Will's forte. In fact, Taylor had the uncomfortable feeling that one reason he didn't like Varga was she reminded him a little too much of himself.

He did his best, though, and by eleven o'clock they were trotting Madame in and out of the famous shops along Rodeo Drive, a three-block obstacle course of palm trees, lampposts, flower urns, expensive cars, and self-absorbed people.

* * * *

In or out of uniform, Lieutenant Commander David Bradley was a big, handsome bear of a man. He did look exceptionally handsome in his naval uniform. He had a silky dark beard, warm brown eyes, and a sexy growl of a voice.

"Good to see you, Will," he said when Will was shown into his office at Naval Base San Diego just before lunch on Monday morning.

They shook hands, and Bradley's grip lingered just a fraction of a second longer than strictly necessary. His smile was white in his tanned face, his gaze friendly if rueful.

"It's great to see you, David," Will said. He meant it. He was grateful that Bradley wasn't being difficult about the awkward way things had ended between them. It wouldn't have been unreasonable if he'd held maybe a bit of a grudge.

Will had broken their budding relationship off at the stem after Taylor had been shot. As much as he liked Bradley—and Will liked him very much—he had been guilt stricken at the knowledge that one reason Taylor had been shot had almost certainly been because he was distracted and upset over Will's relationship with the other man.

The idea of ever doing anything to upset Taylor again had been unthinkable in those first few days when his life had been hanging by a thread. Then later Will had been preoccupied with hunting down the men (boys, as it turned out) who had shot his partner—and keeping up the spirits of that same partner while he was stuck in the hospital.

So he'd called Bradley and apologetically told him he just wasn't at a place in his life where he could focus on a relationship, blaming the pressures of work and a sidelined partner. Bradley had been understanding, accepting Will's decision with maturity and dignity. It had been excruciating, because Will really had thought he and Bradley might have something together.

But by then Taylor was recovering, and Will's attention and focus were on getting his partner back.

He had wanted Taylor back with a ferocity that surprised even Will. To this day the depth and power of his feelings for Taylor took him aback.

But seeing Bradley again, he couldn't help thinking what an easy natural match they would have been. He and Bradley were a lot alike.

"How've you been?" Bradley asked as they took chairs on either side of his well-organized desk.

"Very good," Will said. "You?"

He was disconcerted at the way Bradley was smiling at him. There seemed to be such a wealth of liking and understanding there.

"Good. Great. Busy time for us right now." There was a twinkle in Bradley's eyes as he added, "I never did get around to camping on Catalina."

Will's face felt warm. He and Bradley had planned a camping trip at Black Jack campground on Santa Catalina Island. Unlike Taylor, Bradley loved camping as much as Will, and they'd had nearly as good a time planning their trip to the pines and eucalyptus trees of Mt. Orizaba as they would have had making that trip.

If they had made that trip, Will was pretty sure their relationship would have reached a turning point, moved into deeper waters. But it was not to be. And Will had no real regrets.

Bradley continued to smile at him in the old open way. "Why don't we grab some lunch and talk the case over?" he suggested.

Bradley drove them to an off-base steak house for lunch. They ordered prime rib sandwiches and got down to brass tacks.

Naval Station San Diego provided shore support and berthing facilities to the operating forces of the US Pacific Fleet. Over fifty ships called NAVSTA home, with more than fifty tenant commands at the NAVSTA. The base population exceeded thirty-five thousand military personnel and in excess of seven thousand civilians. Needless to say, security was an issue for a naval station that had grown to be one of the largest surface-force support installations in the world.

Will pounded ketchup out of the bottle onto his fries and said, “Okay, so to cut through the bullshit, we think we're looking at illegal Mexican nationals using forged documents to gain access to the Thirty-second Street Naval Station?”

Bradley agreed. “Originally we thought illegal aliens were using fraudulent passports to get other documents like drivers' licenses, ID cards, car registrations, and the like in order to unlawfully gain employment in San Diego's concrete construction industry.”

“But the passports aren't fraudulent.”

“According to your people.”

Will grinned. David's return smile was reluctant.

“The passports aren't fraudulent,” Will said. “However, we've got a line on the guy some of these nationals were going to for these additional documents. Jose Valz runs a side business helping Hispanic immigrants obtain legal documents so they can work in the concrete construction industry—where he's also employed.”

Bradley's eyes lit with interest. “You're after Valz?”

Will nodded. “We want Valz. He's made false statements regarding his status on I-9 forms. He claimed to be a United States citizen. He claimed he was a lawful permanent resident. And he provided documentation that concealed his true immigration status as an alien in temporary protected status.”

Bradley held up his empty beer bottle in question.

Will shook his head. “Valz's false statements not only allowed him to fraudulently obtain employment but also allowed him to obtain a US Navy badge that grants him access to all the naval bases in the region.”

“We're going after Valz,” Bradley said grimly.

Somebody had to. But it was going to be a long and probably dull week. Will wondered how Taylor was faring his first day back on active duty. Then he had to bite back an inward grin at the idea of Taylor partnered with Varga. Talk about two peas in a pod.

As though reading his mind, Bradley said suddenly, “Your partner never made it back, I take it?”

Will was startled at the stab of emotion that went through him at the idea of Taylor not making it back. He wasn't sure he was ever going to get over the memory of seeing Taylor shot and dying on that stockroom floor. Will couldn't understand it. He had been in the marines; he'd seen men die. He'd lost friends. It had been ugly, painful, but none of it shook him to the marrow the way seeing Taylor shot had. He wasn't given much to praying, but he'd prayed then. It wasn't very often your prayers were answered; he knew to count his blessings.

"He's back on active duty now," he said calmly. "We're just working different cases at the moment."

The old unease about what was happening with Taylor when Will wasn't there to watch his back returned. Not that Taylor wasn't very good at taking care of himself—with one notable exception. Will's separation anxiety made no sense.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Bradley asked casually.

The stock answer, the safe answer, was no. If the higher-ups discovered that he and Taylor were lovers, they'd be repartnered faster than you could say nonfraternization policy. But lying to Bradley was difficult.

"Sort of."

Bradley raised his eyebrows.

"It's complicated," Will admitted.

"Someone you work with," Bradley guessed.

Will nodded apologetically.

Bradley sighed. "Oldest story in the world." His smile was wry. He glanced at his watch.

"We should get back."

* * * *

By the time Taylor got back to the office on Temple Street, his feet ached. So did his head.

He wasn't one of those guys who made a drama out of hating to shop, but even he couldn't figure out how the hell anyone could shop for nine hours. Nine hours. And almost straight through, because no one could seriously consider the stop for herbes de Provence french fries and pomegranate-blackberry iced tea at Café Rodeo a legitimate break.

Madame Kasambala had spent the probable equivalent of her nation's defense budget between Gucci, Chanel, Dior, Valentino, Versace, and Tiffany's. Varga was in an even worse mood than Taylor—which was some comfort. Of course, she had a point. If they had dispensed with the pleasures of Rodeo Drive in one day, what fresh hell was Madame going to drag them through tomorrow—and beyond?

Still, as boring as the day had been, and despite the fact that he had not been working with Will, Taylor felt almost cheerful. He was back in the field, back on active duty—and he felt fine.

There had been a time when both those things had seemed unobtainable goals.

He hung around the office for a time in the hope that Will might get back early from San Diego, but no dice. He hadn't really expected it.

He was the last person out of the office, and it was dark when he reached home.

He parked in the side drive, walked down to the corner to pick up his mail from the stand of metal boxes. Walking back up the quiet, shady street, moon shining like a newly minted dime above the treetops, he remembered the Chevy that had been parked curbside on Friday when he'd gone to get the mail.

That was why Will's description of the car that had nearly run them down on Saturday had rung a bell. Not to overreact. There were one hell of a lot of Chevrolets driving around Southern California. And a lot of motorists could use a driver's ed refresher course.

Taylor reached his own overgrown patch of yard, reflected he needed to hire some kid to mow the grass once in a while, and went up the steps to his porch.

He stopped.

One of those bright plastic phone-book bags hung from the front door handle. He reached for it, but the plastic straps were knotted around the handle and in the amber porch light he caught a glimpse of white string.

A fuse.

His fingers froze on the cool plastic. After a couple of seconds of frantic thought, he decided he hadn't touched or tugged anything. He delicately let go, retreated a few steps, and then jumped off the porch and sprinted for the relative shelter of the nearest car parked along the street.

Nothing happened.

He gave it a few more seconds. Feeling silly, Taylor returned to the steps and from that distance studied the yellow plastic bag. Now that it had his full attention, he realized that whatever the plastic bag contained was not square or even shaped like a phone book. It was round. Like an old-fashioned bomb. Like a cartoon bomb.

As hard as it was to believe, it looked to Taylor like someone had booby-trapped his front door.

Chapter Five

Will's phone rang as he was negotiating the intricacies of the 405/101 interchange. He reached inside his sports coat, extracted his cell, noted the photo of a sunburned Taylor on a chartered fishing trip, and flipped the cell open, hastily refocusing on the freeway traffic merging in front of him.

"Hey," said the two-year-old photo of Taylor.

"Hey." Will opened his mouth to ask how Taylor's first day back had gone; it had been in the back of his mind all day. But Taylor interrupted; there was a note in his voice that Will couldn't quite pinpoint. "Are you still in San Diego?"

He was now sure something was up. Taylor was perfectly calm, but it was his on-the-job voice. "No. I'm stuck on the 101. Why? What's up? Where are you?"

"I'm at the Red Dragon."

"You're where?" Will glanced at the dashboard lights. Tea-smoked duck at ten o'clock at night? It seemed unlikely.

"I'm having something translated."

Weirder and weirder. "Like what?"

"Like the note that was left on my windshield this morning. Apparently it's connected to the bomb on my front door."

"What?" Will narrowly missed plowing into the BMW that swerved into his lane without signaling—and apparently without looking.

"Yeah. Someone hung a shaku ball in a plastic bag on my front door."

"What the hell is a shaku ball?"

"You want the short answer or the long answer?"

"Short."

“Hanabi. Japanese fireworks.”

“That's too short.”

“That pretty much covers it, though. They're these big spherical balls. They call them flowers of fire.”

Will cut through the “flowers of fire” crap. “Someone tried to kill you?” he demanded.

“Doubtful. I might have lost a hand or my eyesight, but I wouldn't have been killed.”

“That's comforting. For the record, I like your hands. I like your eyes. I'd prefer nothing happened to them.”

“Me too. Anyway, it was just wishful thinking on someone's part, because the fuse was fucked-up. Even if I hadn't noticed the bomb in time, it wouldn't have gone off.”

Will turned on his signal and started inching over traffic lanes, whether his fellow motorists liked it or not, moving into the far lane bound for Ventura. “Did you get LAPD and the bomb-disposal unit over there?”

“Yeah, they're on it, but essentially this amounts to someone leaving a bag of dud fireworks on my porch.”

“Bullshit!”

“Cool it, Will,” Taylor warned.

Will cooled it. “What did the note on your windshield say?” That much he had already figured out. A note in Japanese writing turned up on Taylor's vehicle the same day someone tried to booby-trap his front door with fires of flower or whatever the hell it was? Taylor had made someone very angry, and Will thought he knew who.

“Mama-san says it's a death threat.”

“Say again,” Will ordered tersely.

“It might be a threat. It reads 'Old poison slays as swiftly as new.'”

“Stay right there,” Will said. “I'm coming to meet you.”

“No.”

“The hell I'm not.”

“For chrissake, Will.” Taylor sounded exasperated. “First of all, they're trying to close for the night here. Secondly, there's no reason I can't go home. Nobody broke in. There isn't even any property damage, let alone damage to me.”

“That place is as secure as a cardboard box. I'll meet you at my place.”

“Oh for God's sake.” Taylor sighed. “All right, Mom. Whatever. I'll meet you at your house.”

* * * *

“Just for the sake of argument, let's consider the punks from the Red Dragon parking lot,” Will said, pouring a short glass of bourbon. He held the bottle of bourbon up in offer. Taylor shook his head. He was sticking to iced water tonight.

They were sitting in the comfortable den of Will's Woodland Hills ranch-style home. It was a small room—the entire house was small, though more than big enough for one guy who was never there anyway. The walls were oak paneled, and the furniture was upholstered in funky blue and black plaid. There were a couple of rifles over the fireplace and a couple of marksman trophies on the mantel below.

Riley was snoring softly on Taylor's feet. A rare honor. He said, “Nah. Why would they leave me a note in Japanese? How would they leave me a note in Japanese? It's gotta tie in to the cobra in the wine bottle.”

“You said you had no idea who sent the cobra in the rice wine.”

“I don't.”

Will gave him a skeptical look before proceeding with his own line of reasoning. “They would leave you a note in Japanese to throw suspicion off themselves. If they left you a note in Spanish—assuming the morons can even write—it would lead directly back to them. As for how: one of them could have a Japanese girlfriend. Who knows?”

“Why not leave me a note in English? That would be easier. Plus, there would be more chance of me understanding the threat.”

“They wanted you to know it was about what happened in the parking lot of the Red Dragon.”

Taylor said reasonably, "Then that cancels out what you said about them not wanting me to know it was them."

Will's easy smile took him aback. "Good, then we can eliminate that bullshit before you ever think about using it as a smoke screen. Who, besides the cholos in the Red Dragon parking lot, have you had a run-in with?"

Sometimes Will really did annoy the hell out him. Irritably, Taylor shook his head.

"Not good enough."

Taylor gave him a narrow look. "Maybe not, but it's the truth."

"What about Japan?"

Taylor tensed. "What about it?"

"Someone sends you a cobra in a bottle, a note in Japanese, and a Japanese firework bomb? I'd say we have to consider Japan."

"There's nothing to consider. Japan was eight years ago. I worked in the embassy. That's it." He was trying, but he must not have been too successful at hiding his anger. His muscles were locked so tight, Riley half woke, blinking up sleepily.

Will's brow knitted. "Hey, it's me. Remember me? I'm on your side. Who's got it in for you?"

"No one." Taylor took a deep breath, forced himself to think objectively about this. Will was wrong. This could not have to do with Japan, so it had to be something else. One of these things is not the same... He answered honestly, "Well, not lately. Not since before I was shot."

Their eyes met. "The Phu Fighters," Will said.

Taylor nodded. Old poison, for sure.

They'd been in Orange County following a lead on a possible counterfeiting ring, when he'd been shot by a juvenile member of the Phu Fighters, a Vietnamese street gang. While Taylor had been in the hospital, Will prowled Little Saigon, eventually tracking down the two punks involved in the shooting, and—according to the reports Taylor had read—pretty much prodded them into a fight. One kid had surrendered without trouble. The other had gone for his gun and ended up with a shattered hip and missing fingers.

It was still hard to believe that Will—patient, easygoing, teasing Will—had gone hunting with vengeance in his heart. But reading between the lines of the police report and the DS's own internal investigation, that's exactly what Will had done.

The official verdict was that Will had been under extreme emotional stress; cops and DS alike understood the bond between law-enforcement partners. And Will had been careful to let Le Loi Roy get off the first shot. Even so, Will was lucky to slide out of it with nothing more than an official reprimand and his picture in the paper. He'd been more riled about the newspaper photo than the reprimand.

“The Asian snake wine was bottled in the Mekong Delta,” Taylor said slowly.

“Did you phone the manufacturer?”

Taylor shook his head. “I never had a chance.”

Will finished his bourbon and set the empty glass on the table. “Well, tomorrow you're going to call the Asian snake people, and I'm going to see what Le Loi Roy is up to these days.”

Later, brushing his teeth, Taylor stuck his head out of the bathroom to say, “If it was revenge, I don't see why anyone would come after me. They already shot me. You're the guy who crippled Roy.”

Will was lying on the bed, staring moodily up at the ceiling. “Who knows? They're kids. They're nuts. Roy was counting you as a kill. He was disappointed when he found out you didn't buy it. Maybe he's trying to reestablish his street cred?”

It seemed shaky to Taylor, but he didn't have a better theory. He spit the toothpaste out, rinsed his mouth, rinsed the sink, and turned out the bathroom light.

He threw himself down on the bed beside Will.

“Why Japanese and not Vietnamese, though? The note, I mean.”

Will shook his head, raised up to shut off the bedside lamp. “You're the one who insists it's nothing to do with Japan.”

Taylor didn't really have a response for that. But how the hell could it be anything to do with Japan? He didn't believe in ghosts.

For a few seconds they lay not touching, not speaking in the darkness. It was unexpectedly lonely. "How was San Diego?" he inquired politely into the silence between them.

"Sunny, with a high of seventy-six."

"Ha."

Will was silent. Taylor thought he might be falling asleep, but he said suddenly, "If you could live anywhere, where would it be?"

With you. Taylor knew better than to say that aloud. "The beach. I like the beach."

Will was silent.

"What about you?" Taylor asked.

"The mountains."

Taylor rolled over on his side and set about falling asleep. After a couple of minutes of slow, easy breaths, Will's arm slipped around him, pulling him close.

* * * *

Will woke to the unmistakable nudge of Taylor's cock trying to elbow its way into his dreams. Taylor was still sleeping, as evidenced by the warm gusts against the back of Will's neck, but his body was waking up and taking an interest. Will was faintly amused by that heat and hardness pushing against him, that unconscious urgency. Taylor was the randiest guy Will had ever met—well, who actually possessed a brain to go with the balls.

It seemed sort of a shame to waste this. He shifted around, gathering Taylor close, interrupting but not rejecting. Taylor started awake, blinking dazedly into Will's eyes, his mouth soft and young looking—he rarely looked that vulnerable.

"Hey, wanna fuck?" Will whispered hopefully, and Taylor started laughing.

"Beat the clock?"

Will nodded, and they shifted around some more, trying to accommodate legs and arms and cocks.

"We don't have any passion oil here," Taylor regretted.

"Use the homemade brand," Will suggested.

Taylor did, his fingers slick with his own slippery urgency. He was inclined to be overly conscientious about this part, and Will shoved back against him. "Let's go. Move it or lose it."

Taylor chose to move it. He shoved his cock into Will's body, sank into him pedal to metal, and began to drive. He thrust into Will's tight heat in a steady rocking motion, and Will moved to match that smooth, steady rhythm. Taylor timed it expertly, like a driver taking a winding mountain road, decelerating in and accelerating out, long, smooth strokes, whipping around the curves, drawing his cock all the way out to the rim of tight muscle, then pushing back hard.

Will closed his eyes tight, just focusing on that pumping rhythm as Taylor sped up, pushed them both harder, faster...they were going to break the odometer this morning...and there it was. The finish line. Blazing sensation peaking, overloading...

Taylor's hands were going to leave bruises, and Will didn't mind, because that warm glow was spreading through every cell of his body in the wake of those pulses of shocking delight.

They could only spare a few minutes to hang on to each other, damp and flushed and muscles trembling in their own tracks. Will kissed the bridge of Taylor's cheek, and Taylor kissed his jaw, and then they were rolling free of each other, up and running.

Taylor had taken him with gentle, relentless strength, and for the first time Will had stopped struggling against it—mentally, that was—and just enjoyed the fact that Taylor was taking control, driving them. Part of what Will loved about him was that rough and reckless strength. Maybe because he looked like the kind of guy who should be going to art museums and babbling about postmodernism, but he was a hard-nosed, hard-ass cop at heart. Taylor's tenderness always took him by surprise.

* * * *

The fourteen-hour time difference between Vietnam and Los Angeles created a slight problem for Taylor. He arrived later at the office than he'd planned. That had been Will's fault. Will woke up horny and happy. It was just his nature.

Not that Taylor was complaining.

Even without the time difference, there was no way Taylor was going to find time to squeeze in a call during a day spent bargain hunting and babysitting.

Madame Kasambala had decided to hit the garment district, in particular Santee Alley, famous for its bargains and carnival-like atmosphere.

Carnival-like was putting it mildly, and the security nightmare presented by Santee Alley made Taylor homesick for dear old Rodeo Drive, with its snooty shopkeepers and private security.

"I'm going to kill her myself," Varga muttered as they watched their charge pawing scornfully through piles of knockoff Prada bags.

"I'm thinking homicide, double-suicide pact," Taylor said.

Varga giggled, surprising him. She had a very endearing giggle.

Slowly but surely they were beginning to figure out how to work together. It wasn't like with Will; it was never going to be like it was with Will, but it wasn't the rather-work-for-the-postal-service torture of the first day either.

A major corner seemed to have been turned when Taylor brought Varga a caramel macchiato that morning. Initially she had eyed the coffee as though suspecting poison and had actually said stiffly, awkwardly, "I like to keep things strictly business, MacAllister. I don't screw around with coworkers."

Did she honestly think...? Taylor had done a double take, spluttered, "Relax, Varga. I'm gay."

Varga had laughed.

Taylor had laughed too, but he said, "Hey, I'm not kidding."

Her jaw had dropped. "You're shitting me."

"No."

Well, that was the point of GLIFAA, right? Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies. This wasn't the bad old days when foreign service employees were fired for "moral weakness." Not that he and Will went around advertising, but they didn't hide it either. That had been one of the initial bonds between them when they'd first been partnered.

"I had no idea," Varga said.

"Why should you? It's not relevant to the job."

"But I mean, we've worked in the same field office for eighteen months." She'd thought it over. "Does Brandt know?"

"I think he suspects," Taylor said gravely.

So whether because he'd won her heart with chain-store coffee or by removing himself from the potential-sexual-predator list, today had been much easier. Which meant he had more time to brood over Will in San Diego with David Bradley.

Not that he was really brooding over Will and Bradley. Will was genetically incapable of cheating, even if Taylor didn't already know Will loved him. The ongoing problem—for Taylor—was that he was convinced that Will didn't want to love him. That Will believed loving him was a bad idea. That Will was now focused on all the ways they weren't compatible instead of all the ways they were: Like that question about where Taylor would live if he had a choice. What was that about?

Whatever it was about, it was depressing as hell.

Taylor hated thinking about this stuff. It wasn't even like him to worry about things like this. He wasn't that kind of guy. He had never fretted as to whether his feelings were returned, because previously his feelings were always returned. More than returned. He was the one other guys worried about.

So he was experiencing some kind of karmic romantic backlash, and he probably deserved every miserable minute of it, but it was still unsettling and messing with his focus.

Not that he needed a lot of focus on this detail. If the enemies of Comoros had any brains at all, they'd just leave Madame Kashandcarry to go on spending like there was no tomorrow, and the government would soon be bankrupt and out of business.

It was a long, boring day. They didn't get back to the office until after six. Varga couldn't wait to take off. She bade Taylor a quick good night, and he waved her off, sitting down at his desk to have another try at calling the Asian Snake Winery.

He was surprised when he actually got through. Finessing his way through the language barrier was harder, but he finally managed to make himself clear without resorting to calling in local law enforcement—an absolute last resort.

Unfortunately, according to the company's records, they had not shipped any wine to him. This meant someone else had purchased a bottle and shipped it to Taylor from within the States.

Taylor tried to remember the shipping label and wrapping paper on the box. Nothing distinctive, that he recalled. A plain, sealed cardboard box with a computer-printed label? Had there been a return address? A postmark? He thought not. He'd have surely noticed.

Trash pickup was Tuesday morning, so it was—

No, it wasn't too late, because he had spent the night at Will's and not put his trash out for pickup. So somewhere in the trash barrel were the box and label that might or might not offer some clue to the identity of the person who had sent the snake wine.

Taylor was pretty sure the wine had to be connected to the threatening note and the firecracker bomb. A cobra in a bottle was about as creepy an illustration of old poison as anyone could ask for.

* * * *

“Thanks for dinner,” Bradley said as they walked out of the seafood restaurant. The indigo-orange sunset turned the water bronze. The crimson-tinged sails of the boats along the docks whipped musically in the evening breeze.

“My pleasure,” Will said.

“Do you feel like working some more tonight?”

“I need to start back. It's a long drive,” Will said regretfully. They'd made some good progress, even with Will spending part of the morning on the phone to the Orange County Sheriff's Department, following up on Le Loi Roy.

The information they'd dug up on Jose Valz had led them to other suspects, all employed by construction companies with questionable residency or work-eligibility permits. A little more digging had uncovered the fact that those companies employed at least five people who had presented false resident-alien cards to their employers.

Will was feeling satisfied.

“You know,” Bradley said lazily, “we can put you up at the base if your expense account won't stretch to a hotel room for the night. It would save some time in the morning.”

“I know. And thanks for the offer. But I've got some things to take care of at home. Feed the mutt, put out the milk bottles, you know.” The briny, astringent sea-breeze smell reminded him of Taylor.

“Your choice.” Bradley was smiling. Will thought again how much he liked him. How if things were different—

But they weren't different, and he wanted to get back and talk to Taylor. Wanted to reassure himself that Taylor was fine. It was not a lack of confidence in Taylor; it was just...he didn't trust anyone to watch Taylor's back as diligently as he would. Nobody else had quite the investment in Taylor's well-being, did they?

Besides, that morning had been mind-shatteringly good, and his body had been aching pleasantly with the memories all day long. He was craving Taylor. He wasn't even sure why. It wasn't anything they hadn't done before, but somehow that morning everything had just...fallen into place.

Will told Bradley good night and set off for home. Emmylou was singing about the train in the Tulsa night. He felt good; the flow of traffic was with him. He had his case to preoccupy his thoughts, and before he knew it he was pulling onto his own street.

Only to find his house dark and the driveway empty.

Taylor was not there.

Chapter Six

The phone clattered off the hook and Taylor's sleep-husky voice said, "MacAllister."

"Where are you?" Will asked.

The answer was evident, of course, but Taylor replied anyway. "Home."

"What are you doing there?"

"Uh... I live here?" Taylor suggested.

"You know what I mean. What the hell are you doing there? Is that what you'd tell a client who was being stalked? Go home?"

"I'm not being stalked." His derision at the very idea was loud and clear. "Even if I was, I'm not exactly a civilian. We do this stuff for a living. If I can't handle one nutcase, I need to find another line of work."

"You know damn well you should not be there on your own."

There was an instant smile in Taylor's voice as he drawled, "Come and keep me company."

"I don't really feel like making that drive at one thirty in the morning." Despite himself, some of Will's annoyance—disappointment—crept through.

Taylor smothered a yawn, not entirely successfully. "Did you just get in?"

"Yeah."

"Burning the midnight oil, huh?"

"I had dinner with Bradley before driving back."

Will wanted to get that out of the way fast. No way was it ever coming back to bite him in the ass. But there was no hesitation, no pause. Taylor said calmly, "How's the case coming?"

"It's coming. Listen, I talked to the OC sheriff's department, and Le Loi Roy is still incarcerated at the Lacy Juvenile Annex."

Taylor seemed to be considering this.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes. I guess we can rule him out."

"Him, yes. But maybe someone's acting on his behalf."

"Maybe." Taylor's tone was noncommittal.

"Did you think of something else?"

"No. It's just..."

"Just what?" Old ghosts? Will was suddenly convinced that Taylor was hiding something from him.

Meanwhile, Taylor was reporting, "I called the wine manufacturer. According to their records, they didn't ship the bottle to me. So someone else must have purchased it and then sent it. I dug the box and wrapping out of the trash. It was mailed last Tuesday from Ventura County. I'm going to have it analyzed."

"Good thinking," Will approved.

There was a short silence.

"I thought you'd be here," Will said. He was a little embarrassed at the reproachful note that crept into his voice, but it was true. He'd expected to find the lights on and Taylor home and was still unsettled at how let down he'd been to be proved wrong.

"I wasn't sure you were coming back to LA tonight." Taylor sighed. "Anyway, I can't hide out at your house."

"Who said anything about hiding out? I just... I was looking forward to you being here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Taylor said slowly, "Are you driving back tomorrow night?"

"Sure."

"Maybe I could stay over tomorrow night."

"That'd be good. I might be late, but I'll be here. How's it going with Varga?"

"We've reached détente."

“Ever think about trying out for the diplomatic service, my son?”

Taylor chuckled.

Will wrapped his hand absently around his cock. “Talk to me,” he said suddenly, urgently.

“What would you like me to say?” Taylor sounded amused, but then his voice sharpened.

“Hey, are you—”

“Yeah. I am.”

Taylor laughed, a husky, naughty, full-throated laugh that closed Will's own throat. Desire. That was what he felt. More than lust. It was the longing, yearning to be together. To be one.

“Oooh, Brandt,” Taylor cooed. “Oh God, what you do to me.”

Will laughed breathlessly, kept his hand moving.

Taylor moaned, mocking them both probably, but certainly mocking himself, that keening sound that escaped him when Will was fucking him hard. Those little cries that drove Will insane with lust.

“Bastard,” Will gulped out.

Taylor chuckled again. Then he said huskily, deliberately, “No one's ever made me feel what you do, Will. When you push that big, hot cock inside my body. I never let anyone do that to me before. It...scares me, it's so good. I want it so much. But there's always this moment of panic when I think, No, he's too big. I can't take him. Not just my body but my mind. Like you're taking me over. Pounding my ass and pounding my brain.”

Will started to laugh, breathlessly.

Taylor's voice dropped lower. “And it feels so good. In a dark, dirty way to let you do that to me...to shove right inside my body, right inside my skin. The friction...the way it feels for you to move inside me. It kind of burns and it kind of scrapes and I feel it in my belly and my chest...”

Will bit his lip hard, hand moving frantically.

* * * *

On Wednesday they had their first viable threat against Madame.

Well, at least it looked that way for the first few seconds.

They were shopping—what else?—in the Beverly Center, located at the edge of Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. Madame had already chewed them out once that day for hovering too closely. Did she suspect that in the guise of protecting her they were going to snatch a great bargain from under her nose?

A woman with a stroller was passing to the side of Taylor; he was absently tracking her out of his peripheral vision because she was a little closer than he liked. The kid suddenly screamed. There was no mistaking that sound, it was raw pain, and Taylor turned instinctively. It turned out to be nothing more serious than pinched fingers, and he was relaxing as Varga suddenly shouted, “Gun!”

Taylor ducked and spun, pulling his own weapon, and there in his sights stood a beanpole of a kid in dreadlocks holding up one of those little goofy autograph books. His hand was shaking, the color draining out of his face.

He opened his mouth, and no words came out.

Plenty of words, however, were coming out of Madame Kasambala. Varga had knocked her to the department-store floor and was using her own body to shield Madame. Madame was less than grateful and making it clear.

Loud and clear.

“Identify yourself,” Taylor ordered the half-fainting autograph hound. It was already clear to him they had got it wrong and it was probably going to be on the news—not to mention YouTube—in a matter of hours, judging by the cell phones clicking from around the store displays where other customers and staff were hiding.

“Norman Piggot. Little Piggy,” the kid quavered. “I just wanted to get Krista Kross's a-autograph.”

“Who the hell is Krista Kross?”

Little Piggy barely inclined his head toward the tangle of Varga and Madame Kasambala. Madame was rejecting Varga's protective embrace for all she was worth, and in another time and place, Taylor would be laughing his ass off at the picture they made. At the moment, not so funny. Pulling their weapons in this kind of a crowd situation? He and Varga would be lucky if they didn't wind up with an official reprimand.

A voice from behind a display of lady's hosiery—a chorus line of mannequin feet and shapely, stocking-clad shins—volunteered, “She's a female rap artist.”

“You've got the wrong lady,” Taylor informed Little Piggy.

Little Piggy nodded, eager to show himself cooperative.

It took a few minutes to sort it out: reassure the public that all was well, reassure Madame that they were truly sorry, reassure Little Piggy that he wasn't going to jail.

“I misread it,” Varga said, chagrined, when they had moved on to Bloomingdale's.

“Better safe than sorry.”

He knew Will would have been amused to hear him say it.

* * * *

Jose Valz lived with his wife, parents, brother, sister-in-law, and assorted rug rats in an older Spanish-style apartment in downtown San Diego. Had he lived alone, it would have simplified everything.

The plan was to interview Valz. They weren't ready to make an arrest yet, and when they did scoop him up, they planned on catching as many of the little fish as possible in their nets.

In fact, Will wanted to do the interview on his own; he suspected—and he turned out to be correct—that Valz was liable to panic when he spotted Bradley's uniform. But Bradley was adamant that Will was not walking in there on his own, not when they didn't know exactly what they were dealing with.

So they waited till suppertime, when the odds were in their favor that Valz would be home from a hard day's work ripping off the US government. Señora Valz opened the door to their knock. Good smells issued forth, along with a babble of non-Spanish.

Nahua, identified Will, who had spent some time in San Salvador. So there was another strike against Valz, who claimed in a couple of documents to be a lawful citizen of Mexico—those would be in the documents where he didn't claim to be a United States citizen.

A roomful of wary black eyes turned their way, and silence fell.

Bradley began to explain their business in painstaking Spanish. There was the squeak of floorboards behind them. Will turned, and there was Valz rabbiting down the apartment hallway toward the staircase.

Will was after him, shouting a warning for Valz to stop. He wasn't going to shoot the guy in front of his kids—wasn't going to shoot him at all. Nothing in Valz's profile indicated he was dangerous or warranted shooting. In any case, Valz paid no attention.

Will jumped over the railing and gained a flight, dropped over another metal railing, and hit the ground floor the same time as Valz. He could hear the pound of Bradley's feet behind him—slower and heavier than Taylor, who would have passed Will up by now.

Valz burst out through the side entrance that led to the pool courtyard.

Will shot through the doors a few seconds behind him.

The courtyard was empty. It was too cold for swimming this time of year, even in San Diego, but there was some kind of pool maintenance going on and the deck was wet. A large gray hose was stretched across from a rumbling truck in the parking lot, and it sounded like the pool was being vacuumed.

Though small and portly, Valz was fast. Or very scared. He went through the obstacle course of lounge chairs and tables like a steeplechaser. Will was gaining on him, though, until he slipped in a puddle. He knew an instant of chagrined surprise before his foot shot out from under him and he plunged headfirst right into the pool, his skull grazing the cement lip of the pool. His last thought was the hope that they weren't draining the pool...

Chapter Seven

“Will?”

A hand was patting his cheek. Annoying.

“Will?”

He twitched his eyebrows in irritation. His head was pounding sickeningly, like someone was kicking an oil drum next to him. He was wet and cold and starting to shiver...

“Come on, Marine. Talk to me.”

And if that fucking voice and fucking hand slapping his cheek did not go away, Will was going to punch someone. His eyes snapped open.

David Bradley was leaning over him, his handsome face grim and worried. In fact, his face was quite close to Will's, his mouth a couple of inches away, his breath warm on Will's chilled skin.

Seeing that Will was conscious, he drew back in relief. “How do you feel?”

Now that he thought about it...not good. In fact...

A wave of nausea rose inside him. Salty saliva filled his mouth; his stomach lurched. He rolled onto his side, away from Bradley, and was sick on the pavement.

“Great,” he got out.

“I see that.” Bradley's big hand was on his shoulder, squeezing in support.

“I'm okay,” Will assured him hoarsely. “That's just reaction.” He pushed up from the mess.

Bradley grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet. “More like concussion.”

“Nah. Where's our guy?”

He was upright now, weaving a little in the mild evening breeze. Bradley steadied him and chuckled. “He ran straight into the arms of a pair of sheriff's deputies here to collect a deadbeat dad.”

Will laughed shakily, put a hand to his throbbing head.

"Let's get you back to the base," Bradley said with quick concern. "They've got it under control here. It'll do Valz good to wait a little before we question him."

* * * *

The base medic pronounced mild concussion, recommended a couple of days of bed rest, and sent them on their way. When they got back to Bradley's office, Will accepted a change of clothes and declined the offer of a bunk.

"I'm serious. You can stay at my place," Bradley said. "You should not try driving tonight. I've got plenty of room. I'd like to have you."

No kidding. And Will would like to have Bradley too. But that was not going to happen. Will might be suffering from mild concussion, but he'd have to have major brain damage to go along with that idea. He tried to imagine breaking it to Taylor he was having a slumber party at David Bradley's house. Not going to happen.

Bad enough that he wasn't going to be able to drive back home tonight. He wanted to, but he knew better. He was just groggy and exhausted enough to make that unwise.

"I appreciate it," he said, "but I think I probably better get a hotel room."

"Now I'm insulted," Bradley said, and he did look pretty formidable. Definitely not a guy to jerk around. "I sort of thought, regardless of the rest of it, we were friends."

"We are friends," Will said.

"But what?"

"There is the rest of it. I'm not going to pretend I don't still want you. But I've got someone now."

"So you said." Bradley was watching him closely, speculatively. "Is it this partner of yours?"

Will hesitated. He felt he owed Bradley this honesty. "Yes."

"I wondered. I knew you were close. When he was shot, it was pretty clear your world narrowed down to him."

What could Will say? It was the truth.

"I've never been partnered with anyone, so I wasn't sure if it was like that for everyone. I had a feeling it might be unique to the two of you." Bradley asked tentatively, "Does he feel the same?"

Will nodded. He had a sudden sense of how very lucky he was. He could see it on Bradley's face.

"Well, hell." Bradley grimaced. "I guess I made a mistake backing off when I did. I was kind of hoping you'd see the light. Unfortunately it turned out to be a different light."

"I'm sorry," Will said. "It...caught me by surprise too."

"I believe that. I thought we had something pretty special ourselves."

Will didn't want to hear this; what was the point? "We had something good," he acknowledged.

Bradley was still eyeing him in that steadfast, measuring way. "And you don't have any doubts about this partner of yours? I thought he was kind of a wild card?"

"I don't have any doubts about him." End of discussion.

Bradley nodded, mostly to himself. His eyes met Will's, and there was a wicked gleam in the brown depths. "Okay if I kiss you good-bye?"

Will laughed uneasily. His heart started thumping. It was ridiculous and stagy, but easier to get it over with than make a fuss. "Sure."

Bradley put his arms around him, and Will thought what a crazy thing it was that for all Bradley's greater size and obvious strength, it was only when Taylor held him in that bony, fierce grip that Will felt helpless. Then Bradley's mouth was on his, and Will stopped thinking, because he'd forgotten how good this was. And Bradley was applying his considerable talents to this moment.

Dazedly, Will was aware of a surge of sexual hunger, of fierce physical desire, his body responding to the expert pressure of the hot mouth on his own. It was startling because it wasn't like he was doing without these days, and it was alarming because it would be very easy to give into this. Sex had always been good between him and Bradley.

But what he had with Taylor went way beyond this.

He drew back—not without effort—and said, “And this is why spending the night at your place would not be a good idea.”

Bradley looked slightly dazed himself. “Will—”

“I’ll stop by tomorrow on my way out of town,” Will said, and he got himself out of there.

* * * *

The generic hotel was mostly clean and mostly quiet. Will used the complimentary toothbrush, took a couple of painkillers, climbed into bed, and phoned Taylor.

Taylor’s voice had that edgy, on-the-job note when he answered, and Will said, “Everything okay?”

“Sure.”

Will could hear the conscious effort to ease up. Something had happened; Taylor was definitely wound tight. Tighter than usual. Will silently cursed the fact he wasn’t driving back. “Any more weird gifts or notes?”

“Nah.” He sounded relaxed about that, so it was probably just the stress of working with Varga. Taylor confirmed that a second later. “Varga and I are in the doghouse. I’ll tell you when you get here.”

“Well, I’ve got bad news,” Will admitted. “I’m not going to make it back tonight after all.”

“Ah.” Neutral.

“It’s... Well, I had a slight mishap.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I was in pursuit of a suspect, and I—” Will broke off to cough. He hadn’t swallowed a lot of water, but enough that his lungs were still a bit foggy.

“And you what?”

“Fell in a swimming pool and knocked myself out.”

“You’ve got to be—Are you all right?” Taylor’s voice was hard and terse.

Will reassured quickly. “I’m fine. But I don’t think driving back tonight is a good idea. Much as I want to.”

The edge was noticeably sharper as Taylor questioned, “Where the fuck was Lt. Commander Bradley during all this?”

“He was right there. He pulled me out of the pool.”

“If he'd been doing his job, you'd never have fallen into the pool.”

“Come on, MacAllister.”

“Don't 'come on, MacAllister' me, Brandt. He was supposed to be watching your back.”

“Nobody failed in their duty, nobody made any mistakes—except me slipping in the pool water.”

“It shouldn't have happened.”

This was touchy. The few times he'd tried to address this with Taylor, Taylor had shut him down fast. Will gentled his voice. “Shit happens, Tay. No one should know that better than you.”

Silence.

Taylor changed the subject. “You sure you're okay?”

“I'm okay. Swear to God.” Will added softly, “I'm disappointed too.”

Taylor let out a pent-up, irritable breath. “It's not that. Well, yeah, it is partly that, but...you could have been killed, Brandt, and here I am stuck babysitting East Africa's answer to Paris Hilton.”

“That bad?”

“Yes. And don't change the subject. Did you actually see a doctor, or did you just decide all on your own you didn't have a concussion?”

“Yes. I saw the base doctor. I just stunned myself for a few seconds. If I hadn't fallen into a swimming pool, it wouldn't have been worth mentioning.”

Taylor made a huffy sound that made Will's lips twitch into a grin he'd never dare have shown.

“On the bright side, we've wrapped our case up,” he offered.

“Yes?” Taylor sounded slightly mollified.

“Yep. I'm driving back first thing tomorrow morning, and we can spend tomorrow night together. Your place or mine, you can choose.” He planned on stopping off in Orange County

and doing some more checking into the recent activities and general attitude of the Phu Fighters, but he wasn't going to mention that right now. Taylor was edgy enough.

“We've got one more day escorting Miss Congeniality around LA. Then they fly her off to San Francisco, and the gang on Pine Street get to amuse her for the next forty-eight hours.”

“So, tomorrow night. My house or yours?”

“Mine. I...want to show you something.”

“Oh yes?” Will said hopefully, suggestively.

There was a smile in Taylor's voice, but he sounded absent. “Will?”

“Right here.”

There was a pause. “When I was shot—”

Will's heart quickened; he wasn't even sure why. “Yeah?”

“It wasn't because of you...turning me down. It wasn't because my mind wasn't on the job.”

“No?”

“No. I know—at least, I think I do—that you thought you were somehow to blame for me getting nailed. It wasn't anything to do with you.” He heard Taylor sigh. “It was when I saw how young they were. Kids. And I hesitated. I hesitated a couple of seconds too long. That's all.”

Something inside Will relaxed, like the clutch of a child's hand on a balloon. The balloon went sailing free and happy. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. So if you're, you know—you don't have to.”

“Huh?”

Taylor said carefully, painstakingly, “So, if you're you know—”

Will burst out laughing. He couldn't help it—not to save his life. “You are fucking insane, do you know that?”

“I beg your pardon?” Taylor said in outrage.

The formal words and indignant tone made it all the worse, and Will was already having a very hard time not roaring. He couldn't even explain why he felt so happy. “You think I'm with you out of guilt?”

“No, you ass. Of course not. I just mean—”

“You're a nut, MacAllister. I'm with you because I love you.”

There it was, out. Three little words. Three of the most common words in the world, but string them together and they were more powerful than any warrant, any extradition papers, or even treaty. Stronger than any magical spell. Had he really never said them aloud to Taylor? Something in the ringing silence that followed made him think he maybe hadn't.

It was a relief when Taylor said, at last, in that irritable voice that always signified nerves or great emotion, “That's fine. I just thought you should know.”

“I love you,” Will repeated firmly, having got the hang of it. “I'll see you tomorrow night, you lunatic.”

“Love you,” Taylor said tersely and hung up.

* * * *

Taylor stared at the receiver in its cradle and then got ready for bed.

If he was spending the night by himself, he'd have preferred to be between his own sheets. Somehow it felt lonelier in Will's bed without Will. And it was hotter and smoggier here than in Ventura, and the street outside Will's place was noisier than his own neighborhood.

He left his .357 SIG on the nightstand within grabbing distance.

Even Riley seemed uneasy without Will, jumping up and growling at phantom shadows a couple of times during the long night.

“Easy, Riley,” Taylor muttered, and each time the dog curled up next to the bed, grumbling under his breath. He lay, head raised, panting softly in the gloom, ears twitching at every sound.

Taylor wasn't much better. He wasn't nervous, but every time he started to relax into sleep, he'd remember something and jerk back to full consciousness. At first the memories were good: Will saying he loved him. Not that he didn't already know this, but if Will was saying it out loud, saying it so casually, acceptingly, they had turned some corner.

The laughter, the affectionate exasperation in Will's voice was...well, the best birthday present he could have received.

But then the memories grew darker. Things he had forgotten, tried to forget, came back to him. His shooting. The subsequent trip to the High Sierras when Will had been taken hostage.

When he'd feared Will was dead. Other memories, older memories. Other friends, other losses and failures.

Japan.

A long time since he'd let himself think about Japan, let himself remember. No point to it. Nothing productive was going to come out of raking over those memories. Better, healthier, to forget.

Not that there weren't good memories too. A lot of good memories. Even if he wasn't ready to face them yet.

It was the cobra in the bottle that had started him remembering. Old poison.

Weird.

There couldn't be a connection. It was nearly a decade ago.

But equally he had trouble believing that the Orange County Phu Fighters were still gunning for him. He couldn't even picture them coming after Will, let alone him.

And that note: Old poison slays as swiftly as new. Vietnamese gangbangers were not going to leave notes in Japanese kanji. If they wrote anything at all, which would be doubtful, it would be in their own Romanized national language—or English. But the fact was, they wouldn't leave notes; they wouldn't send cobras pickled in rice wine or try to set booby traps with Japanese fireworks. They'd shoot him when he walked out his door one morning.

By the same logic, he dismissed the idea of the punks in the Red Dragon parking lot. To start with, the cobra in the bottle had been sent before the altercation in the parking lot. And that little dustup couldn't have been staged, because no one but Will knew where they were headed that night. Secondly, Mexican gangstas were even less likely to leave notes in Japanese than Vietnamese gangs. Thirdly, this whole complicated threat scenario was out of character. Out of character for both the Latino and the Vietnamese gangs. Wine with cobras? Cryptic notes? Bombs made out of fireworks? It was just too involved.

Convoluting.

Personal.

Granted, he and Will pissed people off in the normal course of their duties, but Taylor just couldn't see the forgers and counterfeiters they typically went after lashing back with this kind of scenario.

It was sort of, well, theatrical. Like those Noh dramas Inori had dragged him to see.

Taylor was tempted to dismiss it as a joke, but there was no reason anyone would be joking about Japan to him. Ninety bucks for a giant firecracker and another ninety bucks for a bottle of imported rice-and-cobra wine was a fairly expensive joke.

No, there was something not right.

Nothing he couldn't handle, but maybe he did need to talk to Will about Japan. He didn't want to. He could think of few conversations he wanted to have less. But Will had brought it up, and he deserved to hear the truth.

Chapter Eight

Taylor woke early—very early—and was momentarily confused to find himself in Will's bed—minus Will.

He dealt briskly with missing Will. A hot shower and hotter coffee helped chase away the remaining fog. He fed Riley, put the dog out in the backyard, to Riley's evident disappointment.

He borrowed a pair of Will's briefs—every single pair pristine and conservative white—and one of his clean shirts and dressed listening to the suburban birds in Will's well-kept backyard. He was still well ahead of schedule when he went out to try his car and found it dead.

It had been fine the day before, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. The Acura MDX wasn't new. It wasn't the battery, though, because he'd replaced that the previous month, and the lights and CD player were operating just fine.

Taylor thought it over, went inside, and phoned Varga.

“My car won't start. You mind picking me up this morning?”

She did not sound pleased. “In Ventura?”

“I'm not in Ventura. I'm in Woodland Hills.”

“What are you doing in Woodland Hills?”

“We could talk about this on the way,” he pointed out.

She sighed. “All right. What's the address?”

He gave her the address, and she rang off.

Shortly before eight o'clock, Varga rang his cell to say her ETA was two minutes out—clearly expecting him to be on the sidewalk waiting.

Taylor rinsed his coffee cup, set it in the sink, locked Will's front door, and walked out to meet her, surprised to see a battered brown Chevy in the driveway, blocking his own disabled Acura.

Brown Chevy...

He registered this, registered that Riley was snarling and throwing himself at the chain-link gate, and instinctively Taylor's hand went to his shoulder holster, even as he opened his mouth to calm the dog. A woman was getting out of the driver's side. He didn't recognize her, but he recognized the nightmare expression on her face—so white she looked like she was painted for Kabuki theater: black holes for eyes, a slash of mouth, and ghost white skin. She had a gun in her hand, and it was pointed at him.

Too slow this time, MacAllister. His main regret was Will; that this was happening on Will's home turf. Will was going to think he should have been here, should have stopped it. Shoulda, woulda, coulda.

At the same instant, someone walked up behind him, someone who must have been waiting along the side of the house. Taylor felt the prod of something hard and cylindrical beneath his ribs. His hand froze, fingertips brushing the butt of his pistol.

“Drop it.”

“You've got to be kidding me,” Taylor said. “Do you know I'm a federal officer?”

“We know who you are.”

Okay. If he wasn't already dead, the odds in his favor were improving. He gingerly drew his weapon and dropped it to the grass.

“Walk,” a man's voice ordered. A toneless, empty voice. Accented? Seeing that there was a chance he might survive this, Taylor started taking mental notes.

The woman was scrambling to throw open the trunk of the Chevy. Brown hair, Caucasian, five-six or -seven, medium build, mid to late forties. He didn't know her. Did he? “Hurry!” she urged. “For God's sake, hurry up!”

A motor gunned from down the street. Varga's blue sedan roared up behind the Chevy, blocking it in. She must have seen what was happening, because she jumped out, drawing her weapon on the man who held Taylor.

“Halt. Fed—”

Before she could finish identifying herself, the woman by the rear bumper of the car opened fire. The bullets hit Varga squarely in her chest, the white silk of her blouse turning red as she dropped to her knees. She discharged her weapon harmlessly into Will's lawn and sagged forward onto her face.

Taylor saw it out of the corner of his eye, and it was the last thing he saw; he had whipped around, grabbing for the gun, trying to disarm the man behind him, when there was an explosion in his head.

Hanabi. A brilliant chrysanthemum burst of purple and red lights. Bloodred stars like chrysanthemum petals drifted, twinkling through the night. The lights went dark.

* * * *

Will was in Orange County talking to Deputy Brown about the recent suspicious movements of the Phu Fighter gang leadership when the call came through.

Assistant Director Cooper came up as the Incredible Hulk on Will's phone screen.

Will made a face and stepped outside to take the call.

“Where are you?” Cooper bit out.

Sure he was about to get his ass reamed for taking time off to pursue his own investigation, Will hedged, “On my way back to LA.”

“There's been a shooting at your residence.”

The phone nearly dropped from Will's nerveless hand. “Who?” a weird, flat voice asked on his behalf.

“Denise Varga. She was shot to death in the street outside your house a few minutes after eight. Apparently she was on the way to pick up your partner.”

“MacAllister?” Will managed the force the question from his locked-tight throat.

“Missing. From a neighbor's account, it sounds like he may have been abducted.”

“Abducted?”

“His disabled vehicle is sitting in your driveway. Any idea what he was doing at your place?”

“He spent the night.”

“Something wrong with his house?”

Frost crackled in Cooper's voice. And no wonder. One agent dead. Another—Jesus. Let him be okay.

Will thought rapidly. “I told him to stay at my place while Ventura PD investigated the bomb threat he received. Did my neighbor say if Ta—MacAllister—was injured?”

“She believed he was knocked unconscious and thrown in the trunk of a brown Chevy. I thought it had been determined that there was no bomb threat, that it was just a practical joke?”

“I never bought the practical-joke theory. I think this bears me out.”

“Report back here. Out.”

* * * *

“Why didn't you tell me the truth?” Will demanded. His face was white with fury, his eyes almost black. He looked at Taylor with condemnation, dislike. Never, not once in the three years of their partnership, had Will looked at him like that. Like Taylor was a stranger.

Not even when they had been strangers to each other.

“I...tried.”

“You didn't try. You never said a word about it. You let me believe that you were different. That you were good. Someone I could care about.”

“I am. I am those things.”

Dread welled in Taylor. If Will stopped believing in him, if Will didn't care about him anymore—it was like losing his compass, having his mooring torn away, like being lost at sea and no star to guide him.

“You disgust me,” Will said.

Taylor was shaking his head, childishly insisting this wasn't true. “You know me, Will. You're just like me.”

“I'm not like you,” Will said in disgust. He was glaring at the thing Taylor held in his hand. Taylor looked down. He was holding a percussion pistol. Some of his fear lightened. Will had given him this. A beautiful gift. Smooth black wood grip carved in a snarling dragon head. A large pearl glowed in the dragon's jaws. The pearl beyond price. No, not a pearl. An eye. A brown eye. It stared at him maliciously—and winked.

“You're so fucking lame, MacAllister,” Will exclaimed. “You're so fucking useless.”

He snatched the pistol out of Taylor's hand and held the long, engraved barrel to his temple. “Here's what you do,” he said and pulled the trigger.

A blast of dust and exhaust filtered through the cracks in the car trunk, blew in Taylor's face, waking him. He began to choke.

Chapter Nine

Yellow crime-scene tape cordoned Will's yard and lawn from the rest of the neighborhood and the spectators who had gathered. There was a horrifying red-brown stain at the end of the drive, where Varga had died.

The doors of Taylor's MDX stood open, and LAPD's crime-scene investigators were collecting and documenting evidence.

"Our theory is the perps damaged the MDX's starter coil at some point during the night and then left the scene," Lt. Wray said.

She was a tall, lanky redhead in an ill-fitting suit. Other than the suit, she seemed to know what she was doing. Time would tell.

"Why would they leave the scene?"

"We don't think these were professionals. There's every indication the shooter was panicked into opening fire. Plus, you've got a pretty active neighborhood watch here. We're speculating that the perps didn't want to draw attention to themselves by parking on the street or loitering near your domicile. We think your partner came out early this morning, earlier than the perps were anticipating. He couldn't start his vehicle and went back inside to call Agent Varga. Varga showed up, your partner walked outside, and this time they were waiting for him."

"Quiet, Riley," Will threw back at the dog, who had been barking ever since his arrival. To the cop, he said, "You have a partial on the Chevy's license plate?"

"Yes. We're running it now. So far we're not coming up with any matches. They may have switched plates with another car." Wray hesitated. "If you're right about this being the same car that nearly hit Special Agent MacAllister on Saturday, they've been tracking him for some time."

Why the hell hadn't Taylor listened to him? Why the hell did he always have to be such a damn bullhead? Except...Taylor had listened to Will last night. He'd stayed at Will's place like Will wanted. Will was the one who failed. If he'd been here...

He shoved it aside, questioned, "ID on the perps?"

"Two. Male and female. The witness didn't get a clear look at the male. She thought he might have been Asian. Midtwenties. Possible gang tattoos. A little shorter than your partner and a little heavier. She thought he hit MacAllister with some kind of karate chop or martial arts move."

"And the woman?"

"The woman is described as older, maybe even early fifties. Tall, athletic, Caucasian, brown hair. Our witness got a good look at her; she's going through mug shots now."

Will nodded. If Taylor's attackers were not professional criminals, how useful were mug shots going to be?

"Any chance this is tied to a case he's working?" Wray asked.

"Doubtful. MacAllister was on sick leave for eight weeks and then desk duty for another month. He was only cleared for active duty this week, and it's a routine protection detail."

"Then it's something personal."

Reluctantly, Will said, "It looks that way."

"Did your partner have any recent run-ins with anyone?"

Will filled Wray in on the altercation at the Red Dragon restaurant.

She heard him out but seemed unconvinced. "Doesn't really sound like the MO of any Latino gang I ever heard of."

"I agree. And for what it's worth, that was MacAllister's take too." Will knew he was going to have to tell her about the snake wine, the threatening note, and the dud bomb. He disliked cracking open the shell of Taylor's close-guarded privacy, but privacy meant little compared to getting Taylor back alive and in one piece.

When he'd filled Lt. Wray in on everything he could remember, she said thoughtfully, "Did he have a theory about who was harassing him?"

"If he did, he didn't share it." Will admitted, "He was resistant to the idea."

"Maybe so, but on the surface it sounds like someone was stalking him, all right."

Old poison, thought Will. "He was stationed in Japan about eight years ago."

"You believe there's a tie-in?"

“Maybe. Not necessarily, though. He's always been interested in Japan. He's studied martial arts. He's got a collection of Japanese weapons.” Will thought about the pistol he'd bought for Taylor's birthday. It was a nice piece, an antique, but three thousand dollars wasn't incentive for abduction or murder. Besides, if someone wanted that pistol, or any of Taylor's collection, they'd have had the perfect opportunity to break into his house while he was staying at Will's. No, this was about Taylor himself.

He added, as they walked toward Taylor's MDX, “He could have pissed someone off at his dojo or when he was hanging around Little Tokyo. He can be...abrasive.”

“How abrasive?”

“I like him,” Will said evenly.

“Plus you have an alibi.” He must have looked unamused. Wray said, “Any chance he was snatched as a means of leverage in a case you're working?”

“We're not working the same case right now. We've been temporarily reassigned.”

“That's not what I asked.”

Will stopped walking. “What are you asking?”

Her eyes were hazel and direct. “I was partnered with a guy for six years. I understand the bond. Is it possible your partner was taken in an attempt to put pressure on you?”

“No.”

“What's the full extent of your relationship with Special Agent MacAllister?”

Funny thing being on this side of a criminal investigation. Will found he didn't like it at all.

“We're partners, and we're best friends.”

“You're both gay.”

Well, he had to give LAPD credit; they had done one hell of a lot of background work in less than four hours.

“That's right.” He looked past her to the crime-scene investigator and asked if there were wrappings from the wine shipping box in the MDX.

Negative from the crime-scene personnel.

Will questioned, “What about a note? Japanese writing on plain white paper?”

Another negative.

Wray observed this interchange silently. When Will had finished, she said calmly, "Like I said, I understand the bond between partners, Special Agent Brandt, but this is an LAPD investigation—at least until the Feds yank it away from us. I'll keep you up-to-date on any developments, but I expect your full cooperation."

Will nodded tightly.

"And I'm going to have to insist that you leave the investigating to us."

If Will's nod had been any tighter, his neck would have snapped.

Untroubled, Wray moved forward, pointing to the tire tracks across Will's lawn. "Agent Varga had them boxed in. You can see where they pulled forward and drove across your front yard and out your other neighbor's driveway..."

* * * *

It was hard to breathe. There was more dust than air permeating the hood seal of the trunk, and the combination of exhaust fumes and burned pollen was making him sick. Or maybe that was the taiko drum banging in his skull.

Boom, boom, boom, with every labored beat of his heart.

Something had happened...

He tried to piece together the picture of the last thing he remembered. Had Will been with him? He didn't think so. It was confused...

The car hit another pothole or a dip in the dirt road and slammed down. Nausea rose in Taylor's throat, and he fought it back.

"Will?" he asked the stuffy darkness. But there wasn't enough room for both Will and him in this crowded compartment. There wasn't enough room for him on his own. Woozily, he began to feel around for something he could use as a weapon. But there was nothing. No tire iron, no jack, no handy crowbar or two-by-four.

The car banged down on another dip in the road, and this time the struggle to control his stomach failed. Sickness swept over him in a humiliating tide, wrenching his muscles. His head pounded more fiercely with each gasped retch.

* * * *

“This is a goddamned, unbelievable screwup of near-mythic proportions,” Assistant Director Cooper snarled.

It was the most pleasant thing Cooper had said so far, and it indicated he was finally cooling down.

Will nodded curtly. That had been the extent of his participation for most of his meeting with Cooper.

“If MacAllister believed himself to be in some kind of danger—”

“He didn't.”

At Cooper's look of irritable inquiry, Will said, “He'd have told me, yes, but more to the point, Taylor wouldn't ever believe there was a threat he couldn't handle.”

Cooper snorted, but he couldn't argue with that.

“Well, he obviously perceived there was some threat, because he sent off a sheet of Japanese writing and a cardboard box with wrapping paper to the FBI lab.”

Will swallowed and managed to say unemotionally, “Did they come up with anything?”

“It wasn't a high-priority request at the time.” Cooper sighed. “We should know something soon.”

“Would it be possible for me to see MacAllister's file as it relates to his posting in Japan?”

Cooper was scowling again. “Certainly not. Anyway, LAPD is taking point on this for now.”

“Until the G-men take it over?”

“Don't remind me.” Cooper scrutinized Will. “You think this ties back to MacAllister's first posting?”

“I think it's possible. There's certainly a Japanese theme to these threats.”

“That was, what? Ten years ago?”

“Eight, I think.” Will apologized silently to his missing partner. “He doesn't talk about it, but I can't think of any other connection. He likes Japanese food, but I doubt if that's the key.”

“I can't grant you access to your partner's personnel file, Brandt.”

Will nodded.

"I'll look at the file myself. If I find anything..." Cooper let it trail. "Meantime, I'm instructing you to give your full cooperation to LAPD. And I mean that, Brandt. Full cooperation."

* * * *

"Wake up."

Bright pain beneath his ribs. His right side. He needed to be careful of his right side—

Taylor bit off a groan. A firework display seemed to be going on inside his head. His brain pounded sickeningly with each pulse of flashing bright light. He pried his eyes open. An indistinct figure stood over him. Was the light bad or was it his vision? Or both?

"Wake up."

The voice was cold, level. It was followed by another spike of pain in his side as a foot landed solidly beneath the ribs. He bit off his cry and rolled away—tried to, anyway. There was a rope around his ankles and another around his wrists.

He was on the ground. No, a floor. A cement floor. An interior. It was chilly, and it smelled weird. Like fish. Like the ocean.

Taylor began to remember. He had been at Will's. His car wouldn't start. Then it came to him: Varga getting hit. Jesus. In the chest.

"Varga?" His voice sounded like gravel.

"She's dead. Thanks to you."

No. It wasn't—that couldn't... He shook his head. A very bad idea.

"Why the hell did you have to choose today to ride together?"

A woman's voice from down a long, echoing tunnel. She seemed to expect an answer. Taylor mumbled, "Car wouldn't start."

"Of course your goddamned car wouldn't start," ranted the voice. "That was the point. If you'd just walked out the door at the time you always do, everything would have been fine. But you had to try and play tricks. And now another person has died because of you."

He tried to place her. She seemed to know him, so he must know her, right? Nothing was familiar about her. The voice wasn't familiar. He tried to peer up at her through his sticky

eyelashes. Nothing. Nothing she said made any sense. She went rambling on about Varga and how he'd caused her death. He tried to assess the situation, but so far nothing was making sense.

Maybe his bewilderment was too obvious to miss. "You don't know who I am, do you?" she asked finally.

He shook his head.

"I'm Alexandra Sugimori. The wife of the man you murdered."

Chapter Ten

“Sugimori,” Taylor echoed.

“Are you going to pretend you don't remember, you lying sack of shit?”

“I remember.”

“Yes,” she said with bitter satisfaction. “You could hardly forget.”

No, he could hardly forget. And now the pieces clicked into place like a Japanese puzzle box. Except it still didn't make sense.

“You destroyed him. You destroyed our life.”

He shook his head, and she kicked him again. He began to worry about his right lung, the one that had been shot three months earlier. The doctors had warned him that it would always be vulnerable, especially to tearing loose from his rib cage again. He was pretty sure getting repeatedly kicked in the ribs would be discouraged.

“Murderer!”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he protested. “I didn't kill Inori. I wasn't even in Japan when he—” Taylor stopped. Over the past few days the memories had returned, and though the pain had faded through the years, it still hurt. It always would.

“When he killed himself?” she asked.

Taylor nodded. He pulled surreptitiously at the rope binding his wrists. A lot of rope. Hopefully that meant they didn't know what they were doing.

“The suicide that you drove him to.”

He tried to deny it, moving his head in negation—not easy lying on the floor.

“Liar.”

She kicked at him again, but this time he rolled to protect his lung and ribs. Her foot caught him over the kidneys. Not a huge improvement, as these things went.

"I'm not lying," he gasped. "I don't know who you are or what you think happened—"

"I told you who I am." She turned to someone else. "Lift him up. I want him to see my face. I want to see his."

Someone bent over him, hands grabbing his shirt, dragging him up. He was half lifted, half thrown against a wall. Taylor struggled to stay vertical, to face his abductors.

It was hard to discern them in the gloom, but the man was Japanese. Young, early twenties, neck and hands covered in the intricate tattoos of the Yakuza. Terrific. Taylor turned his attention to the woman. He still didn't remember her except for the few seconds before he'd been knocked out. He'd seen her shoot Varga. He wasn't about to forget that.

She was saying to him, "Are you pretending you didn't know Inori was married?"

Taylor swallowed. "I..."

She came toward him again, and he burst out with the truth. "I knew. It wasn't real to me."

That stopped her. "Wasn't real?"

"You weren't there. You were just a photo on his desk. I knew you were in the States. I thought you were separated or something." The woman standing over him, trembling, fists clenched, bore no resemblance to that long-ago smiling portrait.

"Bullshit. You wanted to think that. You seduced my husband, a good and honorable man, and you drove him to suicide."

"I didn't seduce anyone." This was insane. He couldn't believe it was happening. Where the hell had this madwoman been for eight years? Why was she was doing this? And why now?

The man said something quietly to her. Alexandra listened to him, but her fierce pale eyes never left Taylor's face.

She nodded. "You abandoned my husband and left him to face the disgrace alone. You're a coward as well as a murderer."

"It wasn't like that. I was reassigned. I didn't have a choice about leaving. And Inori broke it off with me before I left, before I started my second tour in Afghanistan. It wasn't a question of leaving him to face...disgrace."

He knew he was wasting his breath, but somehow he had to try and reach her. The kid...no way. Taylor recognized those empty eyes, eyes like a gun barrel. There was no mercy in him. The woman was his only hope. And it wasn't much of a hope.

"Listen to me. It was my first foreign posting at an embassy. I was young and inexperienced. Your husband was kind to me, and eventually we did become friends. It was...not my intention to hurt anyone."

"You used my husband. You seduced him. You perverted him."

Taylor shook his head.

"My husband kept a safe-deposit box. Did you know that?"

"No."

She was smiling eerily at him. "I didn't know either. Yuki found out about the box after the death of Otou-sama."

Otou-sama. The respectful honorific for one's father. The woman was Western, so she must be referring to her father-in-law, Inori's father. But who the hell was Yuki?

The young thug next to Alexandra folded his arms, staring at Taylor with his bold black eyes. Yuki, I presume?

One thing for sure, if they were introducing themselves, they had no intention of letting Taylor leave there alive.

* * * *

Will was on the phone to a contact in Little Tokyo when Cooper stepped inside his office and closed the door.

"Later," Will said to Noriyori Arai and replaced the receiver.

Cooper said, "MacAllister spent two years in Japan. If his annual evaluations are anything to go by, he was a choirboy. A smart, efficient, ambitious choirboy."

"I never thought otherwise."

"No? Well, maybe I'm more cynical than you. There's nothing here that suggests grounds for a grudge match eight years later."

Will's heart sank. There had to be some lead, some clue, something that would help him find Taylor, but every turn seemed to be a dead end. According to Lt. Wray, the license plate

belonged to a Dodge Pinto that had hit the scrap heap six months earlier. And Will's neighbor Linda Schnell had been unable to pick the female shooter out of any mug-shot books. Linda was working with an LAPD sketch artist, trying to come up with a composite of the female abductor.

"There's only one very small indication of a potential lead. MacAllister was friends with a Japanese American contractor, Inori Sugimori, at the embassy. Sugimori was a political specialist. He committed suicide two weeks after MacAllister was reassigned to Afghanistan."

"Is there anything suspicious about Sugimori's death?"

"Other than the fact it was suicide?" Cooper asked drily.

"Was it suicide?"

"Yes. It was certainly never questioned. It was pretty gruesome, and the physical evidence seems to have been conclusive."

Reluctantly, Will asked, "How did he do it?"

"He used a family sword dipped in poison to run himself through the belly."

Will clenched his jaw lest any unwise words escape.

"The family on Sugimori's father's side was very old and very respectable samurai stock. The rumor—and this is only rumor—is that Sugimori killed himself as a matter of honor."

"I don't see what this could do with MacAllister."

"No?" Cooper looked grimmer than ever. "The other rumor was that Sugimori and MacAllister were sexually involved. As you know, eight years ago the State Department took a very different view of homosexuality within the ranks."

The State Department was very proud of its new and enlightened views. Will didn't bother to tell Cooper that gay employees still faced discrimination and harassment from coworkers both at home and abroad. No point. Progress had been made since the days MacAllister had been posted in Japan; after all, Rome wasn't burned in a day.

"Okay," Will said. "Any proof MacAllister and this Sugimori were actually involved?"

"No. But there seems to have been no other reason for Sugimori to have killed himself. And there was the little problem of him being married, you see."

"If this is some kind of revenge thing, why would anyone wait eight years?"

“Sugimori's father recently passed away. At a guess? I'd say some special information the old man had came to light after his death, and it triggered a sequence of events...”

* * * *

“I want him to suffer...”

He could hear them arguing from the other room. Alexandra was still crying, still ranting. Yuki had dragged her from the room to spare her that final loss of face. She'd come unglued as she started describing the contents of Inori's safe-deposit box. The cracks had already been there—had probably always been there, barely plastered over. Taylor had no way of knowing. Inori had barely spoken of his wife in the States.

One thing for sure, Alexandra had never been meant to see the contents of that fucking box. No wonder she was coming apart in pieces; even Taylor wasn't finding it easy to hold it together. Why had Inori kept that junk? Why hadn't he destroyed it before he'd destroyed himself? What could he have been thinking? He was such a fastidious, meticulous man. To have kept those items... Had a part of him wanted them found?

Christ. Blindfolds and cock rings were the least of it. The Japanese were a highly inventive race. And Taylor... Well, he'd had a wild streak, no doubt about it. He had prided himself on being willing to do anything once. Granted, they had played those games more than once. But for Taylor it had always been a test of his manhood, of himself, of his limits. Inori... No question it had been different for Inori. Those pretty, pretty needles. The butterfly board. No wife was meant to see those. Hell, he wouldn't want Will to see those things.

No, he definitely didn't want Will to know about that stuff.

Taylor listened with half an ear while he took stock of his surroundings and tried to figure his options. They were, at best, limited.

He had worked out that he was in a house. An abandoned house. Even the carpet had been torn up and removed. They'd dumped him in a large empty room with vaulted ceilings and tall windows. A dining room, maybe? He could see shadows moving across the distant white ceiling. Water. He was sure he was very near the ocean. Right on the beach. He could feel the pound of the surf beneath the floor like a sluggish heartbeat. The smell of fish and tide pools permeated. The sound of surf and mewling gulls drifted through a broken window high overhead.

The gulls and waves were the only sounds he heard.

There were no sounds of cars, no hum of traffic, no voices, telephones, televisions. Wherever he was, he was not near people.

“With this knife, I'm going to cut off his balls. With this knife, I'm going to chop off his dick—”

Yeah, that would be not counting Alexandra and Yuki, who were still discussing what to do with him in a passionate spate of mixed Japanese and English. Yuki was all in favor of a bullet between Taylor's eyes and getting the hell out of Dodge. Alexandra kept stressing the importance of making Taylor suffer for his past sins. Making Taylor pay was her theme song, and it was easy enough to see who was the mastermind—using the term loosely—behind the tokens of disaffection over the past week.

She had mentioned castration several times, and Taylor was fervently hoping Yuki's sense of self-preservation would prevail. It wasn't just fear for himself—although that was considerable. Taylor didn't want Will having to face the horror of a mutilated lover. A dead lover would be bad enough. There was always that risk in their profession, and they both accepted it. But the kind of thing Alexandra was talking about? No. Taylor did not want Will struggling to come to terms with that. Will would find a way to blame himself. Taylor knew only too well how painful—well, he knew how it had felt when he'd learned Inori had killed himself.

But he couldn't think about that now. He'd avoided thinking about it too closely for eight years. Now was definitely not the time to confront those memories.

The sea air gusted in, brisk and salty, catching his attention. He looked up to where the small round window had been broken. Way too high to climb, unfortunately, even if his hands and feet were free, but there might still be some glass around. He studied the filthy floor for the sparkle of anything bright and shiny and useful.

He saw nothing. It was just a broken window, and it would be cold when evening came—assuming he was still alive when evening came.

* * * *

“Is the wife still around?” Will asked.

Cooper nodded and handed a sheet over. “Here's her LKA. She's based out of Los Angeles.”

If Cooper had bothered rounding up a last-known address, his mind was working the same way as Will's. Not that it was any great leap to want to speak to the surviving spouse or lover. Spouses and lovers always ranked high both for doing in loved ones and avenging them. Feeling the way he did about Taylor, Will understood why—on both counts.

Cooper said, “She wasn't in Japan when Sugimori died. In fact, she wasn't in Japan for the two years MacAllister worked at the Tokyo embassy. Some problem with her visa. At least that's how it looks on paper.”

“You think they might have been estranged?”

“Hard to say. It's difficult to get a handle on Sugimori. Professionally he was well regarded, highly respected. His private life—well, that's harder to read. He was the product of a mixed marriage. His mother was an American. She worked as an interpreter for the UN, which is where she met Sugimori's father. He was a wealthy Japanese businessman, and she was his second wife. She died giving birth to Sugimori, and he married his third wife, a Japanese national, shortly after. So what you've got there is this half-American kid born into a very traditional, conservative Japanese family. There's an older son and daughter by the first wife, then Sugimori, then a younger son eventually born to the third wife.”

Taylor's lover. Okay. So why hadn't Taylor told him about Sugimori when Will asked about Japan? That was the part Will was having trouble wrapping his mind around. Not like they didn't know they'd each had other lovers, Taylor in particular. In fact, that was one of the reasons Will had been hesitant to ever start with Taylor.

Oh.

Maybe he'd just answered his own question. Maybe Taylor was guilty about this relationship? Thought Will would disapprove? He was funny that way. Took Will's occasional criticisms to heart in a way that Will never intended—nor reciprocated.

“Sugimori was educated in Japan but went to university in the States, which is where he met the wife, Alexandra Burton. They married right after college, and Sugimori worked for the State Department. Eventually he applied for the posting to Japan, got it, and moved back to Tokyo.”

“And Alexandra didn't follow?”

“Apparently not. Now it might have been bureaucratic red tape, or it might have been something else. If MacAllister and Sugimori were having a sexual relationship, it was probably something else.”

“Why don't I go find out?” Will suggested.

“Why don't you? But bring LAPD along. We don't want any accusations of coercion or improper use of force.”

Will raised his brows. “Me?”

* * * *

He needed to piss quite desperately by now. Maybe it was weird to worry about that, seeing that there was a good chance he might end up with his balls or dick cut off—never mind dead—but there was something especially humiliating about being forced to wet himself. It made him furious.

Taylor opened his mouth to let loose a string of invective, but they were back, and the look on Alexandra's face shut him up. Not that he had ever imagined he was going to make her understand, see things from his point of view, but he thought she would string it out, want to keep talking to him, make him listen.

Give Will a chance to find him.

Maybe she would have, but there was Yuki to consider. Whatever Yuki's role in all this—besides discoverer of his older brother's box of secrets and bearer of bad news—was hard to say. Clearly he was the more practical of the two. He was observing Taylor with those cold, unwavering eyes, already thinking about how to dispose of the body.

“Here's what we're going to do,” Alexandra announced. She sounded relatively cheerful, so she was getting her way about whatever this was. She carefully set down a white sake bottle a few feet from Taylor and straightened up.

The bottle reminded him how thirsty he was. That he hadn't eaten since lunchtime the day before. The bottle scared him.

“This is laced with rat poison. When you become desperate, you can drink it.”

“Gee, thanks.” Taylor looked past her to Yuki, who stood in the doorway, arms folded and impassive. “You think of everything.”

“Oh, you will drink it,” Alexandra informed him. “Even though you'll have to struggle to get to it. You see, we're going to leave you here to die. To die of thirst and hunger. Like you, this house is condemned. Abandoned. No one ever comes here. It's private property in the middle of nowhere, so you can scream and yell all you like. No one will ever hear you. No one will ever find you.”

Taylor said nothing. What on earth could he say? It was all he could do to hide his relief. He'd been thinking the jar was to keep his private parts in after she surgically removed them. Or that maybe it contained a baby cobra or scorpions or black widows. Or that it contained battery acid. Rat poison was pretty mild unless they were going to force it down his throat themselves, and apparently that was not the plan.

Alexandra smiled. “You don't believe me. You think someone will find you, but there's nothing to connect us to this house, so even if the police do figure out I'm involved, they'll never find this place. I'll never tell them. It doesn't matter what they do to me.”

That much he believed. She was as committed as any martyr lashed to the burning stake. Even Will would have trouble getting this chick to talk, and Will was very good at getting people to talk.

“I'm glad you don't believe me,” she added. “I'm glad you're hopeful, because I want you to take a long time to die. I want you to suffer as much as I did. As much as Nori did. I want you to stay hopeful, to keep believing someone will find you, until you can't stand the thirst and hunger and loneliness anymore and you drink the poison.”

He knew he should try to talk to her, try to appeal to her, try to make her empathize with him, but somehow he couldn't seem to find the energy. He knew it was useless, could read it in her cold, crazy eyes. There was no going back for her. She had killed Varga, and even if she was unbalanced enough to forget that, Yuki wasn't.

Taylor glanced at Yuki again, and a chill ran down his spine. No, Yuki wasn't crazy or stupid, and regardless of what Alexandra thought, Yuki was not going to leave Taylor here and trust that he'd get despondent enough to drink rat poison. Yuki wasn't going to leave him alive one minute longer than he had to.

As though he read Taylor's thoughts, Yuki offered the first glimmer of emotion he'd yet revealed. He smiled.

Chapter Eleven

The house felt weirdly empty after Alexandra and Yuki left. It felt as though Taylor were already dead. As though it were already far too late for him.

He had to hurry. He knew that. Yuki was going to come back just as soon as he unloaded Alexandra, and he was going to kill Taylor. No doubt about that; Taylor had seen it in the other man's eyes.

He had no idea of how much time he had; he had to act based on the assumption that it was very little. He inched and scooted around, crawling toward the sake bottle. When he was within range, he drew his legs up and gave it good hard kick. The bottle went flying, hit the wall, and shattered into pieces, poisoned sake splashing against the wall and dripping down to the cement floor.

Taylor rolled over to the broken pieces and tried to kick a couple of the larger ones out of the pool of poisoned wine and line them up so that he could lean against the wall and saw the ropes without having to lie on the thick glass.

His bladder now felt in danger of bursting, and he knew he was going to have to give in to the indignity of peeing his pants. It added to his general fury—and discomfort—but once that was out of the way he was better able to concentrate on the task at hand.

Literally, at hand.

And now was the time to be grateful for his martial arts training. All that stretching and bending and limbering made it possible for him to move his arms out far enough from his back in order to saw awkwardly, frantically, against the dull chunk of broken earthenware.

Even so, that position quickly grew tiring and then painful and then agonizing. His shoulders and back ached with the strain, his muscles burned. Unable to see behind himself, he was unsure he was making progress.

Every minute or so he had to stop to rest his shaking arms. He used that time trying to free his legs, wiggling his ankles to loosen the ropes binding his lower limbs together. Alexandra and Yuki had not been taking any chances. The rope was looped around his ankles four times, but the excess of rope length actually meant there was play in the line, if he could just...

After a time he had to stop and rest. Had to. Getting slammed across the head, kicked in the ribs a few times, took it out of a guy. He rested, gulping, on the cool cement, willing the world to stop spinning, his guts to stop churning. Looking up at the faraway ceiling, he tried to calculate the time. He could tell by the reflected shadows that the sun was moving across the sky. How the hell long had it been now?

It felt like hours, but that was probably wrong.

Even so, Yuki might be on his way back to the house.

He wondered what Will was doing, tried to guess what steps Will would be taking to find him. He had no doubt that Will was hunting for him. No doubt that Will would find him—Taylor just wanted to make sure Will found him in time.

He heaved himself up and started sawing at the ropes around his wrists again.

* * * *

Elegant brows raised, Alexandra Sugimori studied their badges for a very long moment.

She raised her milky blue gaze to Will's. "Bureau of Diplomatic Security? It's a long time since I've heard from the State Department."

Mrs. Sugimori was a tall, slender woman in an elegant navy silk housecoat. Her dark hair was pulled back in a sleek chignon. She could not have looked more different from the description of the woman who had shot Denise Varga and helped to abduct Taylor, but as Will gazed into her pale gaze, he got that telltale prickle at the back of his scalp.

"Your name came up in connection with a case we're investigating."

"Oh yes?"

She sounded uninterested. Too uninterested. She smiled a chilly smile at Lt. Wray, who was—after some debate—letting Will take point on this, and said, "Well, we may as well be comfortable."

She led them into a beautiful living room furnished with expensive Asian objets d'art. "Can I offer you something in the way of refreshment?"

"No, thank you," Lt. Wray said. She looked around with the innocent interest of a tourist in a museum. She nodded to the credenza, where a silver-framed picture of a young Japanese man and a boy sat. "Is that your husband?"

"That's Nori, yes. He died seven years ago. Seven years ago exactly, as of tomorrow." She added into the awkward silence, "The boy is Yukishige, his younger brother."

Will asked, "You've stayed in touch with your husband's family?"

"I've stayed in touch with Yuki. He chose to attend school in the States."

"Where does he go?" Wray asked.

The pale gaze rested on her. "Stanford University. The same as my husband."

"When was the last time you saw your brother-in-law?" Wray asked at the exact moment Will opened his mouth.

He contained his impatience. He and Taylor had this kind of thing down to a science. There was no talking over each other, no waste of time or energy. Still, Wray was a smart cop, and he thought she was right there on the same wavelength.

Mrs. Sugimori didn't hesitate. Her eyes slanted right as she said thoughtfully, "We met for dinner two weeks ago."

The right-eye movement was a cue that she was visually remembering an actual event. Taylor put a lot of stock in these visual access cues; he was very good at reading them. Will was less sold on body language and eye movement, but he observed that their suspect was holding herself stiffly as she tucked a nonexistent strand of hair behind her ear. All supposedly indicators for lying.

Lying by omission?

He deduced that Mrs. Sugimori had had dinner with her brother-in-law two weeks ago but had seen him more recently. "Where could we get in touch with Yukishige?"

Her eyes slanted left as she said, "Through the university, I suppose. I would call his dorm. Forgive me for asking, but why would you need to speak to him?"

Instead of answering, Will said, “We apologize for having to bring up what are undoubtedly painful memories, but we wanted to ask you one or two questions about your husband's death.”

“Why?”

Seven years later it was clearly as raw as if it had just happened.

Wray said, “A federal agent has been killed and another abducted. We believe these crimes may be somehow connected to your husband's death.”

“That's ridiculous!” Sugimori was on her feet and walking agitatedly around the room, keeping tables and sofas in between herself and them, Will noted. That could be an indication that she was lying—or that she was going to try and pull a weapon out of that big flower arrangement. “That's insane. And you think Yuki is part of this?”

Wray asked, “Was he very close to his brother?”

“Yes. They were close. But what you're suggesting is ridiculous.” She stood still. “Why would Yuki wait seven years to avenge his brother?”

Avenge.

Will said, “Your father-in-law recently passed away, I believe. We thought that perhaps some new information might have come to light at that time. Families often have secrets.”

“I don't care for what you're implying.”

“We're not implying anything, ma'am,” Wray said. “We're just trying to get to the truth. It's nothing personal.”

Maybe not for Wray. As far as Will was concerned it was time to take the kid gloves off. They needed to break Sugimori and break her fast, because if they walked out of this house without the answers they needed, she was going to make two phone calls: one to a lawyer and one to Yukishige Sugimori. There was a more-than-good chance that the first thing she told little brother would be to kill Taylor—assuming he was not already dead.

Will refused to consider that. If they'd wanted Taylor dead outright, they'd have executed him in Will's front yard when they shot Varga.

“Why do you think your husband killed himself, Mrs. Sugimori?” Will inquired.

For an instant the pale mouth seemed unable to form words. “He was...depressed.”

"I'd say that goes without saying."

She blinked at him, nonplussed by the sudden, blatant aggression.

"Marital problems?" Will pressed. "That's the usual thing, isn't it?"

"No!"

He could feel Wray watching him, but she didn't try to intervene. "You weren't with him in Japan. That could have made a difference. Why weren't you there with your husband?"

Her lips were parted, but no words were spoken.

Wray interjected, equally cool, "Do you happen to own a brown Chevy, Mrs. Sugimori?"

The pale eyes widened like an animal at bay.

"Mrs. Sugimori, do you own a gun?" Will asked.

* * * *

The broken edge of the earthenware jug had to be fairly dull, because his hand slipped several times but he didn't cut himself—maybe a good thing, if the contents of the bottle had been laced with rat poison. Not so good for cutting through these fucking ropes.

Jesus, he was tired. If he could just rest a few minutes.

But he was making progress. He'd kicked his legs free of the ropes a short while earlier.

He just needed...a few more...minutes...

A door slammed, the bang as loud as a shot in the empty building. Taylor's head jerked up. Time. He rolled onto his knees, tucked his feet, and stood. Thank you God for the use of his legs, because he'd be a sitting duck otherwise. He leaned back against the wall, fighting his dizziness, trying to contain his breathing.

Footsteps approached briskly. Yu-Gi-Oh! was going to make this fast.

Taylor hit him coming through the door, a shoulder ramming into the other man. Yuki slammed into the opposite wall and dropped the gun he held. It clattered on the cement floor. After a fleeting second of astonished realization, Yuki dived for it. Taylor kicked him in the jaw, and Yuki went flying. He landed on his back and was back on his feet in a reasonably steady kip-up.

Terrific.

Taylor gave a hard, despairing yank on the rope around his wrists and felt it give. Not enough, though, and Yuki was coming at him Fists of Fury-style, throwing kicks and chops like a crazy windmill. Taylor ducked away, kicked the pistol through the door into the other room, away from their area of combat. He delivered a couple of roundhouse strikes.

Yuki staggered back and laughed. "You think you're Chuck Norris, dude?"

Taylor didn't have the breath to spare. Sweat stung his eyes, soaked the back of his shirt. This had to be fast, because he didn't have the strength left for extended combat.

Yuki flew at him again; this time Taylor turned aside and let the kid hit the wall. He smashed into it but was up again, fists and feet flying, laughing.

Oh, to be twenty and a fucking psycho again.

Taylor was only too conscious of the fact that if one of those strikes connected, it was all over for him. He kept moving, ducking, weaving, managing to deliver a few good kicks. His basic strategy was to wear Yuki down a little. The problem was he was wearing down too.

He kept working at the rope around his wrist, tugging and rubbing at it, ignoring the pain of his flesh being scraped raw.

Yuki came hurtling at him again, delivering a succession of showy tornado and 720 kicks. Exhibition stuff. The prick was playing with him, cat and mouse. Taylor faked a retreat toward the doorway and, when Yuki charged after him, dropped him in his tracks with a jackknife kick to the head. Unfortunately, unable to use his arms for balance, it landed Taylor too. Hard.

It was like flipping a turtle on its back. Taylor rolled over, trying to get his feet under him. Yuki, stunned for a few seconds, was getting up again, and the look in his eyes said he was through playing games. He rushed at Taylor.

Taylor gave one last desperate yank to the restraints around his wrists and felt the rope give. He dived through the doorway, scrambling for the gun.

* * * *

"You have no right to insinuate these things!" Alexandra Sugimori cried. There was color in her face now; her eyes seemed to glitter.

"Have you heard of the Federal Death Penalty Act of 1994?" Will inquired. He felt Wray's double take, but he had no time for that. Time was running out for Taylor. He knew it; call it

instinct or intuition or gut feeling. He knew it as sure as he was standing there. It was now or never. It was now. He was not standing by while Taylor died.

“No,” Sugimori said defiantly. “No doubt you'll tell me.”

“It means if you're responsible for the death of Federal Agent Varga, you get the death penalty too. But if you help us save the life of the remaining agent, that could go a long way toward making a difference to what happens to you.” That wasn't exactly accurate, but it was close enough for their purposes.

Sugimori seemed to struggle internally. Her face worked. She said, “I have nothing to do with anyone's death.”

“Bullshit.”

“How dare you? How dare you come into my home and accuse me of these things?”

“There's an easy way to solve this,” Wray said, a voice of calm in the high seas. “Mrs. Sugimori, we'd like to ask you to voluntarily come downtown to take part in a lineup.”

Sugimori froze. She said finally, “I'm not going anywhere with you people. I'm calling my lawyer!”

* * * *

Taylor's fingers brushed the butt of the pistol as Yuki landed on top of him, knocking the wind out of his lungs, sending the pistol skittering. He heaved the younger man off, crawled for the gun. They were in a large open room and not far from away was a sliding glass door. And beyond the sliding glass door was...nothing. Empty sky and then the vast blue stretch of ocean.

The house perched precariously on a hillside that was being steadily eaten away by the waves below. The yard, the deck, the steps—all gone into the ocean.

No wonder Alexandra had been so confident no one would ever find him.

Yuki tackled him around the waist, and they both rolled away from the gun. Taylor head butted Yuki, and as Yuki's grip relaxed, he wriggled free and stretched for the pistol again.

Yuki grabbed his waistband, dragging him back, and Taylor flipped over and kicked him in the chest as hard as he could. Yuki stumbled back and crashed through the glass doors, dropping from sight with a scream.

Trembling, gulping for breath, Taylor lay on the floor, staring at the man-sized hole in the shattered glass, at the gaping hole in the sky. He half expected Yuki's bloody hands to appear over the jagged glass in the door track, see Yuki drag himself back, invincible like those villains in movies.

Nothing happened. He could hear the thunder of the surf, feel the pound of it hitting the rocks below. The chill, salty air gusted in through the broken door and cooled his sweating face. He could hear the cries of the gulls wheeling outside the glass door.

He rested his forehead on the cement.

At last he pushed to his feet, picked up the fallen pistol, and went over to the broken door. He looked down at a dizzying sheer drop of rocks and swirling water. There was no sign of Yuki. If he'd missed the rocks and knew how to swim, he might have survived the fall. Probably not. Taylor hoped not. That one had been for Varga.

Far out on the blue, diamond-dazzled water, he could see sailboats beneath the bright yellow sun. He remembered the card Will had given him for his birthday. Abruptly all the strength seemed to drain out of him. He sat down slowly, carefully, as though he were a thousand years old.

* * * *

Alexandra Sugimori was tougher than she looked. From some hidden reserve of strength, she found the will to ignore their threats and reject their bargains. Finally she refused to answer at all, sitting and staring into space, her face as remote as one of those Shinto goddesses.

"We can't continue to deny her access to her lawyer," Wray warned Will in an undervoice as they took a break from hammering at their suspect's walls. "Even if you are the federal government."

"No way does that bitch phone anyone without us knowing exactly who and what instructions she's giving."

Wray opened her mouth, but her phone rang. She moved away to answer it. Will glanced at her and then glanced at Sugimori. She was staring at him with cold hatred. He stared back.

Wray suddenly let out a disconcertingly girly squeal. "You got a partial print from the fuse? Yeah?" Her eyes met Will's. "Yukishige Sugimori. The brother."

At the same time Will's phone rang. He grabbed it. Unknown Caller. If this was some moron trying to sell him something, he was going to be slapped with a federal charge so fast, his head would spin.

“Brandt.”

“It's me,” Taylor's faraway voice said.

Will's heart seemed to stop cold, then bounded like a deer. “Are you all right? Christ. I thought—Where are you?”

“I'm not sure.” Taylor's voice was muffled as he turned away to speak to someone. An equally muffled voice answered. Taylor came back on the line. “I'm on the coast road between Surf Beach and Casmalia. At an abandoned roadhouse called Richardson's. You can't miss it. It's the one surrounded by cop cars.” He sounded very tired. “I'm okay, Brandt. Can you come and get me?”

“I'm on the way.”

Taylor said quickly, “Brandt? Swear out a warrant for Alexandra Sugimori.”

“Done.” His voice softened; he couldn't help it. “Hold on, MacAllister.”

“I'm holding,” Taylor said and disconnected.

Chapter Twelve

The sun was setting when Will pulled up in front of Richardson's Roadhouse.

There were cop cars parked by the rusted gas pumps, a red peeling sign with the words RICH...R...AD... The roadhouse itself was boarded up. The faded paint had an appropriately queasy green cast to it.

Taylor walked out from between the gas pumps, and Will got out of his car. He went around the front and didn't care who was watching as Taylor walked into his arms.

They hugged, drew apart, and Will said, "Whoa. You have been through the wars."

"I know. I stink."

"I'm not complaining."

"That's because you haven't been shut up in a car with me for a couple of hours. Wait till we head back to LA."

Will glanced at the official buzz of cars and personnel, radios squawking and people talking. "Are we going back to LA tonight?"

"Eventually." Taylor said, "Is Sugimori under arrest?"

"Yes."

Will watched him brace to ask, "She said Varga was dead."

Will nodded. "I'm sorry."

Taylor's eyes shut. He opened them and said, "Yeah. If you don't mind, I'm going to sit in your car and wait for them to clear us to leave."

"I don't mind."

A faint smile touched Taylor's colorless mouth. "Not yet, you don't. You will."

But Will didn't. Not all the long drive back to LA. Taylor slept, mouth ajar and face lined and unlovely with strain and exhaustion. Will drove and used his cell phone to fill in Lt. Wray

and Assistant Director Cooper. He talked while he kept one eye on his partner. Despite efforts to clean himself off in at a rest-stop men's room, Taylor was indeed more than a little on the pungent side, but Will had no complaint.

* * * *

Taylor woke when Will stopped for coffee, and he explained in what was clearly the abridged version how he had managed to get free.

"It was like those convoluted schemes the villains in Batman came up with." He was trying to joke, but it wasn't quite coming off.

"She's insane," Will said. "I don't know about the legal definition, but she's deranged."

Taylor nodded without energy. He described knocking Sugimori Junior. into the ocean.

"They haven't found him yet," Will replied in answer to the question Taylor hadn't asked.

"Good," Taylor replied. "I hope the fish are having him for supper." He told Will about leaving the wrecked and derelict house on the cliff, hot-wiring Sugimori's car and driving into Casmalia to phone the cops and Will. "That's pretty much it."

He made it sound simple. Will tried to keep it low-key too. "Lucky you found it. You could have blinked and missed it. Population less than two hundred. The town's a toxic dump," he said. "I mean literally."

"No wonder I headed straight for it."

They both smiled, but it took effort.

* * * *

Taylor sat grimly through the medical exam and brusquely declined the amenities of an overnight hospital stay. Will couldn't argue, since he'd done the same thing the day before—was it only the day before?

The doctor and Will exchanged a look, and then the doctor gave Will a list of signs and symptoms to look for in case of concussion and sent them on their way—which was straight to a debriefing with Cooper.

When Cooper had finally tired of the pleasure of their company, or maybe just the sound of his own voice, Will had driven home—to Taylor's house—and Taylor had showered and was dressed in the softest, most comfortable jeans and T-shirt he owned, resting on the sofa in the

den drinking the hot coffee Will had prepared. His head still hurt, his ribs ached, but he felt okay. Wrung out but okay. He was alive, and that counted for a lot.

Will sat down on the sofa and put an arm around him. Taylor relaxed, closed his eyes, and let his head fall back against Will's shoulder, relinquishing himself to Will's care. "I guess you have a few questions."

"If you want to tell me."

"No." Taylor smiled faintly. "Yeah."

Will kissed his forehead and didn't say anything.

Taylor opened his eyes and watched Will's three-quarter profile as he said, "He wasn't my first or anything." Taylor had been fourteen the first time he and Bobby Machek had jacked off together behind the broken-down concession stand at Sandoval Baseball Field. He could still remember the ghostly silhouettes of the painted players on the peeling red wood wall. Those guilty, giddy minutes with Bobby had been the launch of a long and occasionally wild journey of sexual exploration that had really only ended when he found harbor with Will.

He closed his eyes and admitted, "But it was the first time I thought maybe I was in love."

In the silence that followed, Taylor raised his lashes. There was so much affection and understanding in Will's blue eyes, he had to close his own again.

"Not like us," he clarified, although he was sure Will already understood that. "We had to be careful, obviously. It would have meant the end of both our careers. You know how it was back then." Eight years. Amazing what a difference a decade—or near decade—could make.

"I know," Will said, and he seemed to be speaking about more than the State Department's historic attitude regarding same-sex relations.

"Inori was married. Separated, I thought. That's what he told me, and I had no reason to believe otherwise. Even so, he was—it was hard for him. After the first rush of finding each other, he was terrified all the time that we were being watched, that we would be discovered. The idea of failing, of disgrace, was unthinkable. His family—his father—was old-school. Samurai. We're talking something straight out of a Kurosawa film. Inori already felt like an outcast because his mother was Caucasian. There was always this standard he was trying to live up to. Being gay just made it worse for him."

"How was it for you?"

Taylor grimaced. "I took my career just as seriously, but being younger, I didn't think we'd get caught. You know how it is. I felt bulletproof back then. Anyway." Taylor swallowed hard. "Anyway, after about ten months he...broke it off with me. Said that as much as he loved me, the risk to both of us was too great." He could still taste the bitterness of that, knew Will could read it in his face. "So I requested a transfer, and I got one. Faster than I expected." Taylor opened his eyes, his expression wry. "They sent me to Afghanistan."

"Hell."

"It was, yeah. Anyway, at least I knew I wouldn't have time to brood. For Inori, though... I don't think he'd expected me to go. I'm not sure what he expected, to tell you the truth. I guess he thought he'd failed me too. I don't know, Will."

Will said calmly, firmly, "What he did was not your fault, Tay. Don't take responsibility for Sugimori's decisions."

"No, it's just—"

"No."

"No." Taylor flicked him a smile. "Thanks." He sighed. "Anyway. I found out a few months later than he killed himself not long after I left Japan. The word was, he'd left some note about family honor and not wishing to live with disgrace, but that was all I heard. If my name had been mentioned—"

"Your name was never mentioned in connection with Sugimori's suicide." Will said carefully, "There were rumors about the two of you, but no one chose to investigate them."

"Jesus."

"It doesn't matter now."

Taylor pinched the bridge of his nose, hard. "I guess not. It's just... It was true about the old poison. All that time that hurt and betrayal were festering."

"You could have told me, you know. I wouldn't have thought any less of you," Will said slowly.

"You wouldn't have thought any more of me." Taylor was kidding. Only not really.

Into Will's silence, he said, "I should have told you. It's just...sometimes..." He didn't finish it, and Will didn't push.

Taylor let his eyes drift closed again. Neither of them spoke. Taylor felt Will take the coffee mug from his hand and set it on the table.

"I'm awake," he murmured. And he mostly was. It was very pleasant lying there with Will's strong arm around him and his head on Will's broad shoulder. He listened to the peaceful, steady beat of Will's heart.

"I've been thinking," Will said eventually.

"Yeah?"

"It really doesn't make sense keeping two separate houses. It's not very practical."

Taylor's heart jumped. He said carefully, "What about Cooper? No way is he going to believe we're just roommates."

"He might let it go. Or he might decide to reteam us. I guess we deal with it when it happens. The bottom line is, I want to wake up beside you every morning, and I want to go to bed with you every night. I don't care who knows. And I don't care what we have to do to make that happen. I like my job, but I love you. There's no question of what takes priority here."

Taylor stared at him. Will stared back at him, steady as a rock.

"You're sure." It wasn't a real question; the certainty was right there on Will's face.

"I'm sure." Will smiled. "Partner."

The End

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Josh Lanyon is the author of numerous novellas and short stories as well as the critically praised Adrien English mystery series. *The Hell You Say* was shortlisted for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. In 2008, Josh released *Man, Oh Man: Writing M/M/Fiction for Kinks and Ca\$h*, the definitive guide to writing for the m/m or gay romance market. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on his next manuscript.