



MEN OF PHUKET:

Thai'ing the Knot

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-melting*.

Men of Phuket

THAI'ING THE KNOT

Sedonia Guillone

Dedication

For Mitch, always.

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Chapter One

The second Nat woke up, he knew something was wrong. A familiar, heavy feeling pressed on his chest, the way it had nearly twenty years ago the day his twin brother had gotten sick and died.

Nat's skin prickled. *Ryu*. Nat turned his head and braced himself. But his lover lay peacefully, eyes still closed, long lashes like dark brushes on his delicately rounded cheekbones. Nat scanned Ryu's body, from the nicely-shaped fingers curled by his sleeping face on the pillow, over his wiry physique of colourful tattoos. Cherry blossoms bloomed over Ryu's shoulder, the branch ending in artful curls on biceps and triceps.

The down-filled comforter had slipped down to Ryu's slim hips and Nat scanned every part he could see. Portions of the white tigers leaping over Ryu's skin showed on his ribcage. Over his lat muscle was a portion of a samurai's kimono. Nat knew the drawing of the two kissing samurai well by know, having had the opportunity to see Ryu's naked back every day for the past four months.

Ryu took a deep breath in his sleep and turned slightly. He seemed fine, yet the heavy feeling remained.

Was it about Ryu? Nat closed his eyes briefly. *No*. His intuition, finely honed from years of police work, did not sense a problem there. Yet, there *was* something. That question. *The* question he wanted to ask Ryu for the last few weeks. He'd already bought the ring on the sly, in the bit of time he actually wasn't in Ryu's presence. All the other guys here in the White Tiger knew about it and were doing a damn good job of keeping it a secret from Ryu. It was just a matter of when to ask. Of that, he was uncertain.

Kiku, the owner of this place, and Ryu's best friend in the world as well as his protector and mentor, had said that when the time was right, Nat would know in his heart.

The time wasn't right yet.

But that wasn't the source of the bad feeling.

Bracing up on his elbow, Nat watched Ryu sleep. *That* at least was something he knew about. Watching Ryu doing anything was pleasurable. In sleep, Ryu looked nothing short of an angel.

Ryu blinked. He let out a long exhale and looked up.

Damn. Staring at Ryu had woken him up. Nat chided himself silently. He should have known Ryu would be sensitive, even in his sleep.

"Are you all right?" Ryu immediately levered up onto his elbow. He scrubbed his free hand over his face. His eyes, though concerned, still looked sleepy, and his hair stood up in bed-head spikes which framed his classically beautiful face. Too sexy for words.

Nat watched him another second. If he lied, Ryu would know immediately and hound him for the truth. He shrugged and heaved a sigh. "Happy to see you."

A smile stretched Ryu's pouty lips. He fell back against his pillow, his gaze still on Nat. "If I didn't have a practice spar today," he said, "I'd show you my gratitude for those kind words."

Nat smiled back at him. "If you didn't have a practice spar, I'd let you." It was a policy of theirs not to have sex the same day Ryu had a fight, practice or otherwise, for as Ryu put it, he had to conserve his *qi*. Nat's cock tightened and rose under the covers. He did his best to ignore it. Later, once Ryu had completed his fight, there'd be time for that.

Ryu's smile faded. "Something's wrong, though. I feel it. What are you troubled about, Nat?" He turned on his side and rose up again on his elbow.

He should have known Ryu would guess. "I don't know. I just woke up with this...feeling."

Ryu's almond-shaped eyes widened. "You're not...having doubts, about us, are you?"

"God no." Nat didn't hesitate on that, not only because it wasn't the problem but because he hated for Ryu to be scared a second about them. He'd given Ryu enough grief their first meeting when Kiku had sent Ryu to Thailand for protection from a psychotic *yakuza* boss, and then again, when that mission had finished and he and Ryu knew there was something between them, he'd said nothing and let Ryu return, hurt and frustrated to Tokyo. When Nat had taken the leap two weeks later and followed Ryu here, taking an emergency leave of absence from the Thai Royal Police in order to be with him, he'd sworn never to let Ryu have another moment's grief. Though with this nagging sense of foreboding, he wasn't

sure that would be possible. "Listen, Ryu, you never have to worry about that again." Nat still remembered watching Ryu's cab pull away from the kerb on the way to the airport. Ryu's face through the window had been so hurt. So disappointed.

Relief flickered over the other man's softly rounded features. "Can you talk about what it is?"

"I would. If I knew."

Ryu sat up now, dislodging the covers and Nat got an eyeful of his morning hard-on which bulged through the skin-hugging white boxer briefs he'd worn to sleep. No nakedness to tempt them. He leant over and pressed a soft, quick kiss to Nat's lips. "Whatever it is, you know I'll help you, right?"

"Of course I know."

Ryu nodded. "Better get going, I guess." He pushed away the covers and rose from the bed.

Nat watched him disappear into the bathroom. Instead of getting up himself, he clasped his hands behind his head and listened to the sounds coming from the bathroom. Ryu's morning relief streaming into the toilet, the flush, the turning on of the shower. Ryu showered even before sweating at the gym. He had a thing about bodily cleanliness that went beyond...normal.

Nat smiled briefly to himself. It was one of the quirks he'd found charming about the man back in Phuket at the training camp where he'd passed Ryu off as a student.

Steam filled the bathroom and Nat sat up quickly and leant forward, stealing a glance through the doorway.

Bull's eye. Ryu had just pulled off his boxer briefs and was opening the glass door of the shower. That erection Nat had seen underneath the boxer briefs still poked heavenward. Not large and thick but perfect, just the right amount of tiny veins and blushing colour, the lobes of the head smooth and lickable. And Ryu's sac underneath, juicy and plump, fit perfectly in Nat's hand when he palmed them.

Too soon, Ryu stepped into the shower and disappeared behind the cloud of steam. The glass door shut, leaving Nat alone with his own hard-on. Heaving a deep sigh, Nat lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling. The tightness in his cock beckoned but he continued to ignore it. He needed to conserve his own *qi*. Ryu's voice, singing, caught Nat's ear. Nat

listened. Ryu was singing a song in Japanese, a rock ballad by a singer he listened to sometimes. Gackt. Funny name, but Ryu liked the guy, and when Ryu liked someone, he was a fan for life. Nat knew this, having seen the scrapbook Ryu had kept since his late teens on Nat's career. Every little news article in Thai, Japanese or English Ryu had found went into that scrapbook. Cheeks blushing, Ryu had finally shown it to him a couple of weeks ago.

That's when the thought of popping the question had popped into Nat's mind.

"Nat?"

A deep voice came from the other side of the *soji* screen door. Kiku.

Nat sat up, frowning. Kiku never came to the door. Must be something important. Nat's stomach tightened. "Yes?"

He threw back the covers, glad for his boxer shorts, and crossed over to the door, which he slid open.

Kiku bowed his head respectfully. Once a *yakuza* boss, he'd gone legit and converted this place from an illegal gambling parlour to a beautiful men's hotel. A long rivalry with his boss's son, Taro Suzuki, however, now showed on Kiku's face. Even though Ryu had ended it all four months ago in a heart-stopping way, Kiku had aged considerably. His still ruggedly handsome face had lines around the eyes and mouth, his eyes deeply sad in spite of the humour and compassion that also showed in their depths. "Nat, I'm sorry to bother you."

"Ryu's in the shower. He'll be out in a few minutes."

But Kiku shook his head. "I'm not here to speak to him. There's a call for you downstairs in my office. He identified himself as Agent Chuek. He needs to speak with you."

Nat's blood froze. "Not about my parents?" He spoke to his mother and father regularly, but they were older, so he worried.

"He said to tell you your parents are fine. Not to worry. It isn't something like that. But it is terribly urgent."

"I'll throw on a shirt and come right down."

"Very good."

Nat grabbed a t-shirt out of a drawer, slipped it on and told Ryu where he was going.

Ryu poked his head out of the steam, a sheen of water darkening his already golden tan skin. Water beaded on his lips. "Nothing serious, I hope?" Ryu's brow crinkled in the middle. He was always worried Nat would have to go back to Thailand to work.

Nat stepped forward and brushed a kiss over his lips. He resisted the urge to linger and slip his tongue in against Ryu's. Ryu was the best kisser in the world and even a tiny peck caused tingles through Nat's body. He pulled back. "I hope not too. At least it's not a family emergency."

"Please let me know as soon as possible."

"I will." He watched Ryu disappear into the steam again before going downstairs.

In Kiku's office, Nat picked up the phone resting on the surface of the black lacquer desk. "Agent Chuek, hello." He sank into one of the guest chairs by Kiku's desk.

"Hi, Agent Phoenix. How've you been?" The solemn tone in Chuek's voice immediately put Nat on edge.

"I'm all right. What's going on?" He braced himself to be ordered back to Bangkok.

"It's about Tongmee."

Nat stilled. For several seconds, he forgot to breathe. He'd hoped never to have to deal with the traitorous agent who'd used his connections to deliver Ryu into Taro Suzuki's lecherous, sadistic hands. Thankfully, Ryu had been able to handle him, but not before a bit of physical torture to his most sensitive body parts. Tongmee was in prison for a long time. "What about Tongmee?" he finally asked.

"Tongmee's dead."

Nat sat bolt upright. "Dead! What the hell happened?"

"He hung himself. Ripped his prison uniform and made a rope of it. The guards found him before sunrise this morning."

"Shit." Nat sank onto his elbow, head in his hand. "Dammit."

"There's been an inquest."

"And what did it show?" Nat reminded himself to take a deep breath.

"That there was no foul play. Tongmee...did it to himself. He had regular psychiatric evaluations and apparently, he'd been improving. And then he just...slid back."

Nat frowned. "Well, I appreciate your telling me. Thank you, Agent Chuek." He prepared to get back upstairs to Ryu.

"Agent Phoenix, that's the thing. I didn't just call to tell you about Tongmee. Something's come to light that didn't come out in the original trial."

Icy fingers snaked up Nat's spine. He'd always blamed himself, really, for Tongmee's action with Ryu. He'd known Tongmee was mentally unstable at the time of their assignment and hadn't replaced the troubled agent with someone more reliable. No doubt, Nat's conduct was being called into question. "And what is that?"

"The psychiatrist who worked with Tongmee said that Tongmee made statements to him during the last session before he...died. Tongmee also left a letter, a confessional kind of thing in which he wrote out the entire story of what happened on our mission, down to every detail."

Nat felt chilled. "Please," he said, "get right to the point."

He heard Chuek take a deep breath before continuing. "Tongmee claimed you left the door unlocked the night he...kidnapped Ryu. Tongmee was complaining about your unprofessional behaviour. He said you were allowing yourself to be corrupted. Commander Wattana reviewed Tongmee's letter. He feels that you withheld many details during Tongmee's trial and are in serious violation of your duties. I'm calling to serve you with a court-martial. He allowed me to do it by phone because I insisted you'd respond immediately and dutifully."

Court marital. The icy fingers became claws, ripping at Nat's chest. His breath came in short bursts now. Of course, he'd replayed that moment many times in the last four months. He and Ryu had returned from his friend Deena's party. Nat had grabbed Ryu, pushed him up against the closed door and given him a blow job then and there. The passion had taken them to the bed where Ryu had knelt on the floor. Nat had taken him from behind and just after he'd come, Tongmee had bludgeoned him unconscious with the butt of his gun and drugged Ryu.

All because Nat hadn't taken one second to lock the door first.

Nausea rose and churned in Nat's gut. He closed his eyes and breathed heavily.

"Phoenix, are you all right?"

"Yes," he managed to say. "I just need a minute."

"No problem."

Breathe, Nat reminded himself. With his eyes still closed, he took several deep breaths. When he felt he could speak again, he opened his eyes. "When am I expected back?"

"Within the next twenty-four hours. As long as you agree to return on your own recognizance, no one will come to Tokyo and bring you back handcuffed. That was the agreement I was able to negotiate for you."

Dear sweet Buddha. Ryu would be beside himself. He cleared his throat, which felt suddenly thick. "All right. Thank you, Agent Chuek. I'll be there."

"I'm sorry, Phoenix." Chuek's tone broke, expressing the sorrow Nat had sensed earlier. "I don't agree with them at all, but they won't listen to me. At least they let me be the one to...work with you."

Nat nodded even though Chuek couldn't see him. "I appreciate that." Chuek had taken over Nat's spot as the commander of their unity in his absence.

"Call in before your flight. I'll be there to pick you up."

"Thank you, Chuek."

"You're welcome, Agent Phoenix, sir." Chuek clicked off, leaving a buzzing tone.

Still frozen, Nat stared at the receiver for what felt a long time before setting it down. He exhaled again and cradled his head in both hands. How the hell was he going to break this to Ryu?

"Nat? Are you all right?"

Kiku's voice in the doorway made him sit up slowly and turn.

The lines in Kiku's face deepened yet more. The poor man. He'd already been through more conflicts than Nat could imagine. A less strong human being would already have died from the stress Kiku had endured. Kiku stepped into the room and took a few paces towards him. His demeanour showed he didn't want to intrude yet felt compelled by his concern. "Something bad has happened, hasn't it?"

"Yes." Nat took a deep breath and told Kiku about the phone call.

"Oh God." Kiku sank heavily into his desk chair and leant back, his rugged face deep in thought. "I share your concern about Ryu," he said finally. "He will not take this well."

"I know." Nat raked a hand through his hair and sat up. "Kiku, I'm sorry. You've had enough to deal with and now I'm causing more trouble."

"With all due respect, Nat, you're talking nonsense."

Nat stared at him. "I don't understand."

Kiku gestured to him. "Ryu has been the happiest these past four months since I've known him, and that's a very long time. Being with you has done that for him. I wouldn't trade that for anything. You know I mean it."

Yes, he knew. Ryu was Kiku's precious baby and Kiku protected the younger man as a tigress would protect its cub. Kiku had gone to great expense and personal anguish to keep Ryu safe for years. He'd lied to cops, chopped off part of his left pinkie finger to free himself from the yakuza, and faced off with a murderous gangster to protect Ryu. Which was why the stubbly dark growth on Kiku's normally clean-shaven head was now peppered with grey and why as a man of forty-one years old, he appeared ten years older than he was. "Of course. But that happiness will end once I tell him I'm leaving."

"You're what?" A new voice cut in.

Nat and Kiku both whipped their gazes towards the door.

Ryu stood there, dressed for training in a sleeveless white t-shirt and blue athletic shorts, his hair still shiny from the shower. He crossed over to Nat. "You're not leaving. I heard wrong, didn't I?"

Kiku began to rise. "I'll give you privacy."

"No, Kiku. Stay." Ryu grasped Nat's arm. "Talk now, please." His voice rose in pitch, as did the alarm on his beautiful face.

"Ryu, please, don't—"

"Now, Nat." Ryu's eyes took on a fierce look. In spite of the trainer-student, older man-younger man relationship they had, Ryu had no problems standing up for himself with Nat. He had to, Nat knew with shame, in order to get past Nat's terrible tendency to become uncommunicative.

There would be no arguing with Ryu, or attempting to postpone telling him this news. Ryu could be relentless in his own way and would wear Nat down. Best to just tell him the truth. Which he did, explaining everything the way he'd explained it to Kiku minutes before.

However, Kiku's face hadn't darkened and creased the way Ryu's did as Nat spoke. Kiku's panic didn't radiate in the air around them, gripping Nat's heart like a desperate fist. Ryu's fingers tightened on his forearm and he sank into the other chair, his eyes staring off as if intent on something beneath their feet. "This can't be," he whispered. He snapped his gaze

up. "You didn't do anything wrong, Nat. That agent hated me. He wanted me dead. You did everything you could to protect me."

"No, Ryu," he said softly, "I didn't do everything. I saw that Tongmee wasn't right in the head and I kept him on the job. Nor did I lock the door that night, when we came in from Deena's party. He opened it right in and snuck up on us. If I'd locked it, he probably wouldn't have been able to kidnap you. I could have gotten you killed."

Ryu sprang out of the chair and pulled Nat into his arms. Clinging to Nat like a kid, he pushed his face into the curve of Nat's neck. Ryu's breath was warm on his skin. "What if they put you in prison? Would they do that?"

Nat pushed his fingers into Ryu's damp hair and cradled the back of his head, aware of Kiku's presence close by. "I don't think so, Ryu." He closed his eyes and breathed in Ryu's clean scent. Since the first day they met in the Bangkok airport, that woodsy aroma of sandalwood oil Ryu wore had mesmerised him.

Suddenly, Ryu pulled back and disengaged from their embrace. His eyes were misted and he glanced at Kiku. "Kiku, what are we going to do? No, it's not fair to ask you that. You've done so much." He squared his shoulders, the determination returning to his expression. "I'm going with you. I'll explain everything to them. They'll see you did nothing wrong."

"No."

Ryu's mouth hung open. He stared into Nat's face as if watching a gory horror film. "What?"

"I said, no. You're not going anywhere, Ryu. You have a fight in three days. You've worked your ass off for it. You already gave up your career once for that psychotic yak," he said, referring to Taro Suzuki who'd wanted Ryu to throw a fight and give up boxing in order to be his personal fulltime sex toy. Suzuki had made Ryu's life a living hell until Ryu ended the entire situation with his bare hands. "I won't let you sacrifice it again for me. I'll own up to what I did and take whatever punishment I've earned."

Ryu released Nat's arms. "You sound mad." His horror morphed back into desperation and he looked beseechingly at Kiku. "Kiku, please, say something. Help me."

Nat cut in before Kiku could answer. "Nothing Kiku could say will change my decision." Nat fixed Ryu with a look. Where this hard-headed, iron-willed pronouncement

was coming from, Nat didn't know. Guilt, perhaps, but it didn't matter. Ryu had been through too much already. No way in hell he was going to let Ryu make any more sacrifices. He stood. "I promise you, Ryu, I won't let them lock me up. I'll come back to you as soon as I can. Now, you have a practice spar. Let's have breakfast and get going."

He watched the fight drain from Ryu's features.

Ryu appealed to Kiku again with his eyes. "Kiku, please, tell him he's mad. How can he not let me testify for him?"

Kiku had risen from his chair. As usual, his eyes radiated care for Ryu, but Nat saw something else in them as well. Without words, Nat saw Kiku's understanding. They were both older than Ryu, and knew what it meant to face certain demons. A time came in each man's life he had to face them down alone. Absolutely alone. Although Ryu had done it once already in that hotel room with Suzuki, he hadn't processed yet what had really happened inside of himself in those moments. He hadn't yet realised his deep aloneness in facing down Suzuki. Perhaps, when he was close to forty or a bit past that, the way Kiku was, he'd understand.

Kiku came around his desk and put a hand on Ryu's back. "Ryu-chan, Nat isn't mad. I promise you. This is something he must do. Please, try to understand. Remember your experience with Suzuki. You had to face him alone, with no one there to help you. Many things in life are like that. Dying is also like that." He leant in and kissed Ryu's hair.

"I don't understand," Ryu said in a tight whisper, his gaze on Nat though he spoke to Kiku.

Kiku rubbed his back briefly. "You will some day, sweet friend. You will." He gave Ryu a gentle push. "In the meantime, however, Nat is your trainer. Your teacher. You must obey him. Do as he says. Eat, meditate and do your practice spar. That's all there is right now."

Ryu opened his mouth as if to object but seemed to think the better of it and nodded. Head down, he left the office and turned to the right, in the direction of the meditation room in the corridor, just next to the office.

Nat began to follow him, but paused, stayed by Kiku's hand. Kiku's eyes, though tired, still simmered with the energy that had enabled him to establish and run the place they stood in now, the strength and determination that had made him a man so many others turned to for help and solace.

"Nat, have faith. Ryu is strong, you know that."

He nodded though the heavy feeling he'd woken up with now pressed on his chest like the leaden plates one slid onto a barbell. Breathing was becoming harder. "I know that," he said softly. He just wasn't so certain about himself. Nor was he so certain about his promise not to be imprisoned. That certainly wasn't within his control. Yet Kiku was right. All there was right now was to eat, meditate and coach Ryu through his practice fight.

"I'll find you a flight back to Bangkok, if it will help."

Nat nodded again. "Yes. That would help immensely."

Kiku squeezed his arm then released him. "I'll have it for you when get back this afternoon."

Chapter Two

"I'm sorry, Nat." Ryu looked as miserable as he was beautiful, standing there, wrapped only in a gym-issue white towel. His newly dried skin gave off the smell of soap. Like this morning after his shower, his damp hair stood in errant black spikes. The only difference were the red marks on his face that would turn to bruises in a little while, in spite of the protective headgear he'd worn for his practice spar.

Nat's heart squeezed painfully. Bad enough what was happening. Ryu's distress had caused him to lose the spar. Badly. "You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for, Ryu."

"I let you down. You've put four months of work into me and I let you down."

Nat steeled himself against the defeat in Ryu's attitude. Ryu hadn't only had difficulty concentrating. Nat knew from the way Ryu had fought he'd been trying to feign ill-preparedness so Nat would order him to forfeit the fight. It wasn't going to work. "Listen, you're going to fight in three days and you're going to win. Just think of this practice round as getting the kinks out." He gestured to the massage table. "Get up there now."

Ryu exhaled and went obediently to the table. With a strange look at Nat, he pulled the towel off his hips and laid it on the flat cushion. Nat set another towel above it and watched Ryu climb on and lie, face down, chin on his forearms.

Nat poured massage oil onto one palm and warmed it in his hands. "You're going to do fine," he said. "You've got what it takes, Ryu."

Ryu turned his head slightly. "Thank you," he murmured.

"And you'll have Kumo-san coaching you." Kumo had been Ryu's first and only coach, the one he'd been forced to give up when he went into hiding in Thailand. Kumo had been thrilled to be a part of Ryu's career again and had gladly volunteered to stand in for Nat.

"Yes. True enough." Ryu was obviously working his ass off to be agreeable when Nat knew how his lover really felt about their imminent separation this evening.

Nat did his best to smile and set his hands, palms down, on Ryu's upper back. Ryu let out a small breath at the contact and sank further onto the table when Nat rubbed easy circles over his shoulder blades.

Damn, Ryu felt soooo good. Nat pressed down a little harder with the heels of his hands. Hard muscle inked over with a million beautiful colours pushed back against the slow, firm circles he ground. Ryu's flawless skin slid easily under Nat's oiled palms.

Ryu groaned softly and heaved a deep breath. The kissing samurai on his back shifted with the movement, as if their entwined, kimono-clad bodies were alive. "Nat, you're so good at this." The breathy tone almost made Nat think there was nothing wrong.

Nat smiled even though Ryu was lying on his stomach on the massage table, hands folded under his chin and couldn't see his lover's face. Heat tingled through his own body, making his groin tighten. Touching Ryu made everything else recede to the background, if only for a little while. They really needed to make the most of these last hours together.

If they'd been in their room at the White Tiger and not still in the gym, he'd have bent over and given the nape of Ryu's neck a tiny lick. In the last four months, he'd discovered one of Ryu's favourite erogenous zones. "Thanks. I just don't want you to get stiff." He made a point of massaging Ryu after every training session. In spite of the easy excuse it gave him to rub oil over Ryu's naked body, his other motive truly was Ryu's physical welfare.

"It works. I don't get stiff. Well, I do, but only in the good spots."

Now, Nat chuckled. Humour. A good sign. "Yes," he agreed, "definitely in the good spots."

Ryu turned over then, interrupting the massage and sat up. Ryu's wide shoulders slumped. Misery darkened his face. "I fought like shit today, Nat, and I'm sorry." He looked down, the angle emphasising the softly rounded contours of his face. Ryu was so beautiful, words of admiration caught in Nat's throat every time he looked at the man. "I just...I don't know how I can do it without you here." His lower lip began to tremble. He looked up, eyes misted. "I need you."

Nat reached out and brushed a hand over Ryu's hair. In spite of its spiky appearance, it was soft and tickled Nat's callused skin in the sweetest way. In spite of Ryu's attempt at faking, it had been clear Ryu was also distracted. The easy shots his opponent had gotten in were not a result of Ryu's lack of skill or strength. Back in Phuket, he'd really held his own in the sparring match Tongmee had goaded him into, and Tongmee had been taller and stronger. The short spar had captured the attention of everyone in the training camp and they'd all ended up cheering for Ryu. This time, words wouldn't come. Nat found himself

tongue-tied, the way he'd been when he first met Ryu and would remain maddeningly silent when Ryu needed him to respond. He searched his mind fiercely for the words he wanted to say. He rubbed his thumb along Ryu's cheekbone. "I know, Ryu," he said softly. "Just...remember what you've been taught. Before you know it, I'll be back." The last words sounded hollow even though he meant them. Who knew what would happen really? Nat knew he was guilty of Tongmee's accusation. And he wouldn't lie about it. Not even for Ryu.

Ryu's gaze lifted. It was a bit lighter now even though the look in his eyes had lost some of its innocence these past few months. Having taken Suzuki's life had changed Ryu, tempered him in a way that Nat prayed could be reversed. Even Kiku had remarked on it, and Kiku had known Ryu since Ryu was a kid in grade school. Killing Suzuki had affected Ryu's nature more deeply than more than having been raped by him. "I'm the one who's sorry, Ryu."

In the next second, Ryu grasped his forearms and pulled him close. Ryu spread his thighs so Nat's hips fit between them, even though he bumped up to the edge of the massage table. The movement surprised Nat into staring at Ryu.

The other man's eyes had darkened a bit, taken on that smouldering look of arousal. "I can't get angry at you for having faith in a man's higher nature," he said softly. "You're a cop and yet...I don't know, you still..." He sighed. "It's hard to put words to." A small grin teased his lips. "Anyway, it turns me on." He slid his touch up Nat's arms to his chest, rubbing him over his thin white t-shirt.

Nat pulled in a breath. Ryu had the most incredible touch, heating his skin right through the material. The pads of Ryu's thumbs found his nipples and brushed them into tiny peaks. "Ryu." His voice came out a throaty whisper. Not what he'd intended. Regardless of the private little massage room, they were in a training gym, not at the White Tiger where this kind of thing was completely acceptable. "Someone could walk in."

Ryu's grin widened. "They know about me in this place," he said. "I have an image to uphold, you know." He trailed the fingertips of one hand down the centre of Nat's stomach, tracing his abdominal muscles through the t-shirt. Nat's groin tightened and his eyes fell on Ryu's erection, jutting curve from between the tops of his tattooed thighs.

Nat stared. He couldn't help it. To his shame, his mouth began to water as he gaped at his lover's lightly veined shaft. The stiff member seemed to silently challenge him to break his personal barriers of what he could and couldn't do in a gym.

"Don't wait too long, Nat," Ryu said in a husky voice. "I think we only have ten minutes left in here." He reached for Nat's hand and directed his fingers to close around the hard length. A small breath escaped Ryu at the contact. "It won't take me long," he promised. "And then I'll take care of you when we get home." Gentle pressure made Nat's oiled fingers slid up Ryu's cock, so that the plump head disappeared into his half-closed fist.

Ryu exhaled sharply. His eyes seemed to darken more and his eyelids lowered slightly. "Yeah," he breathed and bid Nat's hand to slide back down, "Just like that."

Nat glanced over his shoulder towards the door. His heartbeat thudded slightly even though the door was solid, no tiny window to allow a passerby a peek at what he was doing.

"Don't worry, Nat." Ryu's breathy voice pulled his attention back. Ryu leant back, bracing his weight with one hand on the table, the other hand still guiding Nat to stroke him. "They won't say it out loud, but Japanese guys don't care. They all know about *shudo*." A tiny smile played about his soft lips.

Nat found himself now staring at Ryu's lips, wanting to kiss him but still wavering between his own arousal and his uptightness about where they were. "*Shudo*?" He'd never heard Ryu use the word before and he was always learning something new from Ryu.

Ryu tilted his head back. "Manlove," he said in a near whisper. His fingers still rested lightly on the tendons of Nat's hand, though Nat realised he was now stroking Ryu's erection in a slow, steady rhythm without Ryu's help. He couldn't stop, in spite of his fear of being walked in on. From the very first day they'd met, Ryu had been irresistible to him.

"The samurai practiced it for centuries," Ryu went on. His voice was thick and shivery, and his chest rose and fell in quick breaths. A wonder how he was able to speak at all. Probably due to all those White Tiger exercises he'd practiced most of his adult life. "An older man would take a younger man for his lover then teach him to fight." His breath caught on an upstroke and the shaft twitched against Nat's palm. Ryu's eyelids fluttered briefly and he had a faraway look in his eyes now. "The way you're teaching me now."

Ryu fell silent except for his heavy breathing, each inhalation and exhalation matching the strokes of Nat's hand. A pearl of cum seeped from the tip of Ryu's cock. Nat brushed

over the tiny hole, gathering the thick moisture with the pad of his thumb. He rubbed it in the small magic spot just below the ridge of his cockhead.

A groan of pleasure answered the tiny movement.

"Nat, kiss me, please."

The whispered plea sent Nat leaning over. The second his lips touched Ryu's, all thought melted away. The fear of someone coming in hovered in the background, but couldn't compete with the velvety warmth of Ryu's parted lips. More moist heat beckoned him to taste deeper while Ryu's breath pulsed into his mouth, a rhythmic match to Nat's stroking on his cock.

The hard shaft twitched again. Ryu released a long, soft groan. His fingers tightened over Nat's hands, guiding the speed and depth of each slide. Shorter and quicker while Ryu's hips rocked slightly and his wiry torso jerked.

With a huff, Ryu went limp, panting, his forehead pressed gently to Nat's.

Nat rested like that with him, his hand still around Ryu's softening dragon. His own body was tight with need, especially his erection which pushed against his briefs, demanding the same release.

Release.

Only then did Nat notice Ryu was dry. No warm milkiness had spurted out, though Ryu seemed to have climaxed.

Ryu leant back, a lazy grin stretching his lips, his eyelids still heavy, dark golden skin flushed. "Injaculation," he said softly.

Nat recognised the term. It was an advanced technique of the White Tiger. The Taoist practice supposedly conserved a man's life force.

"Didn't know I could do that, did you?"

Nat smiled in spite of himself. "No."

A shy look flitted across Ryu's face. "I just didn't want to make a mess. I know you're worried about someone walking in." He shifted forward on the table and brushed a kiss across Nat's lips. "Let's get home, Nat. So I can take care of you, like I promised." He lifted the towel from the table and closed it around his hips.

Still a bit dazed, Nat stepped back, giving Ryu space to slide off the table and rummage through his gym bag for the clean clothes he had stashed in it. Quietly, he watched Ryu slip

on a fresh pair of boxer briefs. The sight of the thin material stretching over Ryu's round ass cheeks and sloping thighs only made his already tight erection more painful. The boxer briefs were his favourite of Ryu's underthings, far sexier than those G-strings he also liked to wear.

Nat thought briefly of the first day they'd met, when Nat had wanted Ryu to cut off the hot pink tips of his dip-dyed hair. Ryu had tried to make some crazy point about how unhideable he was by stripping down to his G-string and displaying his colourfully-tattooed body of perfect wiry muscles to Nat, front and back. Remembering that scene now, it had been the G-string that had shocked Nat the most about Ryu, the way the slip of material had let him see nearly everything and had sent him over the edge with hunger for the man.

He watched Ryu slip on a T-shirt, baggy pants and *tabi* socks with their cutaway between the big toe and the other toes so Ryu could put on his sandals. The same disappointment always settled over Nat when Ryu's body got covered with clothing.

Just in time, however. A knock came at the door. Someone else to use the massage room.

Ryu winked at him and picked up his gym bag. The glitter in his eyes seemed to say, *See? I told you we had time for a quickie.* He made another brief suggestive movement with his tongue then opened the door, greeting the guy he'd lost the sparring match to with a polite bow and a handshake, both to him and his trainer.

Nat pulled the other towels off the massage table, making sure the space was clean for them, then followed Ryu out.

Seeing his opponent seemed to have silenced Ryu, for the heaviness he'd had about him before the hand job now returned. For an emotionally steady person, Ryu's moods shifted like the ocean breezes. Nat always wondered at this quality. It was like Ryu had several distinct personalities. One moment he was mischievous and seductive as he'd been in the massage room, the next he could be like a frightened little boy, then morph into a fierce boxer. Right now, Nat could see the young man who believed he'd failed his trainer and lover.

Ryu was quiet until they were out on the sidewalk in the cool autumn air.

"I'll do better, Nat. I promise," Ryu said, as if he'd been mindreading.

Nat glanced at him. No, Ryu wasn't psychic like Kiku. Nat chalked Ryu's sensitivity to having grown up in a crime family, surrounded by threatening people. The apology made another pang hit Nat's chest. "You did great, Ryu. I swear. I'm...proud of you."

Ryu's eyes widened. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really." He touched the smaller man's shoulder briefly, over his windbreaker. If they'd not been on a busy city sidewalk, he'd have stopped and pulled Ryu into an embrace. "Under the circumstances, you sparred incredibly well. I know from experience, most guys don't fight their best after trauma for a while. Don't underestimate the recovery time you need from what happened with Suzuki." Even trained soldiers could be traumatised by taking another human life.

Ryu's eyes darkened again, this time with that sombreness that overtook him frequently. "You mean my killing him," he muttered.

The cool October air swirled gently around them. The sun was low in the sky, but the autumn light lent a lovely paleness to the blue above them. All a contrast to the darkness in Ryu, one that hadn't been there before he'd killed Suzuki.

Nat swallowed hard. He didn't know what to say, he only knew he had to say *something* and prayed to Buddha for the right words. "Ryu, I know how you feel about that," he began slowly, letting the words fill his mind. After all, the White Tiger path Ryu had been practicing with him every night, though sexual in its orientation, was meant to allow the practitioner to enter the flow of life. "But if you hadn't done it, we wouldn't be standing here right now. Something hideous could have happened to you instead. And...well, that would've been horrible. I wouldn't want that. I want you to be here. So much. Do you know what I mean?" As he spoke, he felt the heat burning in his own cheeks. Before meeting Ryu, the only person Nat had ever spoken his heart to was his twin brother, and Aran had been dead since they were sixteen. Finding Ryu had been like opening up a bright window onto a dark world.

Ryu was still for several moments and Nat could practically see his words sinking into the other man's consciousness. Ryu had the most expressive face Nat had ever seen, as readable as if the things he was feeling were pasted in words across his forehead. In the next second, Ryu got that look he had at times, that tender, sweet, yet fiery glow that made Nat's

whole insides surge and then turn to mush. Quite a miracle for a guy who'd once fought his way from the rice fields of the Thai countryside to a championship WBA title.

Marry me, Ryu. As they did every day now for the last few weeks, the words rose in Nat's mind with a ghostly force of their own. As always, Nat felt compelled to drop to one knee and do the whole romantic proposal thing.

What stopped him each time, he didn't know...

"Nat?"

Nat blinked, realising the depth of the reverie he'd just been in. Ryu's face, brow furrowed came back into focus. "Sorry," he said to Ryu.

Ryu smiled. "It's okay. I know saying mushy things is hard for you. And you just said one of the mushiest things anyone could ever say." He paused, gazing up at Nat. In the next second, he went up on the balls of his feet and gave Nat a peck on the cheek, ignoring the glances they got from passersby. In spite of cultural conventions, Ryu had no issues with public displays of affection.

The heat in Nat's cheeks went up a couple of notches. "You're welcome," he murmured, urging Ryu to walk again. "I meant it." The thought of proposal had left him distinctly uncomfortable, nagging like a pebble in his shoe. He thought quickly of Rawee, the woman he'd once been engaged to. That seemed like a completely different lifetime. What had stopped him then was his need for men. Ryu was the ultimate man, gorgeous, sexy, loving. So what was stopping him now?

"Nat."

Nat glanced over at Ryu who smiled up at him again. The look in Ryu's eyes told him the other man was still glowing from what he'd said. "I just wanted you to know how grateful I am you're training me."

Resisting the urge to ruffle Ryu's hair, he returned the smile. "The honour's all mine. Really."

Ryu chuckled. Just as quickly his mirth faded, replaced by sadness. "If you say so, Nat. But I still want to show you how grateful I am when we get home. In our last few hours together."

Chapter Three

Kiku was at his desk when Nat went into the office. The other man looked up from the computer monitor and nodded. His gaze flickered to Ryu who hung back in the doorway. "How was the practice spar?" he asked, though his quiet tone held more than the question.

Nat cleared his throat to answer but Ryu spoke first. "I...lost. Badly."

To Nat's surprise, a smile teased at Kiku's lips. "And I'm sure Nat told you this was a dry run to get the kinks out for your real fight."

Ryu's eyes widened briefly and he stepped into the room. "Yes."

Kiku's smile faded and sympathy shone from his gaze. "Your trainer isn't letting you sabotage anything, is he?"

Tiny needles of energy skittered down Nat's spine. Kiku's insight could be shocking in its instant clarity. Then again, the man had been Ryu's friend for over seventeen years. He knew Ryu well.

"I did tell him just that, as a matter of fact," Nat said.

Kiku smiled at him now. Approval showed in his expression. Just as quickly, however, he grew solemn again. "You are right, of course. Ryu is a talented athlete, in spite of his own misgivings. I believe he has a good chance to win...*if* he doesn't sabotage himself." This last part said with his eyes on Ryu.

Ryu looked down briefly. "Thank you, Kiku. I won't sabotage it. I already promised Nat." The tightness in his voice reminded Nat of the reason they'd come straight to Kiku's office after getting back to the White Tiger.

"You're welcome, Ryu-chan," Kiku said gently. Then, to Nat. "I've just printed out your e-ticket." He lifted a piece of paper from his desk. "You're booked on a Nippon Airways flight tonight at eight-forty-two."

Nat's stomach flipped and he avoided looking at Ryu as he came forward and accepted the paperwork for his flight. "Thank you," he said. "I'll write you a check."

"I'm not worried about it. We can settle another time. You have a few hours until you leave. I'll make sure a cab is waiting for you. Just...enjoy some time together."

"I don't see why I can't go too." Ryu's frustration broke through. He looked between Nat and Kiku. "It's not right. I should be there with you, Nat."

Nat felt his resolve harden against the pleading frustration on Ryu's beautiful face. Though he wanted to be with Ryu all day, every day, he didn't want Ryu there to see him a prisoner, seated in front of the military tribunal, calling his professional and personal integrity into question. It would be humiliating enough. He wanted Ryu to respect him. Not pity him. But how to explain this all, especially when his tongue didn't work the way he needed it to. The way it wasn't working right now.

"Nat, please."

Kiku came forward again, the way he had this morning and put an arm across Ryu's shoulders. "Ryu, I don't want to sound cold. You know how much I love you."

"Yes."

"Don't put Nat in this position. Don't ask to see him go through such a thing. Put yourself in his place. You know I'm not one to approve of pride, but there is such a thing as dignity. You know how it feels to have your dignity dragged along the ground. That's all I'll say."

Ryu pinned Nat with his sorrowful yet stubborn look. "Is Kiku right? Is it what he says?"

Nat's heart pounded mercilessly. If there was any moment he feared Ryu would turn away from him and hate him, this was it. But having Ryu hate him was not as unbearable as Ryu seeing him humiliated. Wordlessly, he nodded.

Emotions rippled through Ryu's face and eyes, one after the other, as if Ryu couldn't decide which feeling was the most prevalent inside him. Nat recognised this process in his lover, having seen it a few times at least in the past four months. Sadness was the one that passed through many times and remained when all the others passed away. "Is it so important to you, Nat?" His voice had fallen to a whisper.

The question seemed to free Nat's ability to speak. He stepped close to Ryu and pulled the smaller man into his arms. "Yes. It is." He pushed his face into Ryu's sweet-smelling hair and felt Ryu's arms squeeze around him. They stood like that for what felt like a long time and Nat heard the whisper of movement as Kiku discreetly left the room. Ryu clutched at his

jacket, pressing into his back. Every little movement Ryu ever made was full of his feelings, his being.

When Ryu pulled back and looked up, his almond-shaped eyes shone, red-rimmed. "Come on," he said softly. "Let's go upstairs. We're wasting time."

Nat followed him to the elevator. Once inside, Ryu blew out a breath and leant back inside the elevator. Nat stared at him. Suddenly it was clear why he hadn't proposed to Ryu the way he ached to. Something inside him had known this would happen, that he'd be called back to Bangkok and taken to task for his role in Ryu's abduction.

At the time of the trial, the fact that he hadn't replaced Tongmee when he'd seen clues of Tongmee's frame of mind had been given leniency. Tongmee had undergone counselling and testing when he'd returned from compassion leave after his brother's death from AIDS, and had been determined capable of fulfilling his duties. Something during their mission had set Tongmee off badly enough to plan Ryu's abduction and deliver him into the hands of the very man their unit was protecting him from. In Tongmee's court martial, this had come to light and Nat had been determined innocent.

But he wasn't innocent of having left the door to their room unlocked in his hurry to get Ryu's clothes off and have sex with him. *That*, perhaps, had been the most irresponsible act any agent could have committed and yet, Tongmee had remained loyal enough not to speak of it in the trial.

His negligence made Nat feel completely undeserving of Ryu even though Ryu knew about the unlocked door and didn't blame him at all. If anything, Ryu blamed himself for having seduced Nat. The topic had been one of many discussions between them in the past four months.

The elevator stopped on their floor and the doors slid open. Nat forced his attention back on the present. It did no good to get carried away with his feelings. He'd done that once before and had almost gotten Ryu killed.

Ryu slipped his arm though Nat's and squeezed as they went past the room Kiku shared with his lover, Yuzo. "Nat, you'd better come back as quickly as possible."

The heaviness pressed on Nat's chest as they stopped in front of the door to their room. "I promise I'll come back as quickly as possible," he said softly.

Ryu glanced at him, his face sad. He nodded quickly and slid back the *soji* screen to their room. Nat followed him in and stood by the bed, watching Ryu hang his boxing gloves in the closet. In the last four months, this little room, simply but beautifully decorated like all the rooms in the White Tiger, had come to be a haven. Nat glanced down at the black cover of the futon where Ryu curled up in his arms every night, falling asleep against him.

The sweetness of it made a pang in Nat's chest. He and Aran used to curl up like that to sleep when they were kids and even then, Nat had mourned the day when Aran had started showing interest in girls and the snuggling together had soon stopped. Aran had actually ended up going with their childhood friend Deena after she'd started the process of becoming a woman and Nat had simply tagged after the two of them. But it all ended when they were sixteen and Aran got sick and died.

Ryu was the one who'd helped him deal with the grief he'd hung on to for more than half his life.

A shiver passed through Nat's body. Ryu hadn't judged him when his dreams of Aran woke both of them and Nat had revealed his secret. Sleeping with Ryu had given him back a sweetness he thought he'd lost forever. Of course, Ryu wasn't Aran, but it didn't matter. Ryu was incredible. The man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. The ring to prove his feelings was tucked away in his clothing drawer.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. The contact pulled him from another reverie.

Ryu was smiling at him. "Hey," he said softly, "don't think I forgot about my promise." The seductive edge in his tone reawakened the erection Nat had lost the second someone had knocked on the door to the massage room.

Ryu's hand slid from his shoulder. With both hands, he slid Nat's jacket down his arms and tugged it off him. He tossed it onto the bed, laced their fingers together and led Nat over to the bed. "Have a seat," he said, gently tugging Nat down. He knelt on the *tatami* in front of Nat and eased Nat back into a reclining position, supported on his elbows, before slipping between Nat's thighs and pushing Nat's t-shirt up. Nat raised his arms so Ryu could get the shirt off, which he did and tossed it away as he'd done with Nat's jacket.

A dreamy look slipped into Ryu's even gaze, an expression he got just about every time they had sex. Nat still couldn't believe he inspired such a response from a guy as hot and seductive as Ryu. "God, Nat, you're so incredibly gorgeous." His voice was a near whisper

now and he leant forward, close enough that their lips brushed together. Before Nat could answer, Ryu deepened the kiss. His tongue licked across Nat's, back and forth in an exotic dance. Ryu's woodsy scent floated around them, diffused by the warmth of their bodies so close.

Nat sighed and sagged back, eyes closed. Ryu's hands whispered across Nat's chest, teasing his nipples in slow, light circles. "Ryu," he whispered between deepening breaths, "I want to—"

"What, Nat? What do you want to do?" Ryu's eyes glittered mischievously. Ryu was good at teasing him, working him into a froth. Ryu could be so abandoned and yet in control of their passion, guiding it to different heights like a skilled conductor of a symphony. He was definitely in control now and Nat succumbed.

"I want you...underneath me," Nat managed to say. His throat was thick from emotion and arousal.

Ryu's mischief reached his smile. His full lips curved up and he parted them just enough to slide his tongue along the seam.

Nat's cock surged, pushing against his jeans. Ryu worked such magic with that tongue in the most sensitive areas on his body that Nat was conditioned. The sight of that pink moist organ made his very asshole quiver, just knowing how Ryu would lick his hole until Nat nearly came just from that. "I want..." He panted, unable to say the words.

Ryu brushed his fingertips across Nat's stomach, just above his bellybutton. With his index finger, Ryu teased the indentation and licked across his bottom lip again. "Tell me more, Nat. What do you want?" He ended the question with the slide of his finger around Nat's bellybutton then lower, where he undid the button and fly. Ryu's breath pulsed hot on his exposed skin.

"When you come back," Ryu said and trailed seductive fingertips down the centre furrow of Nat's pectoral muscles. Ryu was controlling their sex right now from fear of their upcoming separation, but couldn't stop him. Ryu's fingertips held him in their pleasurable thrall. "This?" He rubbed Nat's cock over his boxers, softly at first then more firmly, tracing the hard length up and down.

"Yes," Nat panted, "but..."

"Or this?" Ryu slid his fingers through the opening of the boxers and stroked Nat's bare cock.

Nat shut his eyes hard against the intense pleasure. "No," he breathed, his head tilted back.

"Or maybe this." Ryu's eyes glittered with promise. Gently, he pulled Nat's cock through the opening and took the head in his mouth.

"Ohhh." Nat's chest heaved. He wanted to rise up and push Ryu onto his back, yank down the man's pants and mount him. But Ryu's hot, wet mouth held him prisoner. With erotic suction, Ryu pulled the head of Nat's cock between his lips. With the tip of his tongue, Ryu traced the lobes of the head, pulling a bit more with his lips.

Damn. Ryu gave a blowjob that made a man his instant slave.

Ryu closed his eyes and savoured the feel and taste of Nat's cock. Playing the jade flute on Nat had to be one of the best, most incredible experiences of his life. Something he'd fantasised about for years as Nat's unknown fan and now had the privilege of doing nearly every day in real life. Aside from Kiku, whom he'd always worshipped and adored, Nat was *the* ultimate man. The best man in the entire world. Someone Ryu trusted with his life.

Nat's harsh breaths thundered in Ryu's ears, urging him to take Nat deeper. Pulling back, he released Nat's cock and pulled the man's jeans and boxers down so he could have full access.

Nat helped him by lifting his ass off the bed enough to let Ryu pull his clothes off, down to his ankles. Nat's eyelids were heavy, his already caramel-toned skin flushed dark. His full lips were parted with his heavy breathing. What he wanted, the desire he'd been trying to express, was clear in his hungry expression. He wanted Ryu on his back, underneath him, his cock buried deep inside Ryu's passage.

Heat, like lightning, streaked through Ryu's body. He'd wanted to hold Nat off, make him wait until he returned, a kind of promise to himself he'd be with Nat again after this coming nightmare was over. But Ryu's asshole pulsed. Heat radiated through his dragon, as if the organ itself were truly the fire-breathing creature after which it had been named. Aside from sucking Nat's dragon, nothing else in the entire world compared to having Nat's muscular body on top of his, surrounded and filled with Nat's tender strength.

Wordlessly, Ryu slipped Nat's jeans over each foot and pulled them off, along with his boxers. He stroked his hands over Nat's smooth, hard thighs. The tiny hairs on Nat's skin brushed Ryu's palms and Nat's thickly muscled thighs quivered under his erotic caresses.

Leaning in, Ryu tongued the plump sac under Nat's dragon. Nat groaned and Ryu suppressed a smile, instead feathering his tongue over the crinkly-smooth skin of Nat's balls. Nat never came out and said this, but his *yang* sac was one of his most intense erogenous zones and Ryu delighted in licking it until Nat was almost ready to come. In an erotic dance, Ryu stroked Nat's thighs while he teased Nat's balls and the base of his thick dragon in back and forth licks. Nat's dragon jumped and twitched as if given a life of its own, telling Ryu without words where it really wanted to be.

Well, he definitely wanted the same thing, but not just yet. More teasing first. Claspings the base of Nat's dragon with his thumb and forefinger, he ran his tongue up to the head and pushed the tip into the tiny seeping hole. Nat's dragon tears were salty sweet and Ryu savoured them, eyes closed, showing Nat just how much he loved the mere taste of him. It was as if Nat's essence came through in his *yang* juices, strong and salty, yet also sweet and nourishing, the very nectar that had helped restore Ryu's faith in life, a force he'd lost sight of since the deadly clash with Taro Suzuki.

Mmm, he couldn't get enough of Nat's delectable flavours or the no-nonsense smell of his smooth toffee skin. He wanted to taste every inch. He moved his hands to Nat's hips and moved his mouth to Nat's stomach again. Slowly, in a moist upward trail, he licked and teased his way up the centre of Nat's torso, taking extra time to feast on each dark nipple. The smooth disks crinkled against his tongue as if on demand and Nat's hands burrowed into Ryu's hair.

"Ryu," he breathed, "Ryu." Each repetition of Ryu's name shuddered inside him. Ryu moved up farther, to the top of Nat's chest, and nibbled on every part of his collarbone before venturing to the more sensitive skin of his throat.

"Ryu," Nat whispered again. "Ryu, I want—nnnnhh..." The sentence was lost as Ryu took Nat's lips. Nat's velvety lips. Another part of the man that tasted like heaven itself.

Ryu licked deep into Nat's mouth, as if to gather more of the essence in there to take inside of him, to keep him going when he and Nat couldn't be together. Even as he chafed his lips and tongue against Nat's, deep in his consciousness Ryu couldn't believe he wouldn't

be falling asleep in Nat's arms as he'd done just about every night since Nat had come to live here with him.

He felt pressure on his waist. Nat's hands were scrabbling at the button of his jeans. The man's thick fingers found the button hole and opened his pants. Then the fly. Then one of Nat's large hands slipped under the elastic of Ryu's briefs and palmed his cock. Nat loved feeling Ryu's cock, sliding his callused palm over silky skin. Nat treated his dragon as if it were one of the most precious treasures in the world, as he treated all of Ryu everyday.

Ryu felt hot tears spring into his eyes. Mixed in the pleasure of Nat's hot caress on his dragon was the anguish he felt at their being apart. He paused their kiss, his lips resting against Nat's, their breath mingling in each other's mouths, and pushed his jeans and underpants down. Nat's large hands closed over his arms and Ryu felt himself tilting. The bed came up under his back and Nat's hunger-darkened face flashed above him.

Nat pushed Ryu's shirt up, exposing his chest. Nat wasn't teasing and seductive in the way he descended and licked hungrily at Ryu's chest. Nat wasn't a refined man. He was a wild tiger, unleashed, protective and engulfing with his passion. Ryu felt this every time they made love, in the way Nat's tongue moved over his skin, his nipples, over his throat, the way Nat nibbled at his jaw, wildly yet also carefully. "Nat, the oil's in my bag," he whispered, grasping Nat's broad back muscles. The way Nat's torso filled his arms was a pleasure beyond compare. "Please."

Nat lifted his face. Sweat dotted his brow. His chest heaved. He rocked his pelvis and their cocks rubbed together. Nat's eyes widened, as if he'd been given a jolt. Wordlessly, he leant over and reached into Ryu's bag. Ryu took the bottle from him and poured some into his own hand. Reaching down, he slathered it up all over the other man's hard cock then over his hole. "I want you so much, Nat," he whispered. Time was mercilessly slipping away from them and he wanted Nat inside him for as long as possible.

He lifted his legs and wrapped them around Nat's hips. That act alone sent an ecstatic shiver through his body. Aside from Kiku, Nat was the only man he'd done this intimate act with, not counting Suzuki's violation, and every time he pulled his legs back, surrendering his body to the man he loved, was sacred. He grasped Nat's ass cheeks and squeezed.

Nat groaned. He pushed the head of his cock against Ryu's slippery hole. The oil made the head sink in. The tiny pleasure-pinch made Ryu gasp. He pulled Nat's head down and

kissed him deeply. The air around them filled with the erotically wet suction of their mouths together...followed by the small slap of their hard bodies sliding together as Nat penetrated him and slid his cock all the way in.

"Mmmm," Ryu sighed in his throat, eyes closed, his arms around Nat's broad torso, knees pulled back so Nat could plunge in deep with each thrust. Nat's hard stomach rubbed Ryu's dragon in a rhythm with each glide into Ryu's deep channel.

Ryu relaxed, opened, surrendered completely to the friction, the heat, the sheer delight of Nat on top of him, inside him, surrounding him. The two main gates of his body were filled with Nat—Nat's tongue in his mouth and Nat's thick dragon in his back passage. Ryu's mind softened, darkened, as if he were floating upward, his body carried in the very essence of consciousness itself. He'd gone there the first time he and Nat had made love back in Thailand, and even then Ryu had known there was something special, something transcendent in the way their beings mingled. Nat, too, had experienced the transcendent levels when they mixed their *yin* and *yang* forces together.

Please, Ryu prayed silently, even in the midst of ecstasy, *don't separate us*. He squeezed the muscles of his jade gate around Nat's dragon, clutched at the man's rock-hard ass cheeks with the fingers of both hands, pulling Nat in as deep as the man could humanly possibly go.

It worked. Nat groaned. He thrust faster and harder. His dragon surged, filling, pulsing as the nectar shot up and into Ryu's channel.

The friction of Nat's stomach made Ryu come. Together their bodies emptied their *yang* clouds, their mouths still joined in their deep kiss. The smell of sex emanated, diffused into the air by their sweating bodies. Nat collapsed on top of Ryu, heedless of the warm puddle that fused their skin. His large hand slid into Ryu's hair and he rested his damp forehead against Ryu's.

My beautiful Ryu, Nat thought, breathing heavily in the aftermath of that incredibly hot sex. He'd felt as if Ryu were trying to pull him inside, make of their two souls one so he'd be with Nat wherever he was. He smoothed back Ryu's damp hair, afraid to speak lest he say something stupid.

"Tell me it'll be okay, Nat," Ryu whispered.

Nat's heart lurched. Back in Thailand, hiding from Taro Suzuki, Nat had said those words to Ryu. *It'll be okay.* He'd wanted so badly to comfort Ryu. He didn't want to lie but he also wanted to hope.

"It'll be okay, Ryu," he said softly, caressing Ryu's hair. "Because no matter what happens, I love you." *If...when...I come back, I want you to marry me.* He wished he could say the words right now. Go to the drawer and take out the ring. But he couldn't. Not until this trial was over.

Ryu gazed up at him, one hand on Nat's cheek. "I love you too."

Nat lay on top of him as long as he dared, but time was moving forward, uncaring of their sadness, and so he finally levered himself up, took a quick shower and got dressed before packing his things.

"I want to go to the airport with you."

Nat pulled a small pile of t-shirts from the drawer. They were all he had here in Tokyo. Didn't need much in the way of clothing except to go to the gym. Here at the White Tiger, he and Ryu spent most of their time either naked or in kimonos to go to and from the baths downstairs. His bag sat open next to Ryu on the bed. He pushed the shirts into the bag and paused. "What about Mr. Hamura? This is his night to come for a massage."

"I'll call him and postpone for tomorrow. He's a dear friend. He'll understand."

Nat sighed. It was the least he could do, allow Ryu to accompany him in the cab to the airport. Only Buddha knew how long they'd be apart. "Okay. As long as Mr. Hamura doesn't mind."

He knew Ryu would have objected normally, but Mr. Hamura was old and frail and Ryu worried about him much of the time.

"Ryu-chan." Naoto's voice came from the other side of the *soji* door.

"Yes?" Ryu got up and slid the door open, revealing the taller, brawny man, hair hanging down past the middle of his back. Next to Kiku, Naoto and Naoto's lover Koji were Ryu's most trusted friends here.

Naoto's wide rugged face showed the same kind of worry that Kiku's had earlier. He nodded a polite greeting to Nat before turning back to Ryu. "I'm so sorry to bother you at a time like this," he said, "but Hamura-san's housekeeper just called here. Hamura-san won't be able to keep his appointment tonight."

Ryu's face paled and Nat's heart lurched. As if things weren't bad enough. "What's the matter with him?"

Naoto shook his head. "They're not sure. He's just unwell."

"Dammit. I knew something would happen. He's been going through conflict in his family. The stress has been hurting him." Ryu raked a hand through his hair. His troubled gaze met Nat's. "Well, now I can at least go to the airport with you." Then, to Naoto, "Thank you for telling me. Did he mention whether he would be able to receive visitors?"

"Actually, yes. He said if you would be so kind, he would send his car. Just to call when you're ready."

Ryu nodded. "I'll go. On my way back from the airport."

Naoto hesitated in the doorway. "Do either of you need anything?" His sympathetic tone was clear. The men of the White Tiger were accustomed to emergency calls taking them away. Their friend Quan Chan was still back in Shanghai, mourning the death of the man who'd raised him.

"No, thank you, Naoto," Nat said.

Naoto sighed. He reached out and affectionately squeezed Ryu's arm. "Let me know if you do."

"Thanks, Nao-chan." Ryu came back to the bed and perched on the edge. Nat stuffed his shaving kit and spare pair of jeans and a few boxer shorts into the bag. It was mostly for show, really, for Ryu's sake. Being court-martialled, he was going to be given his uniform for the next few days, as well as a place to stay. He'd rented out his apartment in Bangkok anyway and would have had to stay with Agent Chuek.

He zipped the gym bag closed and looked at Ryu. There was just enough time for their evening meditation and supper together with the others before they had to catch the taxi. He sank down next to Ryu and pulled Ryu close, resting his cheek on the other man's hair. Ryu's deep sigh pushed against him and Nat could feel his lover's troubled acceptance of their circumstances. "I'll miss you, Ryu," he said against Ryu's hair.

Ryu clutched Nat's thigh over his jeans. "Just keep your promise, Nat." He tilted his face upward and pressed a soft kiss to Nat's lips. Nat cupped Ryu's cheek in his palm and lingered over the kiss, his eyes closed. Never before in his life had he savoured a kiss, felt it was a passageway through which his soul and another's could find each other. With Ryu,

every kiss was like that, whether they were gulping hungrily at each other's mouths, tongues entwined, or brushing their lips together tenderly as they were doing now.

When the kiss ended, Ryu pulled back, only a couple of inches, close enough that his warm breath still whispered over Nat's lips. "Keep your promise," he whispered again.

Nat rested his forehead against Ryu's and closed his eyes again. "I will," he said and laced his fingers with Ryu's. "I will."

Even though in reality, he didn't know if it was a promise he could keep.

Chapter Four

In all the time Ryu had known Hamura-san, he'd never been to the elderly man's home. He knew it was in Yoyogi, a mostly residential neighbourhood only a kilometre from Shinjuku, the district he lived in. But now, pulling onto the quiet side street of large, bare concrete style mansions, he saw Hamura-san lived only a few streets from his parents' home, a place Ryu had barely set foot in since Taro Suzuki raped him in his bed there a little more than ten years earlier.

Ryu hadn't seen his parents since he'd come back from Thailand and he'd only spoken on the phone to his father once, to thank him for sending money to Kiku, the amount that Taro Suzuki had been extorting from him in exchange for the ills he perceived Kiku had inflicted upon him—one of those ills, having kept Ryu away from him for years.

Truthfully, he was afraid of his parents. There was the chance his mother had seen Suzuki and his goon going into Ryu's bedroom that night to rape him, or if she hadn't seen it, then she'd not protected him and left him vulnerable while his father was out of town. Ryu sighed. He wasn't proud of fearing his mother and father. Kiku said it was understandable, and even though his father had shown some opening in his horror over what Suzuki had done, Ryu still felt afraid. He'd thought many times with Nat at his side, he'd be able to face his parents. Nat had been training him and when he won more fights and felt he stood on his own feet more, he'd go to his parents. Now, with Nat back in Thailand, he felt as if he'd slid backwards to the beginning.

The black Mercedes sedan that had picked Ryu up at the White Tiger upon his return from the airport, parked in a small carport built into the ground floor of the house. Hamura-san's driver got out and opened Ryu's door, bowing as Ryu climbed out of the back seat.

Ryu thanked him and followed the uniformed driver to the lower entrance under the front stairwell. He found himself in a front entry hall, its traditional Japanese décor belied by the ultra-modern exterior. Dark polished wood floors, *soji* screens and low futons arranged around equally low tables completed the rooms he could see. Hamura-san, like Kiku, had impeccable taste, a trait which had probably helped him from his rise as an errand boy to

occupying American soldiers in the aftermath of the Second World War to a wealthy businessman in the decades which followed.

The housekeeper greeted him with a bow as he slipped off his shoes and followed her up two flights of stairs to the master bedroom. The house was dark in the evening hours, lit only by a few soft lamps here and there throughout the house. Somehow, the atmosphere intensified the ache in his chest that had been with him since Nat's phone call and sudden, harrowing departure.

A television set played softly behind the *soji* door that led to the elderly man's bedroom. The housekeeper announced their presence, at which, the TV shut off and she slid open the door.

The bedroom was large, covering most of the upper floor of the house, and was as tastefully and traditionally appointed as the downstairs. Hamura-san lay in a wide, low bed, the covers up to his chest. Ryu winced inwardly at the pale, fragile figure so small in the centre of his low king-sized bed. Hamura-san's face lit with a smile. "Ryu-kun, you came. I'm so glad." One hand came out and gestured for him to approach.

Ryu crossed over to the bed and knelt down. Reaching out, he clasped Hamura-san's thin hand between his. "Of course I came. I was so worried when I got your message."

Before answering him, Hamura-san thanked the housekeeper for seeing Ryu up and asked her to bring them tea. Then he gave Ryu his attention. "Please, my friend, don't stay down there. Come, sit next to me."

"Yes." Obediently, Ryu rose and perched on the edge of the bed, never letting go of the elderly man's hand. Hamura-san had been getting frailer in the past few months.

"I'm so happy you're here, Ryu-kun. I won't keep you long, away from your new special friend."

Ryu bowed his head. "You're not keeping me," he said softly.

Hamura-san squeezed his hand a tiny bit. He was always sensitive to Ryu's distress. "Something has happened, hasn't it? Please, you know you can tell me if it helps."

Ryu looked up, into the elderly man's face. Hamura-san had the kindest eyes he'd ever seen. "You're not feeling well. I couldn't bother you."

"Nonsense. It makes me feel better to help you, if I can."

Ryu smiled at him, remembering when Yuzo first came to the White Tiger. Kiku had fallen immediately in love with the vivacious, physically intoxicating young man, much to Ryu's distress. One night when Hamura-san had come for his massage, Ryu had broken into tears against his will, only to have the elderly man hold him until his tears were spent. "I want you to feel better, Hamura-san," he said finally.

Hamura-san's smile widened. "Then please, unburden yourself to me."

With a sigh, Ryu told him about all that had happened that day, beginning with Nat's phone call from Thailand, then his losing the sparring match and Nat's leaving, insisting Ryu stay in Tokyo and attend to his scheduled fight.

Hamura-san's smile had faded while Ryu talked and when Ryu finished, the elderly man patted his cheek. "My dear friend, I'm so sorry."

Before Ryu could continue, the housekeeper announced herself and slid open the door, bearing a tray. Ryu rose and took it from her. He brought it over to the bed and served them both.

"Thank you, Ryu-kun." Hamura-san accepted the small white porcelain cup and waited for Ryu to pick up his own cup with both hands before taking a sip.

Ryu sipped his tea after the older man did and closed his eyes as he swallowed. The tea was soothing, as was Hamura-san's company. "Kiku and Nat both told me that Nat doesn't want me to see him in prison, that he must face this alone and be done with it." He shook his head. "I don't understand. Why wouldn't he want me there with him? I'd want him to be with me."

Hamura-san looked thoughtful. "Perhaps you would, Ryu-kun. But if something like that actually happened, you might not. It's difficult to know unless you're in the situation." He sighed and took another sip of tea before speaking again. "There are such things in life that each person must face absolutely alone. I'm getting closer to facing the most mysterious one of all."

Cold prickles ran over the tops of Ryu's hands. Kiku had said a similar thing earlier this morning about death. He set his tea cup down. "Hamura-san," he said, his voice slightly choked on the feelings rising up with unexpected force, "please, don't die yet. I...would miss you too much."

Hamura-san smiled. He, too, set down his cup and picked up Ryu's hand. "I don't plan on leaving this world just yet. I would miss you too much as well, my little friend." He squeezed Ryu's hand. "I want to watch your fight."

Ryu's heart thumped. "It's scheduled to be on ESPN 3."

"Well, then, it's a good thing I have cable television."

Ryu laughed but then the humour passed. He set the tea tray aside and sat back up on the bed. "Thank you, Hamura-san," he said softly.

The elderly man smiled at him. Understanding showed in his rheumy eyes.

Ryu leant over and kissed the man's forehead, still smooth in spite of the fact he was nearly eighty. He caressed Hamura-san's thick snow-white hair for several moments.

"You are like an angel, Ryu-kun."

"Thank you."

"Now, please, get comfortable, Ryu-kun, if you wish. Stay as long as you like. You see, like I told you, helping you made me better."

Gladly, Ryu stretched out beside him and Hamura-san lifted the remote control for the television. "There is a very good historical drama beginning tonight about the great samurai, Yamamoto Kansuke," Hamura-san said, flicking the channels. He stopped on NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation. "It should start in about five minutes."

"Sounds good." Ryu rested his head on the elderly man's shoulder and sighed. All he could do now was to wait for Nat to call and tell him he'd landed safely in Bangkok.

* * * *

Nat spent the entire flight to Bangkok thinking about Ryu. Ryu's eyes, sad and hurt, yet also determined, haunted his mind even after the plane landed at Don Muang airport and he deplaned and passed through customs. It had been too dark out to see the spires of temples interspersed with tufts of green from palm fronds from the air, but Nat knew where everything was by heart.

He also knew the men of his unit, Agents Chuek, Seinalloy and Pettoh, were waiting just beyond the gate through customs, in the same spot he'd once waited for Ryu's arrival from Tokyo. Ryu had worn his hair dip-dyed, the ends shocking hot pink. The first thing Nat

had seen of Ryu was his hair. The battle Nat had waged with the man over clipping those pink ends off had landed them in bed together.

After passing through customs, Nat stopped before leaving that section of the airport. Once he delivered himself into their custody, he couldn't know when he'd have a chance to call Ryu. Quickly, he activated the SIM card that would enable his mobile phone to work in Thailand and dialled Ryu's mobile.

Ryu picked up on the third ring. "Nat," he said without a formal greeting. "You're there safely?"

"Yes." Nat's heart squeezed. The thought he wouldn't fall asleep with Ryu's slim body of wiry muscles curled up in his arms made him feel hopeless. Had he been right to keep Ryu from coming with him? Picturing Ryu there, speaking with him in a visitor's room at the military prison, Nat knew that yes, he'd made the right decision. "I just passed through customs a minute ago. I wanted to hear your voice before I...meet my agents."

"I'm relieved. I miss you so much." Ryu sounded as sad as Nat felt. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Neither can I." He decided to change the subject before the whole world saw him tear up. "Hey, how is Mr. Hamura? Are you visiting him?"

"He's a bit better. He just needed company. We were watching television together. I'm home now, though."

Nat smiled in spite of himself. He could just picture Ryu and this elderly man hanging out together, watching TV. It sounded like heaven compared to where he was going. "That's very good. I'm glad. Please send my well wishes."

"I will, Nat. I...love you." Ryu fell silent.

Nat's heart thumped. The statement comforted him. Made him feel his connection to Ryu even though they were so far apart now. He'd not said those words to anyone since Aran was alive. Aran had been the only person he'd said them to. Until now. "I love you too, Ryu."

Silence came through on the other end, broken only by Ryu's breathing. Nat sensed the other man's emotions roiling, as if they could come through the line as a palpable force. "When can I talk to you again?" he asked finally.

"I don't know." Nat looked down at the floor. People were passing around him and he knew he needed to go through the gate and meet his agents before they suspected he wouldn't show. "I'll call you at every chance I get. I promise."

"Okay, Nat. I'll wait for your calls."

"Don't neglect your training, Ryu. You have a fight in three days. I'm going to make sure I can watch it."

He heard Ryu snuffle on the other end. "Okay. That's my promise, Nat. I'll work hard."

"Good." He started walking towards the gate. The closer he drew, he saw the three agents standing at the opening, looking in. Their gazes met his and they signalled to him. "I have to go now," he said. His heart pounded and his hand holding the phone began to sweat. He would have stayed on the phone all night long, just listening to Ryu brush his teeth and get into bed and fall asleep.

"Nat, promise me one more thing."

"Anything."

"Don't forget to meditate."

Nat smiled again, feeling the tension in his facial muscles. "I promise."

"Good night, Nat."

The line clicked off. Heart aching, Nat closed his phone and shoved it into his jeans pocket just as he reached the gate.

Agent Chuek stood in front of the other two and bowed first, hands steepled in front of him before shaking his hand. Agents Seinalloy and Petttoh did the same. Then Chuek frowned. He pulled something from his pocket. Something shiny.

Shit. Handcuffs. Chuek looked mournful. "I'm sorry, Nat...Agent Phoenix, sir, but I have to put these on you."

"I understand." He surrendered his gym bag to Agent Petttoh and held out his hands, aware of passersby turning their heads to see what was happening. Chuek manoeuvred Nat's hands behind his back and together, and Nat felt the cold metal closing around each wrist, followed by the decisive click of the manacles that made him a prisoner.

Quietly, holding onto his dignity as best he could, he let the men he'd commanded up until now lead him out of the airport, into the car that would take him to prison.

Chapter Five

Nat stared at himself in the mirror of the lavatory. Behind him, Agent Chuek's reflection showed the man stood a few feet away, giving him space to shave and comb his hair. Some daylight came through the high set window, interrupted by the bars. He sighed as steam rose from the tap. The water was hot enough to shave and he depressed the button on the can from his shaving kit and began to lather his cheeks.

The night without Ryu left him feeling emptier than the situation already had to begin with. The cot in his cell would have been too narrow for the both of them, but it hadn't stopped the almost physical ache in his arms to hold Ryu as he fell asleep. From the first moment he'd held Ryu, comforting him during a flashback caused by his and Tongmee's attempt to hold Ryu down and clip his pink hair, he'd discovered how perfectly Ryu fit in his arms, as if he'd always belonged in Nat's embrace. In that early moment, Nat had known deep inside himself that Ryu was the one.

Nat wet his safety razor and slid it across his left cheek. Even this act left him bereft. Ryu loved to sit nearby on the closed toilet seat each morning and watch him shave. Sometimes, Nat actually felt playful and scooped some shaving cream off his jaw and dabbed it onto Ryu's nose or chin just to hear Ryu laugh. Damn, in four short months, his life and Ryu's had become so interwoven, there wasn't anything—eating breakfast, meditating, lying in bed—that didn't make him think of his lover or long for him.

Nat finished shaving, rinsed and patted his face dry. He combed his hair and placed his black beret on, completing his uniform of black button-down shirt with the pocket tab of Naresuan 261's lightning bolt insignia, black baggy pants and boots. He squared his shoulders and turned to Chuek. "I'm ready."

Chuek stood at attention, similarly dressed. He saluted Nat and escorted him out of the lavatory and through a set of corridors to the hall where the tribunal awaited him. Thankfully, they'd left off with the handcuffs while Nat was contained in the building. Not that it mattered. As long as Ryu wasn't here to see him like this, he didn't care as much whether they cuffed him or not.

The tribunal was already assembled when Nat was led to his seat facing them. Nat recognised all the men who'd been present at Tongmee's trial, including the head commander of all forty Naresuan 261 units, the commander of the Thai Border Patrol Police of which Naresuan 261 was a division, as well as the company commander of the BPP's Aerial Reinforcement Unit, directly supervising Naresuan.

Nat's gut tightened painfully. These men were not going to be lenient on a man charged with his country's internal security, especially not when that man had been careless with his duties out of lust for another man.

"Agent Nathaniel Phoenix, please stand." The speaker was Sarit Wattana, commander of the BPP. "You are here under allegations of gross dereliction of duty and sexual misconduct. Do you understand the charges being investigated here against you, brought on by the late Agent Pracha Tongmee, who served under your command?"

"Yes, sir. I do." Nat remained calm even as the words 'sexual misconduct' stabbed him like a knife plunged into his back, the other reason he'd not wanted Ryu here. His lover had been subjected to enough humiliation by men with power over him. Nat refused to allow it here, even if it would help his case.

"Please be seated. The interrogation will begin now."

The man on the end rose. His uniform distinguished him as a lieutenant in the Royal Thai Police, the attorney who would be asking the questions for the tribunal. Tall and thin, shoulders squared, the man pierced him with a look of deep concentration. "Agent Phoenix, I am Kowit Promnog of the Royal Thai police. I will be conducting this interrogation."

Nat nodded his acknowledgement.

"Agent Phoenix, it was brought to our attention by Agent Tongmee that the night he abducted the subject your unit was assigned to protect, he claims the door to the room in which you were staying was unlocked. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Can you please explain to the tribunal the reason as to why you did not make sure the door to your room was locked?"

Nat cleared his throat. Quickly, he scanned the solemn faces lined up before him. "It was carelessness on my part," he said, making eye contact with his superiors.

"And what was this carelessness due to, Agent Phoenix?"

"I was...thinking only about being...intimate with—"

"With Ryu Miyazaki, the subject. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Thank Buddha Ryu wasn't here for that cold humiliation. Sexual misconduct or not, what he and Ryu had, even in that moment, had been real. Love in its beginning passionate stage. Ryu's sweet face rose in his mind, along with a determination that he would do all he could not to prolong discussion about Ryu.

"And by intimate, you mean you were having sexual relations with Ryu Miyazaki?"

"Yes."

Promnog paced in front of him. "During Agent Tongmee's trial, you testified to Agent Tongmee's compromised mental state, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"But in the course of those proceedings, you failed to mention that you'd left the door unlocked. In this court, omission of facts is perjury. Are you aware that you committed perjury?"

"I am, but at the time, I was focused on the fact that an agent in my charge took advantage of his position to endanger Ryu and deliver him into the hands of the yakuza member we were protecting him from."

"I see." Promnog clasped his hands behind his back and continued to pace. "And yet, you too, endangered Ryu Miyazaki, didn't you?"

Nat nodded. "Yes, I did. I make no excuses for my carelessness."

Promnog paced once more back and forth and halted in front of him. "Agent Phoenix, did you at any time order Agent Tongmee not to disclose your sexual relationship with Ryu Miyazaki or the fact that you left your door unlocked?"

"I did not," Nat said, keeping his tone controlled. Each mention of Ryu in this context made his blood feel hot in his veins. "I never said a word to Agent Tongmee on either of these matters. Aside from my one offer to have him reassigned, we discussed only our work at hand." Last night, lying on the cot in his cell, Nat had reflected a long time on the fact that Tongmee never mentioned neither Nat nor Ryu to the tribunal, or the unlocked door, as if he'd been trying to maintain some sort of loyalty in the midst of his crisis. His later admission must have been something he'd decided to do when he'd made the decision to take his own life.

"Thank you, Agent Phoenix. You may step down. I have no more questions for you at this time."

Nat rose from the chair and took his seat. In the hour that followed, he watched and listened to his other three agents each take the stand and answer Promnog's battery of questions about their leader's conduct. Had they known about their unit leader's sexual relationship with Ryu Miyazaki? No, they had not, even though Chuek had seen Nat and Ryu dancing close together at a party the night Tongmee had abducted Ryu. Nat's stomach tightened when Chuek took the stand.

"Agent Chuek, you accompanied Agent Phoenix and Ryu Miyazaki to a party the night of the abduction, is that correct?"

"Yes."

Nat watched the back of Agent Chuek's head. He wondered what the expression on the agent's face was.

"Whose party was this?"

"Deena Temoyavet, a childhood friend of Agent Phoenix."

"And you saw Agent Phoenix together with Ryu Miyazaki?"

"Yes. They were dancing. It's what one does at a party."

Nat felt a trickle of relief. Agent Chuek would be as loyal as possible without perjuring himself.

"When you say dancing, can you describe what you saw?"

Nat squelched the sudden need to massage the iron tension out of the back of his neck. He and Ryu had been dancing so close they'd probably appeared to be glued together, front to front. Nat remembered leaning in and brushing the tip of his tongue on the side of Ryu's neck.

"With all due respect to the court, I don't understand how this question is relevant?"

Promnog turned to the tribunal. "I'm trying to establish the level of misconduct committed by Agent Phoenix," he said. "National security is at stake here. A man in his position must not compromise that in any way shape or form."

"We will allow the question," Wattana said. "Agent Chuek, please answer the question."

Chuek cleared his throat. "It was dark. There were a lot of people and not much room to move around. I couldn't see them that clearly but they were dancing together, facing each other."

"Touching? Arms around each other?"

Chuek looked down.

Nat pulled in a breath. He was getting another agent into trouble.

"Yes. But that doesn't prove they were having a sexual —"

"That will be all, Agent Chuek. Thank you. Please step down."

Nat watched his fellow agent stand up and turn. Chuek's eyes showed distress even though he avoided Nat's gaze. Nat swallowed down another surge of anger. He'd thought this was an inquest into Tongmee's suicide, but it was turning out to be a criminal trial.

More time dragged on with the questioning of Nat's other agents who were asked to recount practically every moment of that assignment, right up until the day they went to Tongmee's home to capture him when he'd fled Phuket back to Bangkok after delivering Ryu into the hands of Taro Suzuki. Finally, with the sun's descent making shadows on the wall of the tribunal room, Wattana announced the finish.

"This concludes the proceedings," Wattana said. "We will reconvene in two days' time with our decision. In the meantime, Agent Phoenix will remain in custody of the Thai Border Police Patrol here in the General Staffing facilities." He rapped a gavel and the tribunal stood and filed out of the room.

Nat rose from his seat.

"I'm sorry, Agent Phoenix...Nat." Chuek stood in front of him, lines creasing his brow.

"You don't need to apologise for anything."

Chuek hesitated then gestured for Nat to step away from the chair and begin his return to his cell.

"When can I call Tokyo?" he asked when they were moving along the corridor.

"After six in the evening," Chuek said. "I'm not sure why they chose that time, but that's when you're permitted to make phone calls."

"All right." Judging by the slant of the sun through the high windows lining the corridor, Nat guess it was mid-afternoon. He should have been starving after all these hours

with nothing but a sip of water from a glass on the table in the hearing room, but he couldn't even stomach the thought of food.

Back in Nat's cell, Chuek held the door open for him. "If you need anything at all, I'll be here. I asked to be assigned to you, to make sure you're all right and get anything you might need."

Nat sat heavily down on his cot, elbows on his knees. Every cell in his body felt wrung out, as did his soul. "Aside from making my phone calls, there's only one thing I need."

"What's that?"

"In two more days, I need to have a television set with ESPN 3. Ryu has a fight."

A tiny smile spread on Chuek's face, but didn't reach his eyes. He nodded. "I'll make sure there's one available. Anything else?"

Nat shook his head. "No, thanks."

"All right. I'll let you rest." Again however, he hesitated, as if there were something he wanted to say but was afraid to.

"Agent Chuek, did you need to tell me something?"

Chuek sighed. "I just feel terrible about all this."

"So do I."

"I don't want to pry. It's none of my business."

"You mean about Ryu?"

Chuek nodded. "I...have questions about...the situation."

"You can ask anything you want."

Chuek closed the cell door and leant against it. "Agent Phoenix, I've known you for years now and I never expected you just to leave. I mean, your career and everything. He must be...special if you've risked so much. Is that what it is?"

Energy rippled down Nat's back. *Special*. That word didn't even begin to describe Ryu. He nodded. "Yes. He's very important to me." *So important I want to marry him*. Nat thought of the ring. He'd left it tucked in the drawer between a couple of shirts he hadn't brought with him. He'd been afraid to bring it to Bangkok, knowing that once he got here, his belongings would be confiscated. Leaving it there also gave him hope that he'd be back to slip it onto Ryu's finger.

Now he wasn't so sure.

Chuek nodded. "Thank you for answering."

"No problem."

"I'll come to check on you in a little while," Chuek said and opened the door.

"Thank you."

Chuek looked at him a moment longer, his eyes mournful, then closed it behind them.

The sound of the key bolting the door echoed through Nat's very soul with an eerie finality.

What if he never went back to Tokyo?

Leaning against the wall, Nat closed his eyes. Ryu's face rose again in his mind, the way it had earlier in the lavatory. No way could he subject Ryu to a life of partnership with a man in prison, a man shamed and guilty of the charges named in the tribunal today. Ryu was a prince, a beautiful being who deserved nothing less than worship.

That thought led to others. What if he could never come back and Ryu decided he would give his heart back to Kiku after all? Kiku was the man who'd originally rescued Ryu from Taro Suzuki, who'd brought Ryu to live with him so he'd be safe and had become Ryu's first lover to help him heal from the trauma. Though Ryu and Kiku hadn't been lovers for years and Kiku had a steady partner, Ryu had remained loyal to him, body and soul. Even four months ago in Thailand, Ryu had still carried a torch for the other man. Nat remembered briefly the night he'd left Ryu in Deena's bungalow so he could go after Tongmee. Kiku had flown down from Tokyo to help Ryu and Nat had returned to find Ryu curled up in the man's embrace.

In spite of the passion he and Ryu shared, that image had stayed in Nat's mind. Ryu had come to him starved for affection and sex—hard to believe considering he lived in this place, surrounded by hot men. But it was true. Knowing all that, was Ryu simply substituting him for Kiku? And if so, Nat could never expect Ryu to stay faithful to a prisoner, a man who'd shamed himself and let down his country.

Nat raked one hand roughly through his hair. Perhaps it was this place, the iron bars, the cold metal, the white walls that made his mind go in directions it shouldn't. He'd barely been inside this building a whole twenty-four hours and yet he already felt the world shrinking down to a place occupied only by his thoughts and feelings, leaving him unable to distinguish which were real and which were the fancy of his inner demons.

No surprise to him now how Tongmee, already unstable, could have gone over the edge in here, spilled all the facts he'd previously kept quiet out of a shred of loyalty to Nat and to his unit, and then used his own shirt to hang himself.

Slipping off his shoes, Nat lay on his back, hands clasped behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling. If he could just hold on for three days...

* * * *

Ryu stayed under the hot shower spray only a few minutes. He usually lingered much longer but he didn't want to risk missing Nat's call. Sometimes, he showered at the gym before coming back, but today, he'd just wanted to get back to the White Tiger, to escape to his room where he and Nat spent so much time together these past four months. He rinsed the soap off his body and shut off the spray. Opening the glass door, he glanced at the phone on the bathroom counter for the thousandth time, but it lay silent.

"*Shimatta*," he muttered and yanked a fluffy white towel off the bar. Quickly, he rubbed himself dry, wrapped the towel around his hips and picked up his phone, staring at it while he walked back into the bedroom.

Where was Nat now? He'd probably been in trial most of the day but it was mid-afternoon there and it would be awful for him to be in court all these hours. Nat wasn't answering his cell phone and Kiku reminded him that morning at breakfast that Nat's belongings would have been confiscated when he went into custody.

Ryu couldn't help the stab of guilt that nearly sent him leaning against the wall for support. He was partially responsible for what had happened, wasn't he? Even though Nat and Kiku both insisted he'd done nothing wrong, that Tongmee was a sick man who would have made Ryu target of his hatred no matter whether Nat was having sex with him or not. But that wasn't the point. Nat had forgotten to lock the door because he was so intoxicated by the sex. They both were. Which normally wouldn't have been a problem, but Nat had been in charge of a mission to protect him and had been careless. At least that's how Nat felt about it. Ryu didn't care. Nat was a good man no matter what. People were human. They made mistakes. At least it had worked out. Until now.

Shoulders sagging, Ryu sighed and sank down onto the bed, the phone on the covers beside him. Now was the time of day he and Nat both showered then lay down together for a little while before meditation and supper. The days had been sweet these past four months, with their schedule of training in the mornings until lunch when they'd come back here to shower, loll around on the bed for a while then get ready for the evening schedule. Nat's absence screamed at him, the way it had last night. Nat's empty side of the bed had made Ryu feel as if the world were again a cold, thankless place. For years, he'd slept in this room alone while pining away for Kiku next door and watching all the men around him find their soul mates while he lived in fear of Taro Suzuki. Then there was Nat and that seemingly endless period of his life had suddenly, gloriously ended.

What if it began again? It would be even worse now, after having been with Nat. The only good thing to happen in the last couple of days was that Hamura-san seemed to be past his health crisis.

Ryu's chest ached as if an invisible fist squeezed his heart. He rose from the bed and went to the drawer in the wall closet where Nat kept his clothes. Nat didn't have much but Ryu was sure he'd left a couple of things in the drawer when he packed the day before.

He pulled open the drawer and breathed relief. Nat *had* left a couple of things there, like a silent promise which backed up his verbal promise to return. Ryu reached in and lifted a t-shirt out. A navy cotton shirt Nat often wore when he coached Ryu at the gym. He held the shirt up to his face and breathed. No scent of Nat's skin on it as the shirt had been laundered. Ryu inhaled it anyway and rubbed the soft material against his lips. Something caught his eye as he did. Something in the drawer. A small box that had been between the t-shirts.

Nande? Reaching in, he retrieved the box. It was one of those maroon velvet boxes one got from a...jeweller? Why would Nat have a piece of jewellery? He was one of the most unmaterialistic people Ryu had ever met. Ryu could just imagine Nat's apartment back in Bangkok, probably empty except for a bed. No pictures or anything on the walls. Nat didn't seem to care about material objects.

Ryu's heartbeat sped up. He was being nosey. If Nat had wanted him to see this box, he would have already shown it to him. But Nat wasn't here and maybe never would be again, depending on the results of this damn trial.

Screw it. He had to see what was in that box. He lifted the lid on its tiny hinges. And pulled in a breath.

Nestled in the satiny folds was a ring. A man's ring by the look of it, gold with a small diamond set into the band. Ryu caught his breath. Rising quickly, he slid his door open and went to Kiku's room. Voices murmured behind the *soji* door. A man laughed. Yuzo, Kiku's lover. The two of them took time each afternoon together the way Ryu and Nat did. He hated to bother them, but this was damned important.

"Kiku?"

The voices went silent. After a moment, the door slid open and Kiku stood there, his tattooed skin damp from a shower, a towel around his hips, like Ryu. Behind him, Yuzo stood by the bed, his slim body also naked except for a towel around the hips. He waved at Ryu.

"Are you all right, Ryu-chan?" Kiku frowned.

"I'm sorry to bother you."

"It's okay."

"I found this in Nat's drawer." He held up the box with the ring. "I didn't mean to be prying. I was...smelling his shirt. This was in the drawer." He opened the box and showed it to Kiku.

Recognition lit Kiku's dark eyes and he nodded. "Yes, Nat told me about this ring. He bought it for you. Last month."

"Last month? Why didn't he tell me?"

Kiku sighed. A smile flashed across his lips. "He's been waiting for the right time to..." Kiku paused. "I hate telling on him at a time like this."

"What do you mean? The right time to—" Understanding hit him. He stared at the ring then up at Kiku. "You mean he wanted to—"

"Propose to you."

"Propose? Marry?" Yuzo's voice cut in. In the next second, he was right behind Kiku, his pop-star beautiful face shining. "Oh, that's so romantic."

"Yuzo-chan, hush." Kiku's eyes darkened. "Be considerate."

Shame clouded Yuzo's eyes and he looked down. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Ryu closed the box and held it to his chest. His other hand braced his sagging weight on the door frame. "I can't believe it." He shook his head, once then again. "I can't believe it. It'll never happen now."

Kiku's hand came out and squeezed his shoulder. "You know that expression, Ryu-chan. Never say never."

Ryu looked down. "You don't know Thai culture." His mother was Thai and he spoke the language, and even though he'd not spent any real time in Thailand, just growing up with his mother and knowing her relatives peripherally, he knew Thai people were taken heavily to task for what they did wrong, maybe even overly so. Nat did, in fact, make a terrible mistake on his shift and wouldn't get away with it for sure. "The best case scenario is he'll do time in prison." Ryu's heart lurched. "Because of me."

"*Not* because of you," Yuzo said softly. Guilt clouded his eyes. He blamed himself for Ryu's having had to hide in Thailand from Suzuki in the first place. All because Yuzo had been Suzuki's toy and had come here to escape Suzuki's sadistic ways. It was like a crazy chain that had no real beginning and no end. Ridiculous to blame anyone. When it came to madmen like Suzuki and Tongmee, there was no blame, just their madness.

Ryu looked at him and nodded. "Thank you, Yuzo-chan."

Yuzo smiled at him, a shy smile meant to comfort.

"Yuzo's right. It's not because of you. Put that to rest. And put the ring back in the drawer. Don't tell Nat you found it." Kiku's eyes darkened again with the look he got when he meant to impart discipline. "Just let it give you a reason to win your fight."

Ryu looked up at him. This was one of those moments he saw the passion in Kiku that made him the charismatic man he'd always been, both as a yakuza and as a teacher, lover and friend. He squeezed the tiny velvet box in his hand. "Yes, Kiku. I will."

Kiku smoothed back Ryu's hair, a gesture that always made Ryu feel the other man's affection for him. Nat's presence in his life had gone the longest way towards softening the romantic rejection Ryu had suffered from Kiku. "Now, Ryu-chan, go back and put the ring where you found it."

He nodded. "All right." Kiku's door slid shut in his wake. Back in his room, he knelt at the drawer and carefully set the little velvet box back on the shirt, covering it with the other shirt. For what felt like a long time, he sat there and stared into the drawer. "Please come

back, Nat," he whispered. He felt little, like a boy lost, not a man nearly twenty-eight years old about to fight in front of hundreds of people.

After returning from Thailand four months ago, he'd been about to drop out of the sport completely. His former coach had wanted to take him back but Ryu'd had enough, especially after what had happened with Suzuki. He'd killed the man with his bare hands, using that pressure point Kiku had shown him nearly eleven years ago after Suzuki had raped him in his bed. It had been so ironic, Ryu under the protection of an elite unit of the Royal Thai Police, one agent of which had turned him over to Suzuki, only to be in Suzuki's bed, his legs around Suzuki's hips, in the man's sadistic clutches where he ended Suzuki's life with the mere press of his fingertips in the right spots. A near lifetime of fear at Suzuki's hands, ended in seconds. Ryu hadn't been prepared for the depression that followed.

But when Nat showed up out of the blue on the sidewalk in front of the White Tiger, however, offering to be his partner, his coach, whatever he wanted, Ryu had felt a new beginning offered to him. He was getting his dream guy. That would have been enough. He hadn't even cared about boxing, but had only wanted to please Nat, to be the champion Nat could make of him. Only that could honour the sacrifice Nat was making of an exalted career in the Thai Royal Police.

For four glorious months, Ryu had one of the sexiest men in the world for a lover *and* a boxing coach all at once. The dream of a thousand lifetimes.

And now this.

Ryu forced himself to close the drawer, get up, dress and meditate so he could have supper with the others, help clean up the kitchen and be ready for Nat's call.

If and when it came.

Finally, a few minutes after eight, Ryu's phone rang. The strange number on the ID window showed the call was coming in from an international source. He pressed the button. "Nat, is that you?"

"Yes. Hi, Ryu."

Ryu's heart thumped. He waved to the Naoto and Koji who were looking at him hopefully and headed out of the kitchen to find a quieter space to talk. "Hi. How are you, Nat? What's going on?"

"I'm all right, Ryu." Nat's voice sounded eerily calm, as if he were feeling crazy and trying not to let it show. "My trial was today."

"And?" Ryu pressed the phone hard to his ear.

"The verdict isn't for another two days. The day of your fight, actually."

Ryu exhaled and leaned against the wall for support. "You mean you have to sit around and wait for a decision? That's bullshit!"

"I know, but that's the way it is. Listen, I can't stay on more than a few minutes. That's all I'm allowed."

"Okay."

"Please tell me about you. How'd your training go today?"

"Fine. I feel good. I feel...ready." Ryu thought of the ring in the drawer. He forced himself not to mention it.

"You are ready." A moment of silence passed before Nat spoke again. "How is Mr. Hamura?"

"He's feeling better. Hopefully, he'll be able to come in..." Ryu's throat thickened and he couldn't finish. Hamura-san might be able to come here to see Ryu but Nat probably wouldn't.

"That's very good."

A voice murmured to Nat in the background.

"I have to go, Ryu."

"Wait! Not so fast!" Ryu stood away from the wall, clutching the phone in both hands by his ear. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, Agent Chuek is watching out for me. He offered to play checkers with me. And Deena is going to bring my parents down from Phuket for a visit. Hopefully, that will make the time go faster."

Ryu looked down at his feet in their slippers. Damn. Everyone else got to see Nat except for him. Why didn't Nat mind them seeing him in prison? Ryu forced himself to remember what Kiku had said to him on that subject. It was the only thing that stopped him from throwing some things into a bag and jumping on a plane. Well, that and the fact that Nat would be disappointed and humiliated yet again if his student forfeited a fight this way.

"Oh, Deena." Ryu liked Nat's childhood friend who'd helped nurse him back to health after the crisis with Suzuki made him ill. "Please send her my love."

"I will, Ryu. I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay."

Nat clicked off before Ryu could say another word. He got an image of a guard standing over Nat, urging him off the phone. It was disgusting. If they were this tough about Nat's making a stupid phone call, what were they going to do about his mistakes on the job?

An eerie shiver passed down Ryu's spine. He leaned against the wall, preferring a few moments by himself before going in to face the others' questions.

Finally, he stood up and walked slowly back into the kitchen. It did no good to stand alone in the hallway, ruminating. If he'd learned one thing in his life, it was that people had no control over big events, only control over how they responded to them. He had one response. He was going to do his best to honour Nat, the man who loved him. The man who'd made him feel like the hottest, sexiest guy ever. The man who held him each night and fell asleep with him in his strong arms. The man who wanted to marry him. Who loved him that much he wanted every day to be a day they cherished each other.

Which Ryu would do. Even if he never saw Nat again.

Chapter Six

Nat was already in the courtroom when the tribunal filed in and took their seats facing him. He stood, shoulders squared, in his Naresuan 261 uniform for perhaps the last time, waiting for their verdict. Chuek and his other agents stood behind him in the first row of chairs of the viewing area. Chuek especially had turned out to be a most loyal friend, staying by him as much as possible the two remaining days, playing cards, keeping him company, concerned for his state of mind. The only times Chuek hadn't been there was when Deena had come down from Phuket and brought his parents with him for a visit.

The worst part had been the nights without Ryu. The two short conversations they'd had during his allotted phone calls to Tokyo were better than not having any contact with Ryu at all, but a poor substitute for holding him in his arms, breathing in the clean, sandalwood fragrance of the man's skin and hair, feeling Ryu's wiry physique moulded to his larger one, and the taste of Ryu's lips when they kissed good night. Never had Nat slept more deeply and restfully in his life than he had with Ryu those four months. His nightmares about Aran's death had ceased and his soul had known some peace for the first time in over twenty years.

These last few nights he'd slipped back into another lifetime. Fitful rest punctuated by dreams of Ryu slipping away from him, over a cliff or into a stormy ocean, had taken up the whole night. He'd paced, meditated, prayed and lay silently staring up into the darkness of his cell. Nothing had worked.

He resisted the urge to rub his stiff neck again as he was ordered to remain standing.

Wattana rapped the gavel and set it down. "Agent Nathaniel Phoenix," he said, "do you have anything to say in your defence to this tribunal before sentence is pronounced?"

Nat bowed his head. "No, sir, I do not."

"Very well. Remain standing while the decision of this tribunal is read." Wattana rose and picked up a piece of paper which he proceeded to read from. "Agent Phoenix, we, the tribunal, have taken into account your service to Naresuan 261, the Border Police Patrol and Royal Thai Police. Until these incidents, you have served with a clean record. Prior to that

you were a professional boxer and represented your country in that arena, serving as a fine representative of the Thai land and its people. Therefore you are to be given leniency."

Nat's stomach tightened. He took a deep breath and stood, outwardly placid.

"Upon deliberation, the tribunal has decided on thirty days' imprisonment followed by an immediate transfer to the Tourist Police Division. Do you humbly accept the lenient punishment given to you?"

Nat clenched his jaw painfully. *The Tourist Police Division*. This wasn't merely a punishment. It was a deep insult. The Tourist Police officers had no police authority whatsoever. Their main duties were writing out insurance claims for travellers to Thailand who had personal items stolen during their vacations. Nat's own indignation shocked him. Until this moment, he'd felt completely at fault, ready to accept whatever punishment had been given to him. He hadn't considered the possibility that his pride as well as his name would be trampled on like a herd of angry elephants.

He stared into Wattana's face and squared his shoulders. Like a man about to jump off the side of a cliff or take the bullet of a firing squad, he spoke. "No, sir. I do not humbly accept."

Wattana's face darkened. "What? What is this insolence?"

Nat bowed his head. His heart pumped madly. He understood the error he was making. Yet he couldn't stop. Wouldn't stop. The only thing he had left was his self-respect and hopefully, Ryu's respect. He would never allow himself the indignity of looking in the mirror and seeing himself wearing the uniform of the Tourist Police and he sure as *hell* would never let Ryu see him wearing such a thing. Not after having been one of Ryu's role models and objects of adoration most of Ryu's adult life. Would Ryu put a photo of him in that scrapbook of his in such a getup? Perhaps a snapshot of Nat writing out a stolen camera report for some American tourist's insurance policy? Or mediating for a drunken tourist who'd gotten himself into trouble at a bar? A man trained in counter-terrorism, anti-sniper training who'd aided in defusing a Burmese student take-over of the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok?

Never.

"I apologise for my insolence, sir. But you asked me if I humbly accept your decision and I do not."

Voices erupted in the background and Wattana rapped his gavel. "Silence. The question was not a yes or no. It was procedure, Officer Phoenix."

Nat winced inwardly at the demotion in his title. "I understood that, sir. But if you would just allow me one moment."

"You had your chance to speak in your defence."

"Please, Commander Wattana."

Nat turned sharply at the voice behind him.

Agent Chuek stood there, stance rigid. He saluted his superior. "Please, if you would allow *me* one minute."

Wattana rapped the gavel several more times. "I demand order."

Chuek saluted again and stood respectfully quiet.

"All right, Agent Chuek, you have one minute."

Chuek came forward and stood beside Nat. "Sir, what you said about Agent Phoenix having represented his country as a sportsman was true. He's also defended his country against political disturbances as well as fulfilled his role in the protection of our royal family."

"Your point, Agent Chuek?"

"If you demote him to the Tourist Police as a punishment, you will be wasting a valuable resource of our country. I was on that mission with Agent Tongmee and I feel strongly that even if Agent Phoenix had locked the door that night, Tongmee would no doubt have procured a key to unlock it. He'd premeditated the entire abduction." Chuek's story poured out, the one the lawyer had not given Chuek time to voice during the trial.

"What are you suggesting, Agent Chuek, that we let Officer Phoenix go unpunished?"

"No. Of course not. I just feel that he shouldn't be demoted this way."

"Let me resign." Nat stepped forward. "Unreservedly, forfeiting all rights and privileges of my former post including my pension. You can even dismiss me altogether."

Next to him, he heard Chuek gasp. "Agent Phoenix, what are you —"

Nat held up his hand and looked at his friend. "It's all right, Chuek. This is what I want."

Chuek stared at him, his eyes filling. His jaw worked, showing how difficult it was to obey such a request.

"We had considered that option, truthfully," Wattana said. "And had dismissed it as far too harsh for a man who has, indeed, served his country well for the majority of his adult life. However, if you wish for this penalty, I will grant it and time served. Step back, Agent Chuek."

Chuek obeyed, though his emotions roiled in the air around him.

"Agent Nathaniel Phoenix, you are hereby dismissed from the Royal Thai Police, the Border Police Patrol and counter-terrorism Unit Naresuan 261. From hereon in you forfeit all benefits of employment with said organisation, including accrued pension up until this point. Do you humbly accept this punishment being given to you?"

Nat bowed his head again. "Yes. I humbly accept."

"From this moment on, you are a civilian." Wattana rapped the gavel, set it down and the tribunal rose and filed out of the courtroom.

Nat exhaled and sank into his chair. He was free to go back. He'd burned his bridge here in Thailand, but he was free. Free to be with Ryu. Free to train him. For that was his option now. Train Ryu or any other students who might want him for their coach. Ryu was a talented fighter but he wasn't hungry for it, not the way Nat himself had once been. That's what it took to become a world champion. Ryu would rather lie on his back with his legs wrapped around Nat's waist than become a world champion boxer.

"Nat, are you all right?" Chuek stood before him, Seinalloy and Pettoh on either side, all concerned.

He looked up at them. His vision had blurred slightly from the rush he was feeling right now, but he was more than all right. He was...planning to become a married man.

But first he had a fight to get to on time.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"Can we do anything for you?"

Nat nodded. "Yes. Get me to the airport immediately."

Chuek nodded. His eyes showed he understood what Nat had done. "Come on. Let's go."

* * * *

"Where the hell is Nat?" Ryu paced the locker room, his phone in his hand. Dressed in his boxing shorts, shoes and robe, he would need to surrender the phone any second to allow Kumo-sensei to wrap his hands.

"I'm sure he'll call you." Kiku stood nearby, his hand held out to take the phone from Ryu. "He knows your fight begins at eight and that you need to be concentrating." He stepped forward and stayed Ryu with a firm hand on his shoulder. "Give me that now, please." Without waiting, he plucked the phone from Ryu's hand. "Now, go sit." He guided Ryu to the bench in the centre aisle between rows of lockers and gently but firmly pushed him down.

Ryu held his hands up and Kumo-sensei came forward with the wraps and began working. Ryu sighed. "I just wanted to hear his voice before I went out there."

Kiku sat behind him and kept a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I know, Ryu-chan. He told he was going to watch you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then, he's probably sitting in front of a television right now, waiting to see you come out."

"I've already come out, haven't I?" It was a lame joke but pulled a chuckle from Kiku anyway.

"Yes, you have."

"Remember, Ryu-kun," Kumo-sensei said, "Jae-Sun has a mean left hook. You must stay on the offensive and keep in close in order to minimise his opportunities to use it. Remember the drills we did?"

Ryu surrendered to the sensation of the wraps closing around his hands and let his mind sink into fight mode. It's what Nat would want of him. "Yes, I remember." An hour and a half straight each day with Nat for weeks, then with Kumo-sensei these past couple of days of being jabbed at with a left hook and working every angle to avoid it and move in on the opponent.

When the wraps were done, Kumo-sensei slid and secured his gloves. Ryu's heart lurched. His phone hadn't rung. The crowd filled the stadium seats and the television cameras were all stationed. He could hear the announcer's voice on the loudspeaker through the walls.

It was time.

* * * *

Nat clutched his gym bag until his knuckles were white. Neon lights splashed multi-coloured lights into the backseat of the cab. Had the cabbie been Thai and not Japanese, Nat could have asked him what the hell had happened to make traffic stay at a standstill for nearly two hours and when did he think it might clear up? As it was, his Japanese was still nearly nonexistent and he was busy figuring out instead how to communicate the absolute necessity to turn on the radio to BBQR, the sports talk station which Nat knew the fight publicist had arranged to broadcast the fight.

He glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes after eight. Shit! The fight had probably started and Buddha only knew when he would get there. His plane had landed in enough time for him to have reached the stadium while Ryu was warming up. Now, he'd be lucky if he saw one minute of it live. Leaning forward, he pointed to the radio. "*Nanitozo*," he said, using one of the only words he knew, "BBQR." He'd learned how to say it properly just listening to the publicist and to Ryu repeating it here and there in the last couple of weeks."

"*Hai, hai*," the cabbie said and flicked on the radio.

Nat watched, his heart pounding while the cabbie went from one station to the next. He hit it just as Nat heard Ryu's name followed by cheers from the crowd.

"Ryu!" he said out loud, picturing his lover in his red, gold and white silk shorts with a white tiger emblem on them, walking briskly up to the ring in his matching silk robe, his hands hidden in their red gloves. Ryu cut quite the image with his hair spiked up and the swirls of colours and designs covering his torso. "Ryu," he said to the cabbie and patted his chest, "*Watashi, sensei*." 'I'm his teacher,' he tried to say, knowing he was butchering the Japanese language, yet unable to keep his bursting emotion in check.

"*Anatta?*" The cabbie glanced at him, eyebrows raised. *You?*

"*Hai, hai*. Nat Phoenix."

"Oh! Nat Phoenix!" Recognition lit his voice and he bowed as much as one could bow while keeping his eyes on the road.

Traffic moved a bit and the cabbie turned back to the crowded street, leaving Nat to listen to the fight.

Round one had started. Nat didn't understand anything the announcers said except for Ryu's name peppered here and there. He couldn't ask the cabbie for a translation in Thai or English so he just tried to surmise what was happening by the cheers of the crowd. Nat could picture Ryu facing Jae-Sun Joh, a Korean fighter who mostly matched Ryu in height and build but who had a left hook that made one think his left arm was bionic rather than flesh and blood.

The crowd was going wild and the announcer sounded quite excited, leading Nat to believe that Ryu was in the lead. "Stay close, Ryu," he muttered. "Upper cuts. Upper cuts." Those were Ryu's speciality. If he could just get in close to any opponent, especially ones with long reaches, Ryu could usually daze them with a series of jabs that gave him the edge. Unfortunately, if Ryu didn't get in close fast enough, he often lost and badly, getting the crap punched out of his face.

From what Nat could understand, Ryu gave Jae-Sun a hard run for over an hour. The bell clanged three times and the winner was announced. Ryu! By only two points, but a victory nonetheless.

The cabbie smiled at him and carried on in what sounded like a string of congratulatory phrases, none of which Nat recognised except for the jubilant sound.

He thanked the man for his well wishes as best he could and sagged back against the seat, smiling yet miserable he'd missed seeing the match. He could just imagine Ryu's face, nose bleeding, lip cut and probably a nice big mouse to top it off. Finally, when Ryu was no doubt back in the locker room on an exam table getting his face tended to, the cab let Nat off in front of Ariake Coliseum. Nat thrust a wad of cash into the cabbie's hand, fat tip and all, and bounded up the front entrance, working his way through the crowd of people going the opposite direction.

The back portion of the building had been cordoned off by uniformed security guards who held off the press and anyone else who wasn't authorised to go into the locker room area. Nat had his pass, issued last week when he and Ryu had come here to familiarise themselves with the place and for Ryu to practice in the ring. Nat showed his pass to the

guards, who admitted him immediately, and made his way to the back, down another wide corridor to the locker rooms and massage rooms.

The first door in the corridor was ajar.

"Ow!" Nat heard inside. His heart squeezed at that voice. That sweet familiar voice. He went towards it.

"Take it easy, Ryu-kun," Nat heard Kumo say. "I'm almost finished. As bad as your shiner is, you gave your opponent the same."

"Doesn't feel like it."

Nat peeked in, and saw a flash of colour. The kissing samurai on Ryu's back. Kumo stood next to him, gently holding an ice pack to Ryu's face over his obviously bruised and swollen eye. Ryu had the mouse as Nat had guessed he'd have. Kiku stood to Ryu's left, watching over him, concerned as always.

Nat's heart set to pounding. He moved slowly towards the door.

"I'm proud of you, Ryu-chan," Kiku said, laying a hand on Ryu's bare, sweaty shoulder. The fight was so recent, Ryu hadn't even showered yet.

"Thank you, Kiku." Ryu's shoulders sagged. "I hope Nat was able to watch. Just knowing he was watching me helped. I almost completely got my ass kicked." Ryu had that slightly manic tone fighters sometimes got after a fight before the adrenaline completely stopped flowing.

Nat stopped in the doorway. "I didn't see it, but I heard the whole thing."

Ryu whipped around, dislodging Kumo's ice pack. His good eye widened. "Nat!" He started to slip off the bench, but Nat said, "Don't. Stay there." He hurried in and came to stand in front of Ryu. Hot tears rushed his eyes. Ryu was so close, Nat could feel the heat rising off his muscles, smell the sweat on his skin and hair. Carefully, he moved in and closed his arms around Ryu, careful not to press any bruises.

Ryu squeezed him back. His chest rose and fell heavily against Nat's. His hands fisted Nat's jacket. "Nat, you're here. Oh my God," His back heaved. Sweat made his skin stick to Nat's cheek. Nat didn't care. He closed his eyes and breathed in Ryu's post-fight, testosterone-ridden smell, acutely aware of Kiku and Kumo's retreat from the room.

Ryu pulled him closer and Nat felt the press of Ryu's legs on his hips, locking him more deeply into their embrace. "Nat, you're here. You're here, oh my God!" He sobbed against Nat's neck. Then Ryu pulled back and kissed him.

The kiss was sweaty, salty, tinged with desperation, hunger and injury. But Ryu didn't seem to notice. He thrust his tongue between Nat's lips, clutched the collar of Nat's jacket and gulped at his mouth hungrily. Nat palmed Ryu's sweaty back and moved his lips against Ryu's, slid his tongue against Ryu's, tasting him, passionately yet carefully, aware of Ryu's cuts and bruises.

When Ryu finally pulled away and looked at him, tears mixed with the sweat on his cheeks. "Nat, did you see me fight?"

He shook his head. His own cheeks felt wet and he couldn't tell if the moisture was his tears or Ryu's sweat and tears. "No. There was a horrible traffic jam coming from the airport. I had to listen to the entire fight in the cab."

Ryu grinned. The grin turned into laughter, a mixture of crying and amusement and jubilation. "It's okay. You're here. That's all that matters."

"You won, Ryu. You did it." This fight put Ryu only a few fights more away from the championship in his weight category.

Ryu's laughter ebbed away. He stared into Nat's face. One hand went to Nat's cheek and traced his cheekbone, then his lips. "I did it for you, Nat," he said softly. "I wanted to make you proud."

"I was already proud of you," he said. It was true. Ryu was the best, most incredible, beautiful person in the world.

Ryu's smile reappeared. He pulled Nat close again and kissed him, deeply, tongues sliding together, the kind of warm moist heat that only a kiss had, mingled with the intimate scent of his lover. In spite of their slightly battered state, Ryu's lips were still velvety, and his kiss held the promise of more to come later, when they were home again, in their bed together.

"Ryu."

A deep male voice came from the doorway behind them.

Ryu pulled away and sat bolt upright.

Still dazed, Nat looked past Ryu to the source of the voice.

There stood Naboru Miyazaki, a larger, older, more rugged version of Ryu in an expensive dark suit, his hair closely shorn. Behind him, a pretty woman, in a silk pants outfit, her hair pulled back, with Ryu's softness of features and tanned golden skin. Mali Miyazaki.

Ryu's parents.

Chapter Seven

Ryu froze. Had his parents been here for the fight? Nat moved to the side and stood next to him, and he gripped his lover's forearm with a clutch he meant to communicate that Nat should stay right where he was. He slid off the table to his feet and turned. "Dad, Mom." He bowed, his aches and bruises as well as his ecstasy at seeing Nat pushed to the background of his consciousness.

His father looked hesitant as he returned his son's polite gesture. His eyes, too, reflected uncertainty, an expression Ryu had never seen before in his father's face. The man had always been so...tough. So unreadable. "We saw your fight, Ryu. You did very well."

Ryu bowed his head. "Thank you, Dad." Praise from his father was so rare as to be nonexistent. An occasional word of it here and there when he'd been in school and had gotten a high mark on a paper or test.

The older man took a few steps into the room. He looked at Nat as if just noticing him. "Phoenix-san," he said and bowed. "You have done well with my son," he said in broken English.

Beside Ryu, Nat bowed. "Thank you."

Ryu moved closer to Nat, as if to shield himself. Yet he couldn't help it. "How are you?" He directed the question to his mother also, though she would probably say nothing. She refused to speak Japanese anyway even though Ryu knew she understood the language.

"We're well," his father said. "We would like you and Phoenix-san to come to the house one evening." His father looked away again, giving Ryu the sense that he felt guilty. He'd been this way since Kiku had gone to him and told him what Taro Suzuki had done ten years ago. Naboru Miyazaki had been surprisingly horrified.

Ryu looked steadily at his father. He'd thought of this moment so many times. He'd carried so many ideas of how he'd respond, what he'd say. Now, here he was and all he could do was stare. His father was so obviously trying to build a bridge to him and the gesture swept away more of his anger and hurt. That's all he'd wanted, ever. "Yes, I'd like

that," he managed to say. His bottom lip began to tremble. "Dad," he said softly, "Mom, I have something to tell you."

"Yes?"

Ryu grasped Nat's arm. "Nat and I...we're...going to get married."

His parents' eyes widened. Nat turned to him, his already round eyes wide too. He glanced up at Nat. "We are, aren't we?"

The look in his eyes showed he realised Ryu had found the ring. Then, as if remembering Ryu's parents at the last second, Nat looked at them. "Yes. That is, if it's all right with you. You're his parents, after all. I should ask your blessing."

His parents both stood speechless.

Ryu's heart lurched. The adrenaline he experienced from his fight surged anew. "You aren't too shocked, are you?" he asked, gently but firmly. "I mean, you know where I've been living for the past ten years."

His father started, as if touched with a cattle prod. "Yes, Ryu, we do. It's just...marriage. It was a surprise."

"Nat gave me a ring. I don't have it here, of course. It's in our room. It's beautiful."

He looked from his father to his mother. Her eyes shone with tears. Ryu felt the sting of tears in his own eyes. Understanding flooded him, showed him what her silence meant in that moment. He grasped Nat's arm for support. He remembered something he'd said to Nat back in Thailand, about how his mother was terrified for their survival. Her silence had been a way to protect them both. She'd been a stranger in a hostile land. His father, though in love with her, had always been cold, silent. She couldn't have trusted his passion for her and probably feared for her and her son every moment of every day. "Mom," he said softly in Thai, "you give your blessing, don't you?"

She nodded, then left her husband's side and approached him. "Yes, Ryu. I want you to be happy." Fear and affection warred in her eyes. Though she'd never been the warmest person in the world, Ryu knew her history and deep down couldn't blame her. She'd been a girl, really, seventeen when the Suzuki-gumi had trafficked her from Bangkok to Tokyo. She'd been presented to Ryu's father as a gift from one of his underlings and he'd fallen in love with her, an occurrence that had saved her life yet at the same time made her feel a prisoner to him, a high-ranking gangster whom she believed would have killed her had she

tried to leave him. And where would she have gone anyway? Yet Ryu knew his father had been good to her in his way and was taken with her beauty. She'd not been ready to be a mother and had found herself pregnant with Ryu when she was only nineteen.

In that moment, Ryu understood her as he'd never done before and returned her hesitant embrace. "Thank you, Mom," he said softly. When he pulled back and looked at her, tears marked her delicate cheeks. He wiped them away with his thumbs, as if she were a little girl. "I'll see you soon."

She nodded, a ghost of a smile on her lips, then turned and went back to her husband's side.

"Kiku told me he would like to leave the car he hired here for you and Phoenix-san," Ryu's father said. "We will take him and the others back to Ni-Chome."

Ryu stood next to Nat, his heart pounding. Everything seemed to happen all at once in his life. "Thank you, Dad."

His father smiled that somewhat shy, slight smile he had and bowed his head briefly. "Good night," he said softly.

"Good night." Ryu pressed closer to Nat as he watched his parents turn and disappear into the corridor. As soon as they were gone, he felt Nat's hand on his arm and turned.

"Are you all right?"

Ryu nodded. New adrenaline rushed through him, filling his mind with the image of his parents as he'd stood there, facing him. He heaved a deep breath and leaned against Nat's chest. Nat's arms closed around him and squeezed. That safe feeling Ryu got every time Nat held him now infused him, easing the tension. "I can't believe it," he said in a near-whisper, "after all this time." He gripped Nat's jacket and pressed his cheek against Nat. Strange to rest there, needing the safety he felt with Nat in the wake of having won a fight against a fierce opponent, but he was getting accustomed to the contradictions of his nature. One of Nat's hands stroked his hair.

Nat wants to marry me. The thought rushed him, as images of his parents had done earlier. Elation soared inside him then fell flat. He pushed away from Nat and gripped Nat's arms. "Nat, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin it. You meant to surprise me." He looked down, fearing Nat's anger about the ring. "I found it in the drawer. I made Kiku tell me the truth."

Nat's fingertips under his chin made him look up. "I don't care, Ryu. It's all right. I'm just glad to be back."

Nat just about melted right then and there, looking into Ryu's face, his uninjured eye glistening from unshed tears. "However, even though I don't have it here to put on your finger..." Picking up Ryu's hand, Nat dropped to one knee and looked up at him. Emotions, like fire, streaked through his chest. Never in his life had he thought he'd be doing this with anyone after Rawee, male or female. But here he was, proposing to the one person his heart had completely fallen for. "Ryu, will you marry me?"

Ryu's already flushed cheeks deepened in colour. More tears slipped down his cheek and he laugh-sobbed. "I can't believe it. Yes, Nat! I'll marry you."

The sobbing laughter was contagious and Nat found himself shaking from it as he rose back up and pulled Ryu to him. Ryu's sweaty hair pushed against his lips and Ryu's hands clutched at his jacket. Nat palmed the wiry muscles of the other man's back, smiling to himself while his own tears fell into Ryu's hair. "Thank you, Ryu," he whispered.

Now, it was time to take care of Ryu. He was still Ryu's trainer. He pulled back. "Ryu, you need to shower and have a massage. The press will want to speak with you."

"I just want to go home with you and get into bed, Nat."

The words sent a jolt through Nat's body, right to his cock. That part of him had missed Ryu terribly as well. "Me too. I'll let Noriyuki know you'll be available for interviews starting tomorrow. How's that?"

Ryu nodded. "Better. You and I need time."

Nat touched his shoulder. "Yes, we do." Reluctantly, he went out of the locker room to find Ryu's publicist and let him know of their decision. Noriyuki bowed to Nat and said he would do his best, then Nat returned to the locker.

Walking in, he heard the shower spray in the background and followed the sound into the steamy white-tiled room. And caught his breath.

Ryu's back was to him under the spray, the vee of his back, emblazoned with the entwined samurai lovers, shiny with rivulets of water. Nat stared, following the stream of water down to Ryu's perfect, round, hard ass cheeks, as colourfully designed as his back. The

designs continued to mid-thigh, where he'd ceased getting tattoos years ago, thanks to Kiku's influence in his life. He cleared his throat so Ryu wouldn't be startled.

Ryu turned and smiled at him. The water plastered down his spikes of hair, accentuating his good eye, making it seem even larger than it already was. He squeezed shower gel out of a bottle. "Join me?" he asked playfully.

Nat crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, grinning. It certainly would be in terrible taste to get naked and lather Ryu up under the shower in this place. "Better if I just watch."

Ryu chuckled. "Suit yourself." The response he usually gave when Nat didn't join him in one of his many showers.

Nat was happy to watch Ryu lather himself up, to watch the soap foam and bubble wherever Ryu's hands rubbed over his muscled flesh. Tension pulled in Nat's groin when Ryu slipped a soapy hand to his cock and lathered around the base, then reached behind him and washed the crevice of his ass. He grinned sensually at first, then the smile faded. He stopped lathering and began to rinse. "Nat, in all this excitement, you never told me what happened. How is it that you were able to come back?"

Nat unfolded his arms and stepped away from the wall. He watched the soapy lather rinse off Ryu's colourful naked body as he explained what had happened at the tribunal, including his feelings about their decision and his own risky choice to confront his superiors.

Ryu turned off the shower and stood, water beading off his skin and hair. He frowned, his face troubled. "Nat, you gave up your entire career...for me?" Guilt flashed through his uninjured eye.

Nat smiled. He pulled Ryu's towel off the nearby hook and brought it to him. "Partly for you," he said softly. "But also for my own self-respect. I couldn't have you see me like that, a tourist police. I do have *some* pride."

Ryu took the towel from him and wiped it over his face. "I know you do. I just... You were a great cop." He continued drying himself off. Then he smiled. "But you're an incredible trainer too." He stretched the towel across his upper back and dried it. "Before long, you'll have more students than you know what to do with." He wrapped the towel around his hips and took Nat's hand. In the locker room, Ryu picked up his bag and clothes

and together, they and went back towards the lounge area where there were several massage rooms.

Inside the massage room, Ryu locked the door, pulled off his towel and pulled Nat close. "Usually I'm exhausted after a fight," he said, slipping his hands under Nat's jacket and caressing his back over his t-shirt, "but being proposed to has given me new energy."

Nat's body tightened. He wanted nothing more than to lay Ryu back on the massage table and mount him, but the man had still just fought a boxing match. Firmly, he backed out of Ryu's sensual embrace and laughed. "On the table, Ryu."

Ryu pouted playfully but obeyed. Spreading his towel on the massage table, he climbed on and lay down on his stomach. "Oil's in my bag," he said with a wink.

"Thanks." Nat fished it out, poured some into his palm and began rubbing Ryu's back muscles.

"Mmm." Ryu closed his eyes, a smile curving his lips. "I missed you so much."

Nat ran his oiled thumbs up either side of Ryu's spine. The fingers of each hand spanned out over the man's ribcage. His skin under its colourful designs was buttery smooth and Nat's mouth watered to use his tongue instead of his hands. "I missed you too." He slid both hands down and moved them in easy circles over Ryu's hips and lower back.

Ryu chuckled then ended on a moan. "You don't give the ordinary sports massage," he murmured. "You realise that?"

Nat grinned at him. "Not with you, I don't." With that, he pushed the heel of his hand into Ryu's left ass cheek and rubbed in more slow circles. *That* was giving him a hard-on.

Ryu sighed and let his thighs fall open, giving Nat an eyeful of Ryu's plump, delicious balls. Nat fought back the urge to rub his fingertips over the crinkly-smooth pouch. "Where do you want to go for a honeymoon?" he asked, trying not to let his voice sound tight and husky.

Ryu tilted his head. He seemed to consider the question carefully in spite of the way his breathing had deepened. "You know, it doesn't matter to me at all. I don't care if we go anywhere. I just want us to have that time to hang out together, nothing else to do, even for a few days."

Nat sighed, forcing his concentration onto the massage and off of what he wanted to do with his hands. "Same here," he said and switched his massage to Ryu's other ass cheek. "Maybe we'll just stay in bed for a week."

"Mmm. Sounds perfect." Ryu spread his legs apart more, as widely as the table would allow him without his legs hanging off the sides.

Nat swallowed hard. Ryu was obviously making it known the kind of massage he preferred. But what kind of trainer would have sex with an athlete who'd just fought a difficult match and was stiff, sore and bruised?

"I know what you're thinking, Nat," Ryu murmured, his voice partially muffled by the way he rested his face against his forearm.

Nat's insides jumped. Ryu's creamy skin slid under his oiled hands. The man's balls and tight opening were mere centimetres from his slippery fingers. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

Ryu tilted his face upward again. The smile he wore now was downright devilish. "You're thinking that I'm too raw after my match for you to climb on my ass and fuck me, aren't you?"

Nat's cock surged hard and hot. Ryu rarely talked in a rough or dirty way and when he did, the impact was...effective. He stilled his hands. "Don't you want to wait until we're in our bed together?"

Ryu pushed his ass up slightly, towards Nat's palms. He'd positioned his body for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, their favourite position. "No, Nat. That's too long a way off." Ryu's breath was velvety and silky all at once, like a feather he was using to tickle Nat's most sensitive body parts. "There's the car ride back to Ni-Chome." He lifted his ass again, a tiny back and forth movement that encouraged Nat to resume his massage. Which he did, in slow, steady circles over Ryu's perfect ass cheeks, up, over the lower portion of his back, down his hips, back to his ass. Ryu groaned and moved against Nat's hands in a rhythm with Nat's massaging circles. "Then, our friends will want to congratulate us. That takes time."

Nat made another round with his hands and Ryu moaned. "I...can't...wait that...long, Nat."

Ryu turned his head. His cheeks were flushed darkly. His unswollen eye beseeched Nat with a seductive shine. "Please, Nat," he whispered and slid down the table until his groin was even with the edge. "No one will know."

Nat suppressed a groan. Just looking at Ryu naked, his colourful skin glistening with oil, his skin still shower-soft and smelling like soap. Which meant one other special part of him was nice and clean. Clean enough to lick...

Wordlessly, he pulled his jacket off and tossed it onto a nearby chair. He toed off his loafers and yanked off his socks, followed by his shirt, jeans and boxer shorts.

"Yes." Ryu whisper of approval was dark with need.

Nat came up behind Ryu and ran his hands over the man's perfect ass cheeks again. Ryu loved having his ass caressed and squeezed, and Nat loved doing it for him since it made him feel so good. Leaning over, he pressed a kiss onto Ryu's back, over the faces of the kissing samurai.

"Oh, Nat."

Nat trailed his tongue down Ryu's spine, down, down, until he reached that perfect ass and nibbled the baby smooth skin of the left cheek.

"Yessss."

Ryu's body sagged beneath Nat's with that languid surrender he always got when Nat did this to him. Squeezing both cheeks, Nat slid a bit lower, dipped into the crevice, seeking the tiny puckered hole with the tip of his tongue.

"Ohhhh." Ryu spread his legs, inviting Nat in. Nat spread his cheeks and teased the starburst of flesh with one tiny lick after the other until Ryu whimpered and pushed his ass out, silently begging for more. "Nat, please, I want you inside me."

That was a request Nat was never able to refuse Ryu. He reached for the massage oil on the table next to them and poured more into his hand. Ryu turned around, watching Nat smooth the oil onto his hard cock with a hungry look. Then Nat reached down and covered Ryu's ass with the oil, pushing it into his opening with slippery fingers.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. To Nat, it had always been ass-fucking, but Ryu's exotic name for it gave the act an air of...erotic beauty. Not that Ryu needed to name anything in order to make it beautiful, Nat thought as he pushed the head of his cock into Ryu's hole. Ryu was beautiful. His very being was a marvel of creation as far as Nat was concerned. Even the long, low groan of sheer pleasure Ryu released as Nat slid his cock in deep was beautiful to Nat's ears.

Nat tried to remember the sequence of thrusting for this position, but the lonely nights without Ryu coupled with this heated joining made it hard to remember. One...two...three...with his hands clasping Ryu's upper arms, Nat slid in deep, pulled back, slid in again and inhaled. Then again, a deep breath with each inward thrust, in rhythm with Ryu's breath on the pull back. Hot sparks danced through his cock, every inch of friction with Ryu's deliciously tight passage. Until Nat, the only man Ryu had had intercourse with was Kiku years ago, and so Ryu's ass was incredibly tight, pulling a gasping breath from Nat with each slide of his cock inside it.

Nat squeezed his eyes shut, breathed in Ryu's scent, rested his lips on Ryu's smooth, perfect skin and pulled back again. Five? Six? He'd lost count. He started over again. One...two...three...

Ryu squeezed Nat's cock and whispered Nat's name several times, an ecstatic cry. Ryu's body trembled beneath his, tiny tremors, each one with a whisper or groan. Ryu had come. Nat recognised the sounds of his climax, the movements he made, the way his breath came out in harsh gasps, followed by the way his body sank underneath Nat with a sigh of satisfaction.

But Ryu never forgot his lover. He squeezed his ass muscles tightly around Nat's cock and pulled, a tiny, staccato rhythm that made Nat's very brain feel as if it would spin right out of the top of his head.

Nat slid his hands up Ryu's arms and laced their fingers together. Ryu pushed his ass up against Nat's front and squeezed again. Nat gasped and pulled back.

"Yes, Nat," Ryu whispered.

Nat thrust. Yesss! The oily slide of his cock deep into Ryu's passage was like entering a gate to heaven. He closed his eyes, pressed his lips to Ryu's back. All his senses sank into the world that was made up only of Ryu. Ryu's scent, the taste and feel of his skin, the sound of his breath, the slippery tightness of his ass, the brush of his skin against Nat's nipples every time Nat thrust into him. Heaven.

Floating in that world of erotic sensuality and romantic warmth, Nat slowed his pace, savouring the tiniest nuance of the man underneath him. Never before in his life had sex been like this with anyone, a world of wonder, closeness, sweetness and absolute heat.

The pressure in his cock built. Ryu called that his dragon's cloud, his *yang* force preparing to spill out, into Ryu. Ryu always told him how nourishing, how strengthening his *yang* force was. Ryu credited his improved fighting skills with the life force Nat shared with him. Nat still wasn't sure exactly how such a thing worked, but if Ryu believed it, it was good enough for him. He loved sharing his *yang* force with Ryu.

One, two, three, four... Each backward pull and forward thrust made Nat's thoughts spin away and delightful shivers pass through his body. Ryu squeezed and pushed against his cock, whispered his name between moans of pleasure.

It was Ryu's pleasure that felt best of all, that drew his nectar to the tip where it spilled out in mind-blowing gushes and filled Ryu's passage.

Nat collapsed on top of him, breathing heavily. "Thank you, Nat," he heard Ryu whisper. He answered with a kiss pressed onto Ryu's back, just below his nape. He lingered there, tasting Ryu's damp flesh, the saltiness, the sweetness, then rested his cheek until he'd gotten his breath back and could rise up.

He pulled out and hovered over Ryu, caressing his hair.

"That was incredible." Ryu turned his head, smiling up at him, his face glazed with satisfaction. There never was a time they made love that Ryu didn't thank him and tell him how great it was.

"Yes, it was." He caressed Ryu's back a few moments. "We should get dressed and go home," he said finally.

Ryu smiled and sat up. "Yes, home."

Nat kissed him then lifted away. He went over to the chair where he'd thrown all his clothes and started to get dressed, watching Ryu fish his own clothes from his gym bag. "I think I need more massaging," he said as he stretched his arms to pull on his long sleeve shirt. "I'm getting stiff."

Nat smiled. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it when we get back."

Ryu's head popped out as he pulled his shirt down. "I know you will." His look grew misty. "You take good care of me."

Nat paused in the middle of buckling his belt. "I hope I always will," he said softly. Ryu was the one person he never wanted to let down.

Quietly, they finished dressing. Ryu put on his jacket then turned. "Nat," he said, coming up to him and taking his hand. "I still can't believe the risk you took. The risk you're still taking."

Nat smiled down at his...fiancé. The word rang nicely inside him. He reached up and cupped Ryu's cheek. "Hey, it's what I want deep in my heart."

A dreamy look came over Ryu's pretty but battered face. "Me too."

Nat kissed Ryu's lips then put an arm across his shoulders, guiding him out of the locker-room. Together, they walked through the now much quieter building. The car Kiku had left for them was actually a black stretch limo, complete with uniformed driver and bar stocked with champagne.

The driver held the door open for them in the chilly autumn night and Nat waited for Ryu to get in ahead of him. On the cushiony seat, they sat close together and Nat leaned into Ryu and kissed him again. Those nights away from Ryu, afraid they might never be together again, had left a residue in his psyche and each touch of their lips reminded Nat of the sense of urgency he'd felt so intensely for days.

He reminded himself to relax. It seemed that fate would allow him and Ryu to have some real time together, At least for now. Life always held its surprises. He lifted away from their kiss. "Want some champagne?"

Ryu shook his head. "Not right now." He put an arm across Nat's front and cuddled into him, his head on Nat's shoulder as the limo pulled into the evening traffic and began the journey back to Shinjuku.

Nat held Ryu's hand, brushing his thumb across the calluses on Ryu's palm. Ryu took a deep breath and snuggled in closer. His breathing evened out and his arm across Nat's front relaxed.

"Ryu?" Nat said softly.

No answer.

Ryu was asleep.

No wonder. He'd just fought a difficult match and won it. He'd gotten engaged and met with his parents after years of fearing them and not communicating with them—all within the space of a few hours. It was enough to exhaust anyone.

Nat smiled to himself. Still holding Ryu's hand, fingers curled together, he watched the city of Tokyo, his new home, pass by the window.

About the Author

Sedonia Guillone is a multi-published, award-nominated author of both m/f and m/m erotic romance. The man in her life is her inspiration and provides all the hands-on research she needs. When not writing, she's cuddling, watching samurai flicks and thinking about the next naughty, delicious tale she wants to write.

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