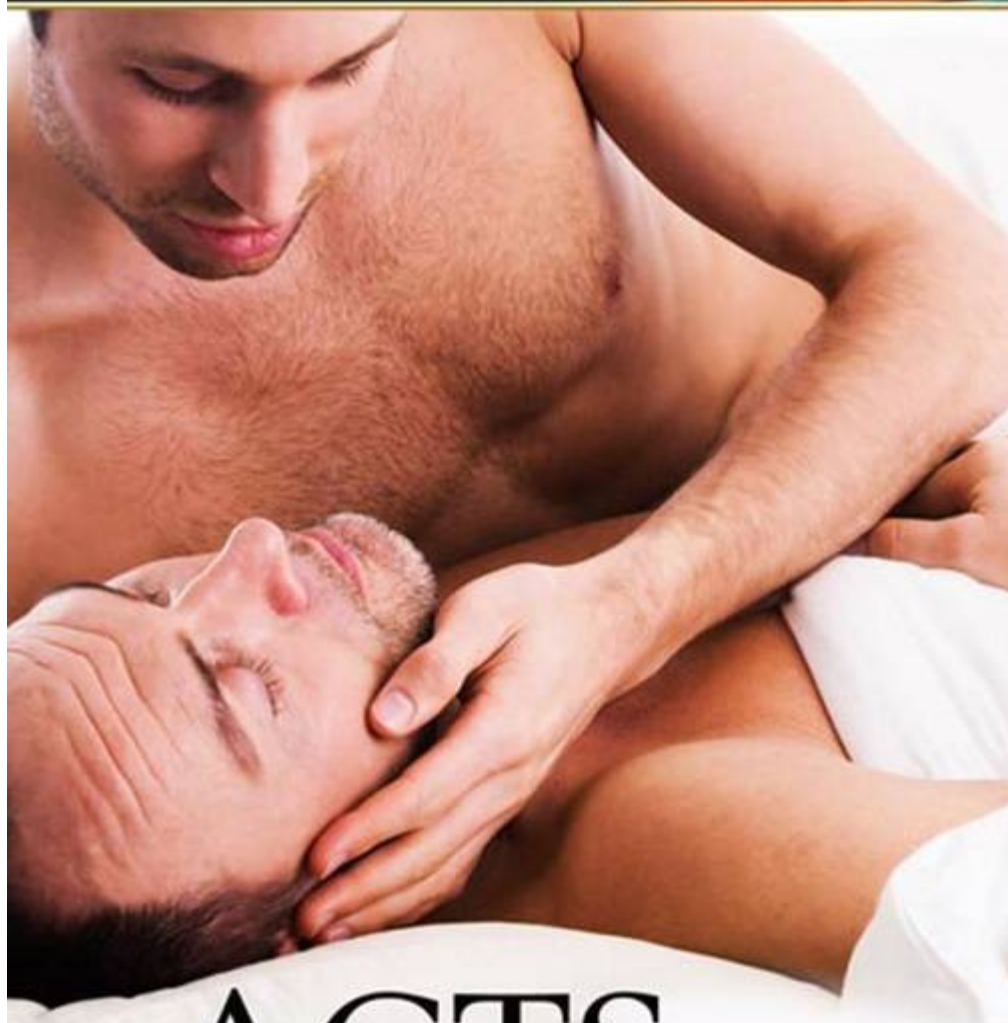


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



ACTS  
of *Passion*  
SEDONIA  
GUILLONE

## **Acts of Passion**

*Sedonia Guillone*

Jack Cade is skeptical of the new criminal profiler he's using. Michael seems so absent-minded and too neurotic to be effective. But he is brilliant and hot and Cade finds himself falling hard and fast, both in lust and in love. The attraction is mutual, although Michael's past demons haunt him, keeping him from getting too close. Together, they begin to unravel Michael's emotional knots even as they close in on a killer, another brilliant, wily person whose sights are now set on Michael.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Acts of Passion

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# *ACTS OF PASSION*

**Sedonia Guillone**

## *Dedication*

*For Mitch, always*

## *Acknowledgements*

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## *Trademark Acknowledgement*

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Harvard University: President and Fellows of Harvard College

Massachusetts General Hospital: Massachusetts General Hospital

Mercedes Benz: DaimlerChrysler

Out of Town News: Hudson News Company

Propranolol: Reliant Pharmaceuticals, Inc.

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## Prologue

*Robert Green was weak. Too weak to live. Not physically of course, his killer thought as he labored over the verses of Green's death poem, but morally, spiritually. Bereft. Stupid. Not what a man should be. A man should die with dignity. End it all before showing the world his defeat. And Green was defeated. He had no interest in rising again. What kind of world was it, full of such people?*

Of course, he couldn't rid the world of all such people, but there were situations in which he could act.

The death poem was ready. All great warriors composed one before dying. He counted the syllables, painstakingly set in proper *tanka* form. After several hours of intellectual and spiritual labor, he could set down his pen and take a rest. He shook his head. Green was so ineffectual and stupid that only his death could be performed with dignity. His life had been shit. He was a worm with a man's body.

He sighed. Perhaps someday he would find the one, the warrior who would walk by his side. The one he would not live without. Once he was found, they would die together, their souls fused in Heaven for eternity. Until then, he had his mission.

Forcing down his hatred for Green, he rose from his desk and continued the preparations. A white kimono, a tray, a *tanto* – samurai's knife, the handle beautifully woven, the blade, fashioned by a great sword maker of the Tokugawa Era. Layer upon layer of steel, honed and folded until it could shave a brick without a scratch on its shiny surface. Green's favorite meal was cooking in the kitchen. The smells of broiling meat made his mouth water. Filet mignon. Such expensive taste for such a stupid and small-minded individual. It would be his last.

Yes, Green wouldn't have to worry any longer about his inability to face the world. Not after tonight.

He was going out the way a man should.

With honor and dignity.

## Chapter One

Being a homicide detective hadn't cured Jack Cade of his horror at seeing a dead body. Jack slipped on a pair of latex gloves and went into the apartment, up to the body. The victim, a white male in a white bathrobe, probably in his mid-forties, still knelt in the position he'd apparently died in, a knife protruding from his ravaged belly. The robe gaped open enough to show the blade remained embedded. Drying blood soaked the area rug on which the body knelt.

Jane Mallory, one of the detectives on Jack's team, approached him. "His name's Conrad Kent," she said. "Age forty-five, according to the date of birth on his driver's license."

"Who found the body?"

"The next door neighbor, Sam Tyson. He stepped out to get his morning paper and saw Kent's door was open. Didn't think anything of it at first but then ten minutes later he left his apartment again to walk his dog, and the door was still open. That's when he peeked in to check on Kent and found him."

"Poor guy."

"Which one?"

"Both."

"Yes. As for Tyson, he's retired and home every day. Easy to reach if we have any more questions for him."

"Thanks, Mal."

Mal returned to her search of the apartment while his second detective, Ken Chin, canvassed the other neighbors to find possible witnesses in the neighborhood. Jack turned his attention back to the body.

He knelt down beside Bill Murphy, the medical examiner, as close to the victim as he could get without being assaulted by the stench of blood. Around him, the flashes of crime scene photographers' cameras sent bursts of light into the dusky apartment. Voices murmured while patrol officers and crime scene team members performed their duties. Even though it was mid-afternoon, the living room curtains were drawn. Jack took a closer look. Kent had been a handsome guy with dark blond hair, his strong features now etched in a permanent grimace. Jack had never seen anything like this before. Nausea threatened in his gut. "What do you think, Bill?" he asked finally.

"Well," the older man said, sitting back on his heels and considering the grisly scene before him, "by all appearances, this man took his own life. See here, though," Murphy lightly tapped the victim's cheek with his pointer, "there's some kind of bruising, the kind I've often seen when someone's been gagged. Whether it has

anything to do with his death, I won't be able to determine until after a thorough autopsy."

Jack nodded. "All right. I'll let you know when to bring him down."

"Will do, Detective Cade." The medical examiner turned back to his work.

Jack rose and peered around the immediate space.

The room was sparsely furnished, the way Jack imagined a man's apartment to be if he were living alone, newly divorced or something like that. No personal effects around, family photographs or artwork. Just a sofa in some kind of ugly blue scratchy material up against the wall opposite where a black lacquer entertainment unit stood, complete with flat screen television, DVD player and stereo. Expensive electronics set in an ugly half-assed decorated room.

The cheap area rug—an imitation Oriental in gaudy colors—on which the victim had been kneeling, still showed indentations near each corner. The coffee table, an inexpensive mission-style such as one bought in chain department stores, matched the indentations. Jack frowned as he ran the fingertips of one gloved hand over an indentation. The coffee table had been removed from the rug, which had then been pulled out toward the center of the room.

Jack turned his attention to the crime lab team member, who was busy lifting fingerprints off the items on the table. A glass of water—half full—sat on a table, along with a prescription bottle of pills. After making sure the necessary photos of the spot had been taken, Jack picked up the bottle and examined it. Propranolol. A beta blocker. Indicated Kent had had a heart problem. Jack replaced it on the table and made a note on his pad, including the prescribing doctor's name. When the time came, the bottle would be bagged by the crime lab team.

The only other item on the table was a piece of paper with writing on it. He picked it up and crossed over to the window where some daylight came through the blinds. After studying it a few moments, he called Mallory over. "Looks like a suicide note," he murmured. "Is this his handwriting?"

"I'm not sure, Sarge. We found a checkbook in his desk drawer. The handwriting in the register resembles this handwriting but the note is slightly neater."

"Anything appear to be stolen?"

"Doesn't seem so. His wallet, complete with two hundred and eleven dollars cash and credit cards was there, as were the keys to a BMW. And there's no sign of forced entry."

"Mm." Jack continued to study the letter. In it, Kent carried on about his sorrow, guilt for things he'd done, souls he'd harmed and what a useless and stupid individual he'd been, wasting his human life on fear. On and on. Jack read the letter once more and set it back down on the table. That sense of something strange tickled in his gut again. There seemed to be an air of ritual, of careful planning to this man's suicide that just didn't gel with the thrown together, uncoordinated look of the man's surroundings. If he'd been haphazard with his living space the way he'd appeared to be, why would he



have been so careful with his death? Would he really have taken the trouble to move his coffee table aside the way he had? And even if he'd left a suicide note, wouldn't the writing have been sloppier? It looked as carefully written as a child's handwriting drill in third grade. Why the difference between the checkbook register print and this one?

Sighing, Jack pulled out his cell phone and scrolled his contacts. This one was already tricky and he was going to consult Dr. Wittig before the trail had a chance to go cold. Some of his colleagues didn't believe in calling in a profiler until things got desperate. Jack disagreed completely. He pressed the button to the Psychology Department at Harvard University. The department's receptionist picked up on the second ring.

"Yes, hello, Gert," Jack greeted the woman who answered.

"Hi, Detective Cade, how are you?" After so many times of calling for Dr. Wittig's help on cases, Gert Neuman knew Jack's voice immediately.

"I'm fine, but I'm on a case."

"Oh. Sorry." She paused. "Dr. Wittig isn't available for consulting, Detective. His health deteriorated suddenly and he's going into semi-retirement."

"I see." *Damn.*

"However, Dr. Wittig has already found his replacement."

"Oh?"

"Yes. A student of his from years ago just joined the faculty. His name is Michael Di Santo."

"Is he available right now?"

"Let me check. Just a moment."

Jack heard the phone click as Gert put him on hold. Roughly half a minute later, someone clicked back on.

"Detective Cade?"

Jack hesitated. The guy sounded...young. "Yes. This is he."

"Hello, this is Dr. Di Santo, Dr. Wittig's replacement? Mrs. Neuman tells me you need a consult?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. We got a hit. I mean, there's a body. I'm at the location right now. It appears to be a suicide but there are some inconsistencies that say otherwise."

"Such as?"

Jack explained his suspicions.

"Well, that definitely needs looking into. I can come down now and take a look."

Jack tried to guess the man's age. Old enough to have earned a Ph D, at least. He caught himself and forced his attention back to the call. "Yes. That would be great." He gave the Boylston Street address to Michael Di Santo, guessing it would take the man roughly twenty to twenty-five minutes to get there on the T.

"Fine. I'll leave right now."

"Do you have your badge?" Michael wouldn't be allowed on the crime scene without identification from the BPD.

"Actually, yes. Dr. Wittig organized for one to be left here for me."

"Good." Jack ended the call and pocketed his phone then stepped into the hallway. There were three other apartments on the floor and no security camera that he could see. He made a note for his team to find out the individual or company who managed the building to see if there were security tapes available for the back and front entrances to the building.

On his way out to meet Di Santo, he stopped at the door of the neighbor who had found Kent's body and questioned Sam Tyson. Tyson said Kent seemed to spend a lot of time in his apartment, watching TV or listening to music. He'd go out occasionally but never for long. "Sometimes I've seen a woman come and go," he added.

"Did you ever meet her?"

"No."

"What does she look like?"

"She's tall. Brown hair in a kind of bob. Always wearing sunglasses, so I never really got a good look at her face. But that's all I know."

"Do you recall seeing her at any time yesterday?"

The elderly man rubbed his grizzled chin. "Oh yeah. I think she was here in the morning. I walked my dog and I saw a glimpse of her just before the door closed."

"Do you remember what time that would have been?"

"Hmm. Maybe ten? Ten thirty? At my age, I lose track of time."

Jack noted down the information, thanked Tyson and went downstairs. At the front entrance to the building, he noted a security camera trained on the glass door. Aside from that, there seemed to be no other security. The building only had twelve apartments in all. It was in a nice area on Boylston Street. Not cheap. Kent drove an expensive car according to the key ring Mal had found in his pants pocket, and yet the furnishings in the place aside from the TV and stereo, were cheap and ugly.

Studying the front area of the building, he wandered down the flower box lined stone walk of the apartment building and turned to face it. Crime lab workers and patrol officers moved around on either side of the yellow crime tape, keeping the building cordoned off until Jack gave instructions to clear out and retain only the apartment as the crime scene.

Jack stepped aside to let someone go past him and *bump!* Smacked into something.

He turned. "Excuse me, I'm—" Or rather, he'd bumped into *someone*.

The man was adjusting the glasses Jack had apparently knocked off his face. "You're in a crime scene," Jack said.

"Yes, I know." Almond-shaped brown eyes seemed to study Jack from behind round lenses. He looked Asian, yet sort of...not Asian at the same time. His dark brown hair was styled in a conventional way, parted on the side in short layers. The crumpled navy suit he wore, complete with diagonally striped tie against a light blue dress shirt made him appear as if his mother had dressed him for a spelling bee at school even though he was probably about Jack's age. Forty.

Jack blinked. He was taking absolutely too long to find out who this man was. Then light dawned. Of course. "Dr. Di Santo?"

"Detective Cade?"

"That's me. Hope I didn't break your glasses."

Di Santo touched them on each side as if to check. "No, they're fine."

Jack watched the man's hands as he gingerly adjusted the frames. Nicely shaped fingers. Clean, trimmed nails. "Sorry I bumped you that way."

"No problem." Di Santo cleared his throat. "I hope I can be of help to you."

Jack started. "Me too. This way." He led Di Santo into the building and up to the apartment. "As I told you on the phone, I'm not so sure this was a suicide." He let Di Santo precede him into the apartment and followed him, observing the way the slim man took in the surroundings on his way over to the victim.

Jack explained his suspicions and then let the man work. For what seemed a long time, Di Santo wandered about then stood in the center of the room, his gaze on the coffee table. His hand disappeared into his jacket pocket and pulled something out, which he popped into his mouth.

Jack watched him. Watched the man's cheek bulge on the side while he sucked on whatever it was in his mouth, his gaze intent on the coffee table and victim. He then approached Jack and Jack heard the click of hard candy against the guy's teeth. Finally Di Santo turned and knelt by the body.

Jack saw the professor's eyes widen, especially on the hilt of the knife. "What is it?"

"Please open the robe so I can see the wound," he said to Murphy.

Murphy did as he asked and Di Santo gazed for what seemed five straight minutes at the vicious cross-shaped cut in the centre of the wound.

"*Jumonji giri*," he said, nearly in a whisper.

"What?" Jack looked between the knife wound and Di Santo.

The hot-yet-nerdy man was still staring down, seeming to ignore him. The candy in his mouth clicked several times against his teeth.

"Dr. Di Santo?"

Michael Di Santo looked up, his eyes seemingly far away yet intent at the same time. "What kind of movies did this man watch?"

"What?" Jack felt a jolt of annoyance under his collar. "What does that have to do with anything?" Dr. Wittig had never worked like this. He'd had his quirks while doing his profiling work but he was at least...normal.

"I saw some DVDs on his shelves. He obviously spent a lot of time watching films, perhaps over and over again since he actually spent his money on purchasing them instead of renting from the library. What are they? I assure you it matters."

Jack exhaled. If Wittig had recommended this guy as a replacement, he'd at least humor him until he saw a reason to do otherwise. He rose and crossed over to the shelves and looked at the titles. Tough guy action films, a few dippy romantic comedies and heavy metal music concerts from the eighties. Everything very ordinary. Returning to Di Santo, he reported what he'd seen.

"Nothing foreign?" Di Santo asked. "Like samurai films?"

Jack shook his head, hoping Di Santo would get to the point sooner rather than later. "No. No films that weren't at some point first run in major movie theaters. Everything conventional. He seemed to be an all-American, ordinary, middle-aged guy."

Di Santo shook his head. "No one is ordinary, Detective. Have you found anything else in this apartment that would indicate he is into Japanese culture? That he would have any knowledge of it? Books? Furniture? Anything?"

"No." Jack had glanced at the few books on the shelf near the entertainment center. All stuff on making a financial fortune and playing the stock market. Not even a dictionary.

"Have you determined whether he died by the sword wound or was dead before the sword penetrated?"

"From what I can see," Murphy said, "the sword wound is the cause of death."

Di Santo nodded then sat back on his heels. "You were right then. This man has been murdered. Not only murdered but in a very painful way in which he suffered horribly before finally dying. And he was murdered by someone he knew. Someone who hated him very, very much. Someone who wanted to see him suffer." Di Santo tilted his head, his look far away again. "The autopsy will confirm what I'm saying. He definitely knew the person. He probably let them in, not knowing he was going to be killed. Find out if he had sex shortly before dying. Find out what his last meal was."

"Of course." Jack nodded to Murphy. "Send him down and get started. We'll be there soon."

Murphy nodded and called over his assistants to prepare the victim for transport.

Di Santo remained where he was, his gaze back on the coffee table. "*Jumonji giri*," he said again then pointed to the coffee table. The letter in the evidence bag had been put back at Jack's request for Dr. Di Santo to see. "This is the suicide note, right?"

"Yes. Though we're not sure the handwriting is the victim's. It resembles other writing we've found but is much neater."

Di Santo picked it up and studied it. Jack watched the man's eyes move as he read. The candy in Di Santo's mouth went *click, click, click* then *crunch*. His lips began moving. One index finger brushed the paper as if he was counting. Moments later he set it down. "It's as I thought. A death poem. Written in *tanka* form. Five units of five-seven-five-seven-seven. I'll need a photocopy of this as soon as absolutely possible."

"All right. But would you please explain what you're talking about?" Jack pushed down his annoyance. If Di Santo was going to work with him, he was going to communicate.

The other man continued to chew the candy. Jack watched the tiny muscles in his jaw work, the light crinkle in his smooth, tan skin. Di Santo swallowed and then popped another piece of candy into his mouth. Amazing the guy wasn't obese with this apparent sugar habit he had. "*Seppuku*," Di Santo said, cheek bulging. "The signs are all here. He committed *seppuku*, you know, the Japanese ritual suicide?"

"I've seen *Shogun*," Jack said.

A ghost of a smile whispered over the other man's face. He didn't seem to be someone who smiled very much. "Yes, well, this appears to be a certain form of *seppuku*. *Jumonji giri*, or cross-shaped cut, to be more precise. This form of *seppuku* lasted much longer, was much more painful and there was no second behind him with a sword to take his head off and end the suffering quickly." Di Santo took a deep breath. He looked around him pensively again then crunched away at the candy. Briefly, Jack watched the way his lips rubbed together as he sucked. Nicely shaped lips, not too thin or too full. The kind Jack liked. Again, a long time seemed to pass with Di Santo ignoring him.

Finally the seemingly nutty professor looked at him. "I'm not sure. The autopsy will help to tell." Jack saw his gaze fall on the prescription bottle. "What's in the bottle?"

"Propranolol. Must have had a heart condition. That might have made him unable to fight back."

Di Santo nodded. "Yes. That's probably the case." He grew pensive for several more moments then nodded again. "Everything's pointing to murder, as far as I can see. This man wouldn't have done this to himself, not only because he wouldn't have gone to the trouble and ritual involved in such a form of suicide but because he wouldn't even have known what to do." Di Santo gestured at the space around them. "That death poem, it's artistic, intelligent, carefully composed. The killer very likely wrote it, imitating the victim's handwriting to his best ability. A man without even one poetry book or foreign film on his shelf would not very likely be someone to compose such a piece of literature. The person who arranged this murder has intimate, detailed knowledge of this ritual. This person took the time to attend to every detail. Whoever it was deliberately chose this particular form of *seppuku*."

Jack's heartbeat sped up a bit. "Why *seppuku*? Why not just stab the victim and let him bleed to death?"

Di Santo seemed to consider the question deeply, if the bobbing of the candy in his cheek was any indication. Jack chided himself inwardly for being so distracted by it.

"There are many possible reasons," Di Santo finally said. "Historically *seppuku* was sometimes used as a way of preserving honor for a captured samurai or a defeated samurai's wife so she wouldn't be captured by the enemy. Other times, a victorious lord would order a defeated lord to commit *seppuku* as a term of peace so that the defeated lord wouldn't pose a future threat to the other clan's power. And at other times, it was used as capital punishment."

Jack exhaled. "Capital punishment?"

Di Santo nodded. "Yes. If that is the reason for this killing, then we could say that the killer was putting him to death."

"That might explain his choice of *jumonji giri*."

"It could."

"Do you believe that's possibly the case here?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure yet. Studying the death poem will probably give some insight." The skin crinkled on Di Santo's forehead. "The thing is, *seppuku* was only used by samurai. Other forms of punishment were used for the other classes in Japanese feudal society." He looked pensive again and tapped a finger against his jawbone.

Again, Jack's eye went to the movement and appraised the finely sculpted bone structure of Di Santo's jaw, covered with only the barest hint of beard. The guy was hot.

Di Santo crunched the candy. "Does the killer see himself as a samurai and his victim as a samurai? Was the choice due to something personal about the killer or about the victim? Or both?"

"How about we discuss that on our way down to the ME's office?"

Di Santo turned to him. For a second, confusion clouded his eyes. Then he nodded. "Yes, of course." Jack led him out of the apartment. Finding Mallory in the hallway speaking to a crime lab person, Jack told her where he was going and left her to continue the investigation. "Did you drive over here?" he asked Di Santo as they walked down the stairs.

"No. I took a cab. I wanted to get here as soon as possible."

"All right. You'll ride with me then."

## Chapter Two

Michael's thoughts about the scene he'd just witnessed were temporarily moved aside. He winced, thinking of how he'd plowed into the detective while going up the walk. Damn klutz that he was. He opened the passenger door to the detective's car and slid in, careful not to close his jacket in the door or something equally jerky. Cade had already looked at him as if he were a complete geek.

Detective Cade started the car and pulled away from the curb. Cade's appearance had taken Michael completely by surprise. He glanced at the man's hands. Large, strong-looking hands that matched his physique, such as it appeared under a fashionable tan leather blazer, retro-style shirt print with the large collar and hip-level slacks. Even his dark blond hair, a short spiky cut with large sideburns, was a sharp contrast to his own boringness.

Michael averted his gaze from the man and rested his hands in his lap. Didn't a man outgrow these feelings by the time he turned forty? He hadn't felt self-conscious like this in so long, the way he had with his first lover, Toshi. At the time, though, he hadn't thought the awkwardness organic. *Any* man felt awkward with Toshi, who was as handsome as a movie star, but Toshi had been several years younger than he, a college student who was just learning English. Michael had felt older, more experienced, not the clumsy neurotic he'd turned out to be. Detective Cade was as handsome, but in a more rugged way. He reached into his pocket, pulled out another candy and popped it in his mouth.

"Hey, aren't you worried about rotting your teeth?" Cade turned large blue eyes on him briefly before turning back to the traffic.

Michael became painfully aware of the candy pushing out his cheek. He tried to center it on his tongue. That didn't work, but he couldn't spit it out. He didn't have a tissue to catch it. "No. I have a...blood sugar issue. So I need to have these on hand." Damn, that sounded even geekier.

"Oh. Sorry."

"No problem." Michael looked out the window.

"So how do you know so much about *seppuku*?"

Michael turned back to him and cleared his throat. "I minored in Asian Studies back at Berkeley." His mother had been one of his professors, but he was sure Cade wouldn't be interested in such a fact.

"Cool. Is that where you did your graduate work as well?"

"Yes."

"I see. How long have you been here, in Boston?"

"Two weeks." The boxes of psychology books he'd sent ahead of him were still packed. Boxes were everywhere. He'd just gotten himself some bedding and cooking utensils for the place he was renting before starting the fall term.

Cade's eyebrows lifted. "Oh. So you're very new here."

"Yes." Michael felt the tension in his shoulders. He didn't mean to give such clipped, uninteresting responses to the man's questions, but the whole topic and the circumstances under which he'd finally decided to leave home were still a raw wound.

Cade cleared his throat. Michael saw the man's thick fingers shift a bit on the steering wheel. He'd seemed to be trying to make conversation only to realize Michael wasn't helping.

Michael's attention returned to the grape flavored ball in his mouth. He remembered Cade's question about rotting teeth and found himself wishing again he could spit out the candy without drawing attention to himself. He forced himself to bite down and chew it until it dissolved.

"So," Cade began again, "we were going to discuss those questions you raised just before we left the crime scene."

Michael sat up. "Oh yes. Well, until the autopsy is complete, it's mostly conjecture, but there are several directions we could consider." A memory of the scene flashed in his mind. The image suddenly melded with another one from his own life. A child's skeleton, that of an eight-year old boy, being lifted from its hidden grave in a Redwood grove...

"Dr. Di Santo?"

Michael stared down at his hands. The grape taste in his mouth turned sour.

"Are you all right?"

The concern in the detective's voice pulled him back. He blinked, hard and re-directed his thoughts. "Yes, I'm fine. Sorry."

"You need a drink of water? Or coffee?"

Michael felt his cheeks heat. Dammit. How embarrassing was it for a psychologist to be a clumsy emotional wreck? He'd have to pull himself together before embarrassing Albert Wittig, the mentor who'd gotten him this work, and screwing up this case. "Thank you, I'm fine." He considered the questions. "The two most likely scenarios are one, that the killer has defeated the victim in some way and committed the murder to prevent the victim from becoming a threat in the future, or two, that it is, indeed, a capital punishment. Either way, the killer wanted the victim to suffer. Of that I'm positive."

"I agree."

Cade suddenly slammed on the breaks and Michael slumped forward.

"Shit," Cade said. "Sorry about that. Damn drivers in Massachusetts."

Michael realized then he'd forgotten his seat belt. Reaching for it, he slid it down across his front and clicked it shut. He caught Cade looking at him. "Safety first," he



said. Then grimaced inwardly. *Safety first?* Had he really lost it? Had he really been this un-suave with Toshi, or had Toshi just been so awkward and culturally out of place that compared to him Michael was with it and cool? He sighed. It wouldn't have been so bad if Cade were just as dorky. But the guy was hot. Like a fashion model for some kind of super hot police department. He kept his mouth shut and thankfully, Detective Cade didn't ask him any more questions. They were quiet until reaching the medical examiner's building.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack winced again at the sight of the corpse on the medical examiner's table. The knife had been removed from the man's stomach and the crisscrossed wounds Di Santo had referred to earlier now clearly showed. With the victim on his back on the cold metal table, the stark reality of the lifeless shell struck Jack, as it always did. Nevertheless, his mind's eye searched the body for a sign of movement, life that surely still remained inside and as always, couldn't wrap itself around the absolute silence and coldness that met his expectations. He glanced at Di Santo, suddenly curious to see if the other man had a similar response, but the psychologist was staring down at Kent's body, face expressionless.

He sighed. "Okay, Murphy, what have you found so far?"

"Well," the older man said, holding out his pointer, "as you and Dr. Di Santo said, this man was probably murdered. The tox screen showed that he had an elevated level of cyclobenzaprine in his system, taken about an hour before his last meal. With those drugs in his system, he'd not have had the force needed to penetrate himself with a sword in the manner here."

Jack suppressed another wave of nausea and forced himself not to look away from the corpse. "So the drug made him easier to handle. What about the propranolol?"

"That was in his system too, but in the amount specified in his prescription. The strange part is I haven't found any physical evidence of a heart problem. There's no apparent reason for Kent to have been on propranolol."

Jack looked at Di Santo. "What do you think of that?"

Di Santo shook his head. "I'm not sure, but there is one possibility. Propranolol has been used experimentally to aid victims of trauma in recovering. For some reason scientists have found a connection between the softening of traumatic memories with the use of this drug."

Jack nodded and made a note. "Obviously a question for the doctor who prescribed the drug."

Murphy looked at Di Santo. "As per your request, his last meal was filet mignon and scalloped potatoes washed down with a glass of red wine. The food was probably laced with the drug. And he did have sexual intercourse in the hours preceding his death."

"That explains the open box of condoms found on his bedside table," Jack said.

"Yes," Murphy said. "A condom was used. But the latex residue was inside him. He'd been penetrated."

"I see." Sexual partner was male. He glanced at Di Santo whose gaze remained focused on the body, that pensive look he seemed to get regularly behind his spectacles. "Dr. Di Santo," he said, not wanting to cut into the man's concentration but needing clarity. "Now that you know his last meal, what does that mean?"

The other man continued staring down. "Part of the *seppuku* ritual is that the condemned is served his last meal. The weapon is then placed on his tray."

"But this wasn't voluntary. The murderer probably didn't place the weapon on the tray."

Di Santo shook his head. "I don't agree. There is an adherence to ritual here that is almost maniacal. The killer would not have skipped this part. You're going to be looking for someone who is obsessive with detail. This person is very likely to be obsessive-compulsive. Such a person is characterized by a preoccupation with details, rules, order and organization. Any deviation from routine or perceived loss of control will make this person upset. The relationship to the victim could be one of employer and employee, the murderer being the employee who did not agree with what Kent wanted, if that person perceived it as a violation of some sort of ethical code. The reason I asked about sex is that if the victim was romantically involved with the killer, the killer would have been putting unrealistic emotional demands on him, creating friction. Perhaps the victim tried to break off their relationship and this was his punishment."

Jack listened, staring at Di Santo. "What about the marks near his mouth? Is that part of the ritual?"

"Actually," Di Santo said, "it could very possibly be. Part of the *Jumonji giri* ritual is that the samurai was expected to bear his suffering silently until he bled to death. Perhaps the victim was crying out from the pain. To enforce his adherence to the ritual of suffering silently, he would very likely have been gagged."

"Dr. Di Santo is right," Murphy said. "As I'd suspected there are identical abrasions on either cheek and at the corners of his lips. The killer gagged him. Identical marks were made around his ankles, along with slight rug burns on the kneecaps showing he'd been bound into the kneeling position and did put up somewhat of a struggle. However, the cyclobenzaprine in his system made his struggle much less effective and the killer was able to overpower him. We found fibers in his fingernails. They're being analyzed now."

Jack shifted his weight, a feeble attempt to ease the sick feeling in his gut. The smells of chemicals assaulted him and his sight blurred a bit. He glanced again at Di Santo who seemed outwardly unmoved, yet Jack remembered that episode in the car. Something had been going on inside the man. "His wrists were never bound?" he asked Murphy.

The tall, thin man shook his head. "There is no indication of it. In fact, the angle of entry of the knife shows that it's possible that the victim himself pushed it in."

Jack swallowed. Why this bit of information should hit him harder than everything else, he didn't know. Only that he had to get out of there. "Thank you, Murphy. If you're finished, please prepare him for identification."

"Will do."

Out in the hallway, Jack walked straight to the water fountain. Pushing the button down, he let the cold stream of water shoot into his mouth while he gulped it down.

"Are you all right?"

Jack swallowed one last gulp and straightened.

Di Santo was standing next to him, a look of concern on his face. Something was different about him. He'd taken off his eyeglasses. *Wow.*

Jack stood there, exchanging an awkward, yet—if he wasn't mistaken—charged gaze with Di Santo. Without his glasses on, the luminous quality of the other man's dark eyes came through, as did his concern. Jack blinked and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, thanks. It was the cross-cut that got me. The whole thing. Rough."

Di Santo nodded. "I understand." His voice was smooth and clear, free of the hesitant, distant sound it had held before at the crime scene. "I...know the feeling."

Jack couldn't tell if looking at Di Santo brought the relief from his sick feeling or the compassionate way Di Santo spoke. Or perhaps both. But he felt better, as if his feet were under him again. He glanced away. The two of them seemed to have quite a few of these "staring at each other" kinds of moments. Maybe it was a product of Jack's sex-starved libido. He'd been so involved in work lately and tired when he wasn't at work, he'd just not bothered to try to meet anyone after his last breakup. In any case, a murder investigation was always intense and that intensity spilled over into other areas of his psyche. The lines blurred. He'd often see in someone else things he wanted to see instead of what was really there. He pulled his attention back to the case at hand. "I need to finish my reports so the family can be notified and come down to identify him."

Di Santo was still looking at him. A bit of the distant nerdy professor had seeped back into his demeanor but the compassion he'd shown left its residue on Jack. Finally, Di Santo nodded. "Yes. I've been through the procedure with the Berkeley police. I'm assuming it's pretty much the same here."

"Probably. I just wasn't sure if I'm holding you up." He gestured in the direction of the autopsy room. "I mean, if there's nothing else here you need to see for the moment. I...don't know. Maybe you have office hours or something." Shit, he was babbling. Like he'd done in the car on the way over here, barraging Di Santo with personal questions. Usually he was quieter, more confident around guys. Even the ones he was attracted to.

That ghost of a smile whispered over Di Santo's nicely shaped lips again. "I was actually finished for the day." His hand came out of his pocket, a red candy between his nicely shaped thumb and forefinger.

Jack grinned at him. "I was thinking you should probably have some real food." Di Santo gave him the impression he sometimes actually neglected to eat. "Too much sugar and you'll probably go into a diabetic coma."

Di Santo's eyes clouded for a moment but then a smile came slowly to his lips. "You were joking."

Jack chuckled. "Yes, I was joking. There's a great pizza place a couple of doors down from here. We can have something while we wait." It usually took at least an hour or so and there was no sense in going all the way back to Homicide on the other side of town when he needed to be here to speak with someone in the victim's family. He wasn't *just* buying time with Di Santo.

"Good idea." Di Santo put the candy back into his jacket pocket, his eyes avoiding Jack's. "I wouldn't want to get teeth rot or fall into a coma."

Jack hesitated. Had he really offended him?

But Di Santo gave a hesitant smile. "That was a joke."

Jack grinned. Dry humor. It fit the man. Another one of those *moments* ensued. Jack felt his groin tighten. Truthfully, he would have preferred to find an empty office somewhere in this building, lock the door and push Di Santo up against a wall so that he could taste the man's lips, lick that creamy-looking skin. He could just imagine what Di Santo's chest looked like, the dark brown hue of his nipples, maybe a tiny bit of soft dark hair in the center of his chest –

*Stop.* There was no use going there. He didn't even know if Di Santo was gay or if he was just imagining the energy between them. "Right," he said finally. "Let's go." He turned and led Di Santo out of the building.

At the pizza place, Jack led Di Santo to a corner booth where they each ordered the special, two slices and a soft drink. As they waited, Jack's phone beeped. Mal had emailed him a copy of the death poem since Jack hadn't been back to Central. He handed the phone to Di Santo and watched him study the poem.

As he'd done in the ME's office, Di Santo seemed absorbed, completely lost in the world of what he was examining. The waitress set down their drinks and a few minutes later, the food, and Di Santo hadn't glanced up once. Jack sat still, refraining from taking a sip or a bite, as if moving would break the all-important spell of Di Santo's concentration. He'd never seen a person work quite like this, not even the best detectives on the force. Not even Dr. Wittig.

Finally, Di Santo looked up, the phone still in his hand. "Kent definitely didn't write this himself," he said. "The killer wrote it."

"That explains the difference in the handwriting." At Michael's questioning look he explained about the sloppy writing of the checkbook register and the neat script of the poem.

Michael nodded. "Have you ever heard of the forty-seven *ronin*?" he asked.

Jack shook his head. He'd watched his share of samurai films but the phrase wasn't familiar. "No."

"Well, without recounting the entire history of the incident, an important samurai lord, Asano Naganori had been forced to commit *seppuku* after attacking a shogunate official. The circumstances of the attack had been contrived to incite Asano through political backbiting. Forty-seven of Asano's loyal retainers rebelled to avenge their lord's death and most of them were killed. The point I'm trying to make here is that critics who've analyzed Asano's death poem have commented that the immaturity and lack of character that caused Asano to lose his temper and attack the official showed in the verses he wrote."

"Are you saying that the qualities of the killer come through in the poem?"

Di Santo nodded. "Yes. There's a...feeling in them, words that Kent so obviously wouldn't have used based on what little bit we've learned about him so far." He leaned closer to Jack and pointed to one line on the screen. "There's a line here about cleansing the vessel of the soul." Di Santo paused. "Kent was murdered. He didn't commit suicide. So what would he be cleansing?"

"Maybe the killer felt Kent was in need of cleansing and saw it as the only way for that to happen."

Di Santo was silent, his hand around his drink, his pizza still ignored. "Hm. That's a possibility." He looked at Jack. "Until we find out what Kent's favorite meal was."

"Explain?"

"Well, I got another feeling from this poem. There's another line about the gift of a new tomorrow. Why a 'new tomorrow' if Kent is dead?"

"Maybe he means they'd be in Heaven."

But Di Santo shook his head. "This killer is more intelligent than that. Heaven as a concept implies eternity. Eternity is outside of time. There are no tomorrows or yesterdays outside of time. I get the sense the killer literally means 'new tomorrows' in the temporal sense. It's as if the killer was trying to pour someone else into the victim. As if Kent was a vessel to be filled and then killed to rid the world of that person. It's hard to explain."

"I'm following you. Don't worry."

"So If Kent's favorite meal was filet mignon, then the *suicide* was intended for him. However, if the meal was a favorite of someone else, then it was a favorite of whomever the killer was projecting into Kent in order to kill." He shook his head and handed Jack the phone. "I'll still need a copy of it to study it some more, but that's what I feel so far." Di Santo suddenly noticed the food and drink in front of him and picked up his straw, pulled the paper wrapping off and dropped it into the large plastic cup.

Jack watched Di Santo's finely shaped lips close over the straw. Clearing his throat, he focused on slipping his phone back into his pocket and unwrapping his own straw. "Interesting. It's almost like you're saying the killer was using Kent's body."

"Yes. It would mean that he didn't carry a personal grudge against Kent."

Jack stared at him. "You got all that from reading a short poem?"

An almost sheepish look came over Di Santo's face and he shrugged. "Yes."

Jack nodded. "Thank you."

"No problem. I know it's not a lot to go on, but at least we're forming an initial profile."

*We* hadn't formed anything, Jack thought. Di Santo had thought of everything so far, but there was something...likeable about the fact that Di Santo thought that way. He grinned. "That's true. Now, don't let your food get cold."

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Jack stood at the glass window of the identification room with the victim's ex-wife. "Is that your ex-husband, Mrs. Miller?" He watched the attractive blonde woman's back as she stared through the glass. On the other side, Bill Murphy pulled the sheet back from Kent's face just enough for her to see him. Next to her, Angie Miller's current husband, Bob, stood, one arm across her shoulders.

She nodded. "Yes, that's him."

Jack watched her for a response, but so far she seemed calm, unemotional. Considering Kent was an *ex*-husband, there wasn't much mystery in that. He wondered briefly what Di Santo thought. The slim man was standing next to him by the table in the cubicle that served as a viewing room.

When Angie Miller and her husband turned around, the man wore a scowl.

"I know this is a bad time," Jack said, "but could I just ask you a few questions?"

"All right." The woman's eyes darted back and forth a couple of times, but she lowered herself into one of the chairs. She was elegantly dressed with perfectly manicured red nails. Her husband, a man of athletic build and salt-and-pepper hair, wore a fancy warm-up suit. He appeared to be close in age to the victim. He took a seat beside her, one hand on the table, tapping its surface in a rhythm that must have been in his head.

Jack took a seat and Di Santo followed his lead. "How long had you been divorced?" Jack asked her.

"Not quite three years," she said softly.

"Had you seen him or spoken to him recently?"

"We talked every so often. He had fallen behind in child support payments recently and I would call him to find out what was going on."

"To the best of your knowledge, did your ex-husband have a heart condition, something for which he'd be taking a beta-blocker?"

At this, Angie Miller's face clouded. "No. I never saw him even take a vitamin."

"Where did you two meet?" Di Santo's voice cut into Jack's inquiry.

"I met Kent —"

"No, I mean you and Mr. Miller here."

Jack slanted a look at him. Di Santo wasn't supposed to be asking questions, but in light of how quickly and efficiently he'd identified the MO of the crime, Jack remained quiet. For the moment.

Mrs. Miller glanced at her husband. That sheepish look slipped through her blue eyes. "At a party. Of a mutual friend."

"What do you do, Mr. Miller?" Di Santo asked.

"I'm a lawyer."

Then to Angie Miller, "Your ex-husband was a lawyer too, correct?"

"Hey," Miller said, his face darkening, "What the hell? Are we suspects or something? We just came down here to identify the man. Not to be interrogated."

"I'm sorry," Jack said with a look at Di Santo who just sat there, calmly observing the couple on the other side of the table. "You're right. We just want to catch this person before they kill again. Our apologies."

"Just a couple more questions if you don't mind," Di Santo said quickly.

"If it's quick," Miller said, appeased yet still looking wary. "We didn't have much to do with this guy. He was a loser. Had everything and blew it all."

Jack resisted the urge to pick up the ball with that statement, though he made a mental note to keep Bob Miller under consideration. He shot another look at Di Santo.

Di Santo seemed to avoid his eyes. "Mrs. Miller," he said, "what was your ex-husband's favorite meal?"

The woman's eyes widened as if Di Santo had asked her an intensely personal question. "Um, I guess...he liked simple things. Burgers. Hot dogs."

"Filet mignon?"

She shook her head. "No. I made it for him one time when we were first married. I thought it would be a nice surprise. But he didn't care. He said all red meat tasted the same to him."

A shiver ran down Jack's arms. He glanced at Di Santo again. The man was eerily perceptive. So the killer wasn't killing Kent per se, but someone else he used Kent to represent.

"Thank you for that, Mrs. Miller. Just the last question now. Do you know if your ex-husband was seeing anyone? A girlfriend?"

She looked down. "I really don't know. He didn't tell me anything about his personal life after we separated."

Di Santo pointed to her and then to Bob Miller. "How long after you two met did you start having the affair?"

Jack's jaw nearly dropped. "Di Santo, you —"

"Okay, that's it." Miller rose and shoved his chair back. With a hand on his wife's shoulder, he ushered her up. She remained silent, looking pained. "This is disgusting," Miller went on. "I could sue the Boston Police Department for a violation of my civil rights. I was told nothing about an interrogation." He led his wife to the door. "Our private life is none of your damn business." He yanked open the door, let his wife go ahead of him and then slammed it.

Jack turned on Di Santo. "What the hell was that? You have no authority to ask questions, especially ones like that!"

Di Santo sat there, maddeningly calm. At least he wasn't popping a candy in his mouth. The pizza must have done the trick to satisfy his blood sugar issue. Jack couldn't have stood a second more watching those sensuous lips move, especially when the man had just been so utterly unprofessional.

"They were lying," Di Santo said quietly. "She was having an affair with this man while still married to the victim. Of course, spouses are always prime suspects until they can be ruled out. I needed to rule them out for my profile."

Jack huffed. "And did you?"

"Yes."

Jack raked a hand through his hair and leaned his elbow on the table. His shift had begun at five that morning. It was now nearly seven in the evening. An incredibly long day, which Di Santo had just made longer. "And how did you do that?" he finally asked.

"First of all, people with obsessive-compulsive personality disorders are most often miserly with money. She was wearing expensive jewelry, designer clothing, had a professional manicure. A miserly person would not spend money on such things or accept such expenditures from someone they were close to. He too, wore an expensive watch and had a meticulous haircut. Secondly, people with this disorder are over-conscientious, scrupulous and inflexible about matters of morality, ethics or values. The likelihood that either of them would have committed adultery and broken up an existing marriage with such an act of passion is nearly nonexistent. The killer you're looking for is most likely unmarried and perhaps divorced or separated from a serious relationship in the past but not currently committed romantically. He or she has gone to extreme lengths to take another human life. This person's symptoms have escalated to a degree that has rendered them out of control."

Jack sighed again. Sitting up, he leaned back in the chair and turned to Di Santo. "Okay. I understand your assessment but I can't rule them out based on this explanation."

The other man was looking a bit worn himself. His already rumpled suit was creased and folded everywhere, as if he'd just rolled out of a laundry basket. His soft hair was not quite as combed as it had been earlier and the ever-so-slight shadow of a beard was a bit darker. "But if you pursue them," he said, "you're wasting your time. You're better off going straight to the doctor who prescribed Kent the propranolol." He



reached up and raked one hand through his hair. "He'll be able to tell you much more about Kent's life."

Damn. Jack clenched his teeth. There was that tightening in his cock again. He shifted in his chair. "Of course we're going to speak with him, but why do you say we're better off?"

"Because, most likely the prescribing physician is a psychiatrist that Kent had been seeing since his life fell apart after the divorce. He either probably didn't think there was anything wrong with his marriage or was hiding something from her to keep his marriage together. When the affair came to light and she left him, he was never the same. Hence the thrown together furnishings in an otherwise nice apartment building. He still drove the expensive car he already owned and took only his prized entertainment appliances, the ones he spent too much time watching football on instead of banging his wife and discussing their relationship, which was why she started the affair in the first place."

Jack gave a harsh laugh. *Banging* was an uncharacteristic term for Di Santo to use. But the act it referred to caused the tightening in his cock to intensify. Just looking at Di Santo, watching his lips move as he talked, was turning him on. "I wish I could just conduct this investigation based on these observations alone, but I can't." He took a breath. "Look, we need you to profile the killer to the best of your ability, but that's all. I can't have you dictating the course of the investigation."

Di Santo remained quiet and Jack sensed him retreat into that distant place he'd been in when they'd bumped into each other in front of the crime scene. Finally, he nodded. "Fine. You're right. My boundary issue. As far as a profile, what I've given you so far is what I have. When I have a more complete picture, I'll be in touch." He pushed back his chair and rose.

Jack felt a pang. He hadn't meant to hurt the guy's feelings. He stood up too. "Look, I—"

"No problem, Detective Cade." Di Santo held out a hand. "I need to get back anyway. Lesson plans, unpacking. There's never enough time."

Jack accepted the handshake. Di Santo's hand was warm and fit nicely in his. His handshake was surprisingly firm in spite of the distance in his tone and demeanor. Reluctantly, Jack let go.

Di Santo reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and produced a card. "This has my cell number on it if you need to reach me."

Jack accepted the card then remembered his own. Still that pang nagged his chest. He gave his card to Di Santo. "Are you sure I can't give you a ride back to Harvard?"

"No need, thank you. It's just a few stops on the red line from here." He tucked Jack's card into his pocket. "Take care." Before Jack could speak again, Di Santo turned and walked out.

Jack squelched the urge to get up and follow. As a public servant, he wasn't in the habit of offending people and on the rare occasion he did, he apologized and moved on.

But even though Di Santo hadn't behaved in a particularly offended way, Jack sensed the man was upset. There was something...vulnerable about him.

Not that it mattered. He was a hired consultant. Hired to help catch what had turned out to be a very clever and vicious killer. Jack's energy had to go to catching whoever it was, not worrying about a neurotic psychologist with boundary problems. No matter how hot he was.

With a heavy sigh, Jack left the viewing room and headed back to Homicide where he met with the other teams, including the ones coming on to the night shift. He recapped everything they'd found so far including Di Santo's criminal profile-in-progress, gave out the follow-up assignments and finished writing up his initial reports. By the time he'd finished it was after ten. He was back on duty at five the next morning. There was just time to run home, shower, grab a few hours' sleep and get back. Not enough sleep. Again.

By eleven, though, he was back in his apartment, showered, teeth brushed and in bed. Thankfully by then, he was tired enough that when the incident with Di Santo came back into his mind, he felt the heaviness of sleep coming on instead of lying there, sleepless, fretting over it as his impulse was to do. Would that he could have just opened the guy's shirt, button by button and licked every inch of that tan skin. A lot better way to spend one's time.

The sound of a shrill ring made him open his eyes. The ring was close to his head. Each repetition cut through his sleepiness. Was it morning already? He glanced at the window.

Dark except for the usual streetlights that his blackout blinds could never really smother. Coming further into consciousness, he reached for the phone and flipped it open. He put it to his ear and sat up, wiping a hand over his face. "This is Cade."

"Detective Cade?"

Jack blinked. The voice was vaguely familiar. "Yeah? Who's this?"

"It's Michael Di Santo."

The name slammed into his consciousness. Confusion warred with surprise and...a small jolt. "What time is it?"

"It's two thirty in the morning. I'm sorry. I can leave."

Jack sat up, away from the headboard. "Leave? What are you talking about? Aren't you at your place? You live in Cambridge, don't you?"

"I do, but I'm...at the door of your building. I took a cab. I had to speak to you. It's important."

Now the urgency in the man's tone came through. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

Relief. And yet, how bizarre of him to show up like this.

"May I come up? If it's too late, I'll leave."

*Sweet Jesus.* "Don't leave. I'll buzz you in."

“Thank you.”

Jack flipped his phone closed, threw back the covers and hurried to the front door, the hardwood floor cool against his bare feet. He already wore pajama bottoms, no top, so he didn't worry about being decent. He pressed down the buzzer and waited, cracking open his front door. Di Santo's footsteps echoed on the stairs before he appeared in the dim light of the hallway.

Di Santo wore the same rumpled suit he'd been in earlier. Still no spectacles. Lines were etched around his mouth and eyes and his hair was mussed. The darkening shadow over his chin and upper lips was yet a bit darker. When he drew close, Jack got a light whiff of his scent laced with sweat.

“Are you all right?” What if something bad had happened to him?

But Di Santo nodded. “I'm okay. I need you to do something.”

Jack blinked again. “Do something?” From what he knew of this guy so far, just about anything could come out of his mouth at any time.

Di Santo's eyes flickered back and forth a couple of times but then remained even on Jack. “I need you to get on the floor and let me hold you.”

## Chapter Three

"I beg your pardon?" Cade's eyebrows rose. The sleepy look washed from his rugged features.

Michael's heart was already pounding from the restless night he'd spent pacing among unpacked boxes in his new house, thinking about the case and his blunder in the medical examiner's office. Now, standing in front of Cade, the pounding worsened.

Without a shirt on, Cade seemed taller and broader than he had in daylight, dressed. The spikiness of his dark blond hair was more pronounced in its mussed state. In those flashing instants while Cade stood obviously stunned by his statement, Michael tried not to stare at the broad chest dusted with dark blond hair, at his small tawny nipples or at the treasure trail down the tight center of Cade's abdomen.

"I need you to—" *Oh shit.* Michael nearly physically whacked himself in the head with the heel of his hand. What had he been thinking? Cade probably thought this was a come on. Hadn't he blundered badly enough today? He was well into the process of alienating the Boston Police Department.

Wouldn't be the first time. He'd alienated detectives before. "I meant...I mean, it's about the case. I've been thinking about it all night, trying to put a more accurate picture together for you. I came up with a theory I needed to test." He raked a hand through his hair, relieved at the understanding in Cade's face.

"I see." The larger man stepped aside. "Come in and we'll...test it."

Michael stepped in and toed off his loafers, leaving on his trouser socks. It was a long-standing habit, learned from his Japanese grandparents and practiced in his parents' home, even though his father was Italian by heritage and no one on that side of the family ever removed their shoes in the house, except to sleep.

Cade led him into the living space, which was cozy, with a few bookshelves and a black leather sofa and chair around a glass-top contemporary coffee table. The area rug beneath it, a tasteful looking, somewhat thick carpet of muted swirls of earth tones, was large enough that it expanded well beyond the seating area. Cade stopped there. "Before we start, do you need something to drink? Tea or coffee?"

Michael hadn't eaten or drunk anything since their meal in the pizzeria, but he shook his head. Bad enough he'd barged in here in the middle of the night. He wasn't about to expect the man to serve him refreshments. "No, thank you."

"All right then." Cade lowered himself to a kneeling position on the rug. "Tell me what to do."

Michael's insides jumped. "Just stay there, like that," he said. He stared at the man's perfectly sculpted lines as he took his crumpled jacket off and laid it aside on the arm of

the sofa. Triathlete, he guessed, judging by the Greek aesthetics of Cade's physique. Not bulky like a weightlifter, not thin and sinewy like a long-distance runner, but with the in-between balance of someone with inter-disciplinary training. Even Cade's profile, smooth nose, high forehead, slightly puckered lips, gave him the Grecian athlete look of the great sculptures.

Michael cleared his throat and went around behind Cade. "I was thinking and considering," he began slowly, pulling his stare off the other man's hard, round bottom as it pressed against his thin cotton pajama pants. "I'm having difficulty discerning whether the killer is male or female. Of course, based on the autopsy we know the victim had a homosexual experience, however, that doesn't mean that the man who penetrated Kent is the same person who killed him." He paused, his mouth suddenly dry.

Cade inclined his head slightly, giving Michael an angle of his profile. "That's correct," he said softly.

Michael stood behind him and took a deep breath. Slowly, he lowered himself to his knees behind Cade. The closeness gave him a whiff of soap. He cleared his throat. "However, statistically speaking, female murderers don't commonly stab their victims. Only a small percentage do." He stared at Cade's hairline as he spoke, at the tiny dark blond spikes against the strong column of his neck. "Men more often stab their victims. Women most often drug or poison their victims."

"True."

"In this case, we have both."

Cade nodded. "Forensically speaking, a man would have very likely made the cross-cut stabs from the front and then made it appear to have been self-inflicted."

"My thoughts exactly." Michael moved a bit closer, his chest mere inches from Cade's broad back. "So I tried to put myself in the killer's place. She...or he...has a drugged man of average size kneeling on the floor. Does he or she simulate the cross-cuts with hands over the victim's hands on the hilt of the knife? Based on the killer's absolute adherence to ritual, I'm guessing he or she knelt behind Kent and helped force the knife in. But I couldn't get a true feel for this without another person."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Michael swallowed again, throat parched now. He rose up on his knees and pressed his front against Cade's back. And pulled in a breath at the feel of hard muscle against his chest. Even through his thin dress shirt, the larger man's body heat warmed his skin. He rested his palms on Cade's arms. More hard muscle. He slid his hands down, over the bulges where shoulder blended into triceps, down to corded forearms dusted with soft hairs. The pads of his fingertips slid over the tendons of Cade's large hands and stopped.

Cade's back rose and fell slightly more heavily than a moment before and the sound of both their breathing filled the space around them. Each push against his chest rubbed Michael's nipples the tiniest bit. He held his breath a moment. Best to get this

experiment done and pull away, before he completely embarrassed himself. "Okay," he said in a near-whisper, "pretend there's a knife in your hands and we're both holding it. You're weakened from the drugs in your system and unable to fight back effectively. Your body is sleepy and pliable in spite of your terror. You know what's about to happen to you and are powerless to stop it."

"Jesus, Di Santo, do you need to go there?" Cade sounded annoyed though his voice was slightly husky.

Michael's cheeks burned. "Sorry." He caught another whiff of Cade's clean scent.

"It's okay."

Michael took a breath. He pushed more firmly into Cade's back then pulled their hands. Slowly, firmly, he simulated the *Jumonji giri*. Cade's torso was broad and filled his arms. His breath came in short rasps and his clean scent hovered in Michael's senses. The tendons in Cade's hands flexed against the flesh of Michael's fingers and palms. It had been forever since he'd had physical contact like this. More than a year. Not since finding Peter...

He shifted slightly and Cade's backside brushed his groin. Michael clenched his teeth as his erection, already at half-mast, rose and pushed.

Right into Cade's ass. *Shit!*

He released Cade and sank down on his heels. "I'm sorry," he breathed and bowed over, the way he'd seen his Japanese grandparents do many times in his young life. His cheeks burned. Blood swirled through his cock. Every nerve ending in his skin crackled and his heart pumped. No doubt Cade had felt that hard-on press against him. *Shit!* This was awful. "I'm sorry."

He could hear Cade turning around but didn't look up. He was acting like a complete jerk but couldn't stop.

"What are you sorry about, Di Santo?"

His heart pounded and to his horror, his hands started tingling. Dammit, he was about to have an anxiety attack. "This was...I'm sorry."

Large hands wrapped around his upper arms. "Hey, look up."

Michael kept his gaze down. Maybe if he waited a bit, his raging hard-on would subside.

"Di Santo. Michael. Please, look up."

Slowly, Michael raised his face.

Cade's blue eyes stared down into his, full of concern. "You all right?"

Michael blinked. The blood had drained from his mind to his lower regions. Slowly, he nodded then looked down again. Hard to believe he was a man of forty, he felt so absolutely...small.

The corners of Jack's lips quirked. "Can I call you Michael, now that we've been... intimate?" One hand left his arm. Firm fingertips under his chin made him look up.

Cade was smiling. His face, though slightly flushed, showed concern. "Just breathe, easy." His thumb brushed Michael's jawbone, back and forth, a tiny, comforting yet sensual movement. His eyes studied Michael's then seemed to drop their gaze to his lips. "I'm sorry," Cade said softly, "I didn't think." His fingertips wandered up Michael's cheek, stroked his cheekbone, then moved over his brow, pushing his hair back off his forehead.

The touch made Michael's body feel alive as it hadn't in a long time even as it calmed his rapid breathing. "Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know," Cade leaned in closer, hovering, while his eyes still roved over Michael's face. His breath pulsed warmly on Michael's skin. His hand passed over Michael's hair again.

Michael closed his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered. Energy swirled through his body.

"You're welcome."

When he opened his eyes, Cade's face was only inches from his.

Cade's hand went to Michael's cheek again and cupped it. His eyelids were lower now, a flush in his cheeks. "You're not...involved, are you?" His voice was a husky whisper.

*Involved.* He hadn't been involved since he and Toshi had broken up. Occasional sex with possibility for more, but never involved. Each time it seemed something might develop, the person learned about his attachment to Toshi and broke things off. It was upsetting but Michael couldn't help himself. "No."

A new smile flickered over the other man's sensual mouth. "Good. Because I'm not a homewrecker."

Before Michael could answer, Cade leaned in and kissed him. His lips were soft and warm. His large hands cradled Michael's face. Michael sighed and parted his lips. Cade slipped his tongue between them, tasting Michael as if he were a rare delicacy.

Michael held the other man's arms. Hard muscle bulged under his hands. The sensations, smells and taste of another human being were achingly familiar, something he'd once enjoyed long ago and had forgotten about in the anguish of the following years.

Cade was giving it back to him. Every hot lick of Cade's tongue across his was like a caress that warmed his entire body. He opened his mouth wider as his body surrendered to Cade's exploring kiss. The other man groaned and slid his hands down Michael's back, as if he were discovering something wonderful he hadn't hoped to find.

Michael's chest warmed and his body melted. When he'd been with Toshi, he'd been the one to initiate every kiss, pull the man to him, lay him down, make love to him. But Cade slid his arms around Michael, surrounded him in brawny strength. His kisses grew wilder, hot licks into Michael's mouth, fervent suckling on his lips as if something in Michael were nourishing him through their kisses. The suction of their lips together filled the air.

Cade pulled away suddenly and looked at him. His lips were slightly swollen, his eyelids heavy, face flushed.

Michael stared back at him, breathing heavily. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Good. I thought I smelled bad."

Cade laughed though his eyes flew open. "What?"

Michael's cheeks burned. Leave it to him to say stupid things in a heated moment. "Never mind."

A grin spread over Cade's lips, making dimples fold in each cheek. "Well, if you're that worried about it, let me be the judge." He leaned in and pressed his lips to Michael's neck.

Michael closed his eyes on reflex and tilted his head back, inviting the bone-melting warmth. Cade nuzzled his skin, breathing in as if inhaling him. Then Michael felt the moist warmth of Cade's tongue lick back and forth, like a vampire marking the spot he'd bite. Delightful shivers traveled down Michael's body.

"Mmm." Cade's murmur trilled against the sensitive skin of Michael's throat. Cade lifted his face. His lids were heavy again and his eyes looked as if his blood were simmering in his veins. Almost as if he were...high. "So far so good," he breathed. "But I have to check the rest of you." Gently but firmly he pushed Michael onto his back and grinned. "Based on the salt content of your skin and the light tang of sweat, I'd say it's been about fifteen hours since you showered." His thick fingers landed on the slightly loosened knot of Michael's tie and worked it down. "Perfect for my taste." He slid the tie out from Michael's collar, tossed it aside and went to work on the buttons.

Michael stared up at him, mesmerized by the combination of sexy talk and enjoyment of what he'd thought of as ripeness. Apparently, it made him muskier. Tastier for the detective. The thought pushed his already straining erection past painful.

Cade got the buttons of Michael's shirt open and pushed the material aside. His blue eyes seemed to darken with appreciation. "Damn, Michael," he breathed, "you have incredible skin." He brushed one large hand over Michael's chest. As if the touch alone did it for him, Cade surged against him, pushing his way between Michael's thighs.

"Thank you." Michael opened his legs and let the man in. And immediately felt Cade's hard cock push against his.

Cade pulled in a breath but his attention was still on Michael's chest. Again, as if he'd found an incredible treasure somewhere in a cave and was diving into it before dragging it back to his lair. "Perfect," he whispered in a silky tone and rubbed several fingertips over Michael's left nipple. The brown disk puckered under Cade's touch and wild tingles spread through Michael's chest. He melted more into the rug under his back while Cade's hard-on, rubbing his through their clothing, made more tingles travel the other direction, saturating his entire body.



Cade slid his hand slowly over Michael's chest, appreciation radiating from his rugged features. He lingered over the soft dark hairs in the center before sliding over to Michael's other nipple. Michael groaned and involuntarily arched his back.

Cade grinned and rubbed another slow circle around Michael's chest. "You don't get out much, do you, Michael?" As he spoke, he thrust his hips back and forth, a staccato rhythm that caused a surge of pressure in Michael's cock each time.

"No." Michael panted under the hot caress, his hands clutching at the short pile of the area rug. If Cade kept this up...

"Neither do I," Cade whispered and descended. His lips closed over Michael's nipple. That hot tongue licked back and forth, around and around, teasing, tasting, making Michael feel as if he were some kind of personal feast. His brain grew fuzzy, more devoid of thoughts than he was used to. An odd tingling traveled around his head, making his vision darken, his body feel as if it were floating.

Cade licked his way across Michael's chest to the other nipple and gave it the same sucking, licking treatment.

Seeing stars now, Michael moved his hips against Cade's, using his hands to anchor his upward pushes. Where this passive, bottom kind of guy had emerged from, Michael didn't know, but it felt so natural, so...damn...good...

Cade slid his large hands down Michael's sides, over his rib cage, down his waist and center. His knuckles brushed Michael's abdomen as he worked open Michael's belt then the button and fly of his slacks. "Damn, you're hot," he murmured against Michael's skin. He worked Michael's pants and briefs down, past his hips, over his knees, abandoning them in bunches around Michael's ankles. The clothing locked around Michael's feet, leaving him immobile under Cade who, with one hand on his own pajama bottoms, was working them down while keeping his mouth on Michael's chest.

Michael lifted his hands up and grasped the elastic waist, helping the other man push the bottoms down. Bracing on one knee, Cade lifted his ass up enough to get the bottoms down to his knees. He seemed satisfied with that and slid his bare cock against Michael's.

Michael let out a harsh breath. His vision darkened more. The last vestige of thought spun away. The world reduced to Cade's brawn over his, the silky skin of the other man's cock over hard muscle, making their cocks glide together. Without thinking, he clutched Cade's ass cheeks. The rock-hard globes flexed against his hands. He dug his fingers in. A man's ass cheeks had always been one of his favorite parts, a fetish almost, and Cade's were perfect. Smooth skin hugging compact, round, hard cheeks. He rubbed and squeezed.

"Yesss," Cade hissed and thrust against Michael. His large hands braced into the carpet on either side of Michael's torso and his flushed, glazed look remained fixed on Michael's face. Lowering to his elbows, he took Michael's mouth again, long, hot sweeps of his tongue against Michael's. The soft wet sound blended with the light slap

of their bodies together, the slide of hard cock against hard cock, murmurs and groans escaping from between their joined mouths.

It had been too long since he'd done this and in mere moments, Michael's body tightened beyond endurance. The pressure built and exploded, splashing hot cum over both their torsos. He groaned, gripping Cade's ass, his mouth slack against Cade's, his entire body immobile as one spasm after the next plowed through him.

As if turned on by Michael's climax, Cade moved faster, harder against him and groaned. More milky ribbons splashed on their bodies, warm and thick. Cade groaned again and collapsed on top of him, panting. His breath thundered in Michael's ear and his chest heaved against Michael's, hot and sticky.

Michael stared up at the ceiling, his hands still on Cade's ass cheeks. His body felt empty, rubbery, as if he'd had a whole body massage but way the hell better. And the sensation of being so surrounded, covered in Cade's strength...it had never been like this before. A disturbing feeling trickled into his bliss. Was he really so un-self-aware that he didn't know his own nature? Was that why sex with Toshi, while pleasurable, had always felt...awkward?

Cade was getting his breath back. Slowly he rolled to one side and leaned on an elbow. He still wore a dusky look but was calmer now. He looked into Michael's face. "Thanks for that," he said softly. One hand covered Michael's shoulder. "Hope you liked it. You seemed to." He seemed to feel a bit awkward himself.

Michael nodded, still dazed. "Yes. Thanks."

Cade remained quiet a few moments. His gaze traveled away from Michael's face and back. Then he heaved a sigh. "I go on duty at five," he said. "How about breakfast before I leave? You can shower, if you want, while I get it ready."

"I don't want to trouble you."

Cade chuckled. "Trouble me? You showed up here at two thirty in the morning to test a theory for your profile. I'm not worried about you troubling me."

Michael's already tingling cheeks burned. "I'm sorry."

Cade touched his cheek. "Don't be. You're...different. To say the least." He levered himself up and Michael caught himself staring at the gleam of their combined juices on the man's perfectly sculpted muscles. Michael worked his feet out of his slacks and underwear. Best to take Cade up on the offer of a shower. Then he could run home and change before teaching his morning lecture.

Rising to his feet, Cade offered a hand. Michael grasped it and let Cade help him up from the floor. Cade looked at him a moment then pointed. "Bathroom's in there," he said. "There's an extra towel on the bar already. Help yourself to whatever you need."

*Seems I already did.* He nodded. "Thank you."

Cade tilted his head, as if studying him again. "You're welcome."

Michael went into the bathroom, set his pants on the vanity and turned on the shower. Waiting for the water to get hot, he slipped off his shirt and set it down with his pants. The bathroom was a nice one, all clean marble and glass-enclosed shower.

Steam rose from inside, inviting Michael in. He adjusted the water and stepped in, closing the glass door. Cade had an assortment of bottles arranged in one of those contemporary stainless steel shower caddies. There were shampoos, conditioners, shaving gels, shower gels as well as bar soap, washcloths and some kind of loofah thing to slip your hand through and exfoliate your skin. Not a typical urban detective, he mused, picking up one of the shampoo bottles. Most guys didn't make their bathroom into a spa experience. But it was definitely nice, especially since he only had the plainest, generic kind of bar soap from the supermarket and a washcloth in his own claw-footed tub-shower at home. He even ventured to use the loofah everywhere on his body except the sensitive parts. By the time he came out and started drying himself off with a fluffy towel that smelled of a dryer sheet, he felt it was a shame to have to put the same clothes back on.

Taking Cade up on his offer to use whatever he needed, he sprayed on some deodorant and a drop of amber-colored cologne from a square, fancy-looking bottle. As he dressed, the smells of food cooking wafted in. He hurried to finish, tidied the bathroom and passed through the bedroom. Here too, the room was clean and orderly, nicely decorated. The bed, though rumpled from Cade's having gotten up in the middle of the night to let him in, had a wealth of pillows, all in earth tones with what appeared to be Middle Eastern patterns on them. There were potted plants, books and photographs in various spots, but Michael didn't want to be nosy and left, following the smells of bacon and coffee, into the kitchen.

Cade was lifting eggs onto a plate with a spatula. Back in his pajama pants, bare-chested, he stood, back to Michael, at the stove. Michael paused in the doorway, his gaze fixed on the way the other man's back muscles flexed with his movements. His dark blond hair stuck up this way and that and he padded on the hardwood floor in bare feet. The small round table was set for two, complete with steaming mugs of coffee.

That's when it struck Michael. The spa-like shower, the luxurious bed full of pillows, the cozy kitchen smelling of coffee and breakfast. Cade had made sure his home was a haven, a retreat from a world full of madness and murderers. A haven he was now letting Michael into, even if only for a little while. The gesture made Michael want to curl up in a corner with all those pillows in the bedroom and hide from the world. A hideously unrealistic desire.

Cade turned with both plates in his hands. He grinned when their eyes met. "You look freshly scrubbed," he said and set the food down on the table.

"I feel freshly scrubbed." Michael pulled back a chair and sat down. "You have good stuff in there."

Cade joined him at the table. "I like the place to be nice to come home to, you know?"

Michael stared at him, speechless. He nodded. "Yes. It is nice."

Cade paused "Everything you need should be here. Ketchup, cream for the coffee, salt, pepper."

A moment passed between them. Michael felt it, like an energy trilling in the air. If the moment could speak, it would have been saying they both had enjoyed what had happened between them but were unsure how to proceed with each other. "I'm fine," he finally said. "Thank you very much." Truthfully, he hadn't realized he was starving, which was often the case and why he popped so many candy balls during the day. Even though he loved to cook, his only real indulgence, he didn't take the time often enough. Cade was the first person to bring it to his attention. The first person to notice. For several moments they ate in companionable silence.

Cade took a sip of coffee and set the mug down. "Michael," he said softly, "I've been meaning to apologize. For yesterday. I gave you a hard time. After Kent's ex-wife and her husband walked out. I was uptight. You really weren't out of line. Well, not too badly."

Michael looked up at him, at the concern on his face. The expression warmed him, the way his realization about Jack's cozy home had done. He shook his head, unable to speak for a too-large mouthful of eggs and bacon mushed together. He was wolfing, he realized. He washed it down with coffee before speaking. "It's all right. I shouldn't have interfered."

"But you were right. Their relationship broke up the marriage. That affected the victim, his actions and the people he associated with. Somewhere in there, most likely, is the killer."

Michael nodded. A sudden memory rose, of him and Cade naked on the rug, Cade on top of him, their hot bodies sliding together. He cleared his throat. "All the same," he said, "I should tell you my thoughts and have *you* ask the questions. That's what you do."

Cade chuckled. "Yes, that is what I do. But at the same time, Dr. Wittig wouldn't have recommended you if you didn't know what you're doing. I'll listen to you more carefully in the future."

Michael felt the heat in his cheeks again. He looked down. "Thank you," he muttered. Praise had always been difficult for him to accept.

"However," Cade went on, "we do have a watch on Bob Miller for the time being."

"He's not the killer."

"I hear you."

They finished breakfast and Michael helped Cade clean up the dishes. Cade took a quick shower before dropping him at home.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So," Cade said after Michael gave him directions to his house, "as far as your... experiment." He pulled away from the curb in front of his building.

Michael stared out the windshield. It was just dawn, a clear mild September morning. He looked down at his hands. "Yes, my experiment."

"Did it help determine the gender of the killer?"

"Oh." Truthfully, he hadn't thought about it since the experiment had melted into hot sex. He pondered, forcing his mind to remember only his arms along Cade's arms, rather than the beautiful sculpted physique pressed to his front, the way his cock had hardened and pressed into Cade's backside. The key was the length of the arms. Cade was roughly the same size as the victim had been. A woman smaller than Kent would not have been able to keep her hands over Kent's on the knife and get the leverage necessary to perform the cross-cut. Of course, a large, strong woman could have done it, especially with her victim heavily drugged. He shook his head and sighed. "This is a tough one." He explained the height issue and Cade nodded.

"I thought as much," Cade said. "If the killer is a woman, she would have had to be taller and very strong."

"Yes. Most everything points to a man except for the use of the drugs. That's something more women do on average."

"What does your instinct tell you?" Cade turned a corner and Michael glanced at the man's strong hands on the steering wheel. Those hands that had stroked him and held him while their naked bodies rubbed together...

"A man," Michael said without hesitating.

"Mine tells me the same."

They rode in silence until Cade reached Cambridge. He pulled onto Michael's street.

In front of Michael's house, Cade let his car idle and put it in park. "Hey, Michael."

Michael paused with his hand on the door handle. "Yes?"

That feeling trilled between them again, hovering in the air while he waited for Cade to speak.

"Can you come into Homicide after your morning lecture?"

He nodded. "Sure, no problem."

"We should have the surveillance tapes by then. Your input would be helpful."

"Of course." He opened the door. "Thanks for breakfast and...for everything."

"You're welcome. Anytime."

Michael got out. He was about to close the door when Cade called to him. Leaning over, he peered into the car.

Cade was grinning. "Call me Jack. Now that we've been intimate."

Michael's cheeks burned mercilessly, but he laughed. "Okay...Jack. See you later."

"See you."

Michael closed the door and approached his front door, his ears trained on the sound of Cade's—Jack's—car moving down the street until it was out of earshot.

Inside, Michael fed his cat Chie who mewed loudly and threaded her tiger-striped body around his legs until he set her dish on the floor. Then he went upstairs to change his clothes. He'd only been gone a few hours, really, yet felt as if he'd spent time in another world. The lonely feeling of this place hit him in its stark contrast to Jack's cozy living quarters.

This house, one side of a duplex on a quiet residential street off Harvard's campus, had been arranged by Dr. Wittig. Very kind of him considering how difficult it would have been to find a place on his own at such short notice. But Dr. Wittig had been keen on getting Michael over here. The now-elderly man had been one of Michael's undergraduate and graduate professors back at Berkeley and the mentor who'd nurtured his affinity and talent for criminal profiling. Their correspondence had continued uninterrupted after Wittig had attained a position at Harvard where he'd been ever since. Understanding of Michael's inability to leave his hometown, Wittig had never pushed Michael to come east.

Then Peter's little skeleton had been unearthed, the discovery that had broken the iron bond holding Michael to Berkeley. Wittig had jumped on the chance to bring Michael on to the faculty here and had arranged everything, including his housing.

Michael came back downstairs and went into the living room to collect the papers for today's lecture, part of the Intro. To Criminal Psychology lecture class he was teaching this semester. He grabbed the papers off his desk and started to cross the living room, struck again by its hopelessly inhospitable décor. Black leather and stainless steel couch, desk and bookcase made up the furnishings, dotted with yet-unpacked boxes. The room *could* be pretty with its whitewashed stucco, dark wood beams and moldings, but the owner had once used this house as an office and had left this furniture here. Michael hadn't the time to make a big change, so he'd decided to live with it. At least he'd put his own books on the shelves and the couple of precious photographs he possessed on a side table next to the sofa—a picture of Toshi holding a drink at a party for the Asian students' union where they had first met, and a picture of him and Peter as kids playing in the backyard, not long before Peter's abduction.

Michael heaved a sigh. The memory was as fresh and agonizing as if it had happened only last week. Perhaps he'd never get over it. Tucking his papers under his arm, for he'd left his briefcase in the Psych. Department yesterday before going out to meet Jack at the crime scene, he gave Chie a pat on the head and left, walking to the Psych. offices before heading to class.

Most of the students were already assembled when he walked into the lecture hall and set his briefcase at the foot of the podium. A large class of sixty-five students dotted the amphitheater-shaped lecture hall. Michael arranged his papers, greeted those already there, waited for the hour to begin and then started.

As he spoke, the natural excitement he always felt for his topic bubbled up within him. Today's topic was a study of Dr. James Brussel, the pioneer profiler who'd helped

police in New York catch the Mad Bomber. Brussel had formed an eerily accurate profile of the man, right down to the fact that he wore double-breasted jackets. Aside from Albert Wittig, Brussel was Michael's professional mentor, and speaking about Brussel's career made the time seem to melt away. Before he knew it, a glance at the clock showed there were only ten minutes left of the class. He fell silent and made eye contact with a few of the more interested students in the front. "Does anyone have any questions?"

A young blonde woman in front raised her hand. Michael pointed to her. "Yes, go ahead—"

The ring of his cell phone in his pocket cut him off. *Shit!* He'd forgotten to turn it off. Quiet laughter rippled through the lecture hall as he struggled to fish the ringing contraption out of his pocket. On the fifth ring he managed to flip it open without checking the ID. "Hello?"

"Michael? This is Jack."

A second of startlement passed and Michael's insides jumped. "Yes? Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. I called to tell you we're bringing in Bob Miller for more questioning. And we're waiting on a search warrant for his house, office and car."

Michael stared, unfocused, on the faces watching him. Probably wasn't everyday their professor answered a phone call during a lecture. Perhaps it was more interesting than the subject matter itself. "Why? I told you yesterday he's not the murderer."

"I know what you said, but we've had time to do a background check on him and it turns out Kent had a restraining order against him. The security tape from Kent's building showed Miller both coming into and leaving the building the night of the murder. We're bringing him in. I'm telling you so you can be present when we question him. I thought it might help. How soon can you get here?"

Michael looked over the array of students. His heart was pumping, not only because the BPD were wasting their time bringing Miller in, but also because Jack's voice teased at his memory. "I'll leave now."

"Okay." Jack hung up, leaving Michael standing on the stage of the lecture hall, cell phone in his hand, feeling uncomfortably the center of attention.

He closed the phone and dropped it into his jacket pocket, along with the candy he'd replenished before leaving his house. "Um, I'm sorry. Something urgent has come up. I have to end early." He reached for his papers and battered briefcase then headed down the steps toward the exit. "My number's on the syllabus," he called to the student whose question had been squelched. "Call with your question."

"Yes, Dr. Di Santo," he heard her say after him, but he was already halfway out of the lecture hall.

## **Chapter Four**

Jack had let Bob Miller stew in a questioning room while waiting for Michael to get there. Miller had demanded his lawyer be present even though Jack had reminded him he wasn't under arrest.

Two of the night team detectives keeping watch outside Miller's house had accosted him on his way out his front door to work, and so Miller was dressed in an expensive tailor-made suit, as was his attorney. Now Jack stood, watching Miller and his lawyer through the one-way glass window, sitting there in the small interview room. Michael came in, huffing from his obvious rush to get there.

"He's not your killer," Michael said, halting beside Jack. Together they observed the two seated men.

Jack glanced at him, ignoring his awareness of Michael standing so close. Memories resurfaced in a traitorous way. Thoughts of Michael's tiny moans, the way his eyelids shuttered and his nipples hardened under Jack's tongue. He forced them down. "I know you keep saying that. Which is why I thought you should be here to observe."

"Of course. I shouldn't go in there?"

"No. That would be unwise. I'm going to wear a wire."

"That's good. I've done it before. I'll tell you what I want you to ask him. You'll see in minutes that he's not the murderer."

Jack nodded. "It's been long enough. He can just stew a few minutes more while I get hooked up."

Jack got himself wired and gave Michael a remote radio. He went in and sat down opposite Miller and his lawyer, a fellow attorney from Miller's firm. Jack recorded the preliminaries of the questioning and sat forward.

"Why am I here?" Miller asked, though the way his eyes shifted back and forth a few times gave Jack the feeling he might already know.

He sat back, one hand on the table. "You tell me, Mr. Miller. Perhaps we'll begin with why you went to Kent's apartment the afternoon of the murder when he had a restraining order against you? You failed to mention that yesterday when I spoke with you and your wife."

"We were in a morgue for God's sake!"

"That's not the reason, is it? The reason you didn't mention it is because it proved you capable of violence against Kent and would make you an immediate suspect."

"You don't have to answer that, Bob." The attorney touched Miller's arm.



"Your client had a restraining order against him by the victim," Jack said. "He violated that order by going to Kent's apartment. It just happened to be the night of the murder. Let's begin with why there was a restraining order against you."

Miller huffed. "The guy had it in his head that I wanted to hurt him. I didn't do anything."

"Nothing? No physical contact?"

"Ask him if the fight was over Angie," Michael's voice said in his ear.

"Was the fight over your wife?" Jack asked.

The man's eyes widened a second and his face softened for a fraction of a moment. "Yes," he said in a surprisingly subdued tone.

"Kent started it, didn't he?" Michael prompted.

"Did Kent start the fight?"

Miller nodded. "It was stupid of me to get into it with him. I guess I feel guilty at times." He shook his head on an exhale.

"Ask him if Kent had been drinking and started up with him," Michael said.

Jack paused. A weird feeling trilled through his nerve endings. It was as if Michael had some kind of vision of what had actually happened. "Had Kent been drinking? Had he started up with you?"

Miller nodded, his previous aggressiveness evaporated. "Yeah. We both hang out at the same place. We were colleagues and sort of buddies for a while. Until...Angie. He ignored her, you know. Watched football all the time instead of giving her what she needed. I used to suspect he was really gay."

"Ask him what made him suspect Kent was gay," Michael said. Jack repeated the question.

Miller shrugged. "I don't know. It was this...feeling I'd get around him. That, together with his complete lack of interest in Angie. It was like he married her just to show the world he's normal. Of course, I've never told Angie my suspicion. No use rubbing salt in the wound."

"All right. Go on. Kent started up with you at the bar."

"Yeah. I didn't mean to break up their marriage. Conrad was bitter. Anyway, he came up to me while I was talking to someone. I'd had a couple myself and my muscles were a bit bigger from it. I tried to tell him to go sleep it off but that only made him angrier. He pushed me. I pushed back, hard, and he fell over a table backward. Hurt his back. I paid his medical bills. I apologized. I wish it hadn't happened, but then about ten days later as I was leaving for work, the police came to my door and served me with the restraining order. Can you imagine? What judge gives a restraining order for a bar fight. He has an expensive lawyer," Miller snickered.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that all the things I said to threaten him went into some report along with his medical report, making it look like I'd kill him if I got half a chance. Which I *didn't*."

"When did all this happen?"

Miller considered. "I think not quite three weeks ago."

"Is that why he went to Kent's apartment?" Michael asked. "To make amends?"

Jack repeated the question to Miller.

Miller nodded. "Yes. I wasn't there long, I swear."

"How'd you get in? There's a buzzer. The door downstairs is locked."

"Someone had propped it open. It was like that when I got there. I went upstairs and knocked on his door. He wouldn't open it, of course, even though I promised not to hurt him. I just wanted to apologize for what had happened. We work in the same office. I couldn't be tip-toeing around. I can't help my clients with that kind of pressure. It's not good for the office. Or for my relationship with Angie."

Jack sighed. In fact, the security tape showed that a guy moving a few boxes in had propped the door open for roughly twelve minutes, during which Miller had gone in and then left. Not long enough to have committed this murder.

"He's telling the truth," Michael said. "He's contrite over his actions. He didn't want to harm Kent and is more concerned over the fact that he hurt the man. The person we're looking for was concerned with punishing his victim. The killer feels no remorse. He's psychopathic."

"I swear," Miller said, unaware of Michael speaking into Jack's ear, "I didn't get through the apartment door. I couldn't have been there more than six minutes. He was alive when I left."

After letting Miller leave, Jack left the interview room and rejoined Michael while pulling the bug from his ear. "It's looking like you're right," he said, taking the wireless from Michael's hand.

Michael nodded. "Yes. Keep Miller in your radar, if you must, but your energy is best spent speaking to the doctor and looking at the security tapes some more. Obviously, the murderer is on them."

"You're right." They still had the unidentified woman from the morning visit to Kent's apartment, yet had pounced on the fact that Miller had appeared on the tape. He led Michael through the hallway and up the stairs to the offices of the Homicide Unit. "Miller was the last man seen leaving the building until the next morning when a couple of the building's residents left for work. During the hours of the murder, only two women were seen coming in and out of the building." He held the door open for Michael as he continued, "They were both buzzed in, but I haven't looked at the tapes myself."

Michael paused in the doorway. A look passed between them and Jack could tell they were thinking of the same thing. "You'd better look at the tape again," he said softly.

"Yes, I had." After getting them each a cup of coffee, he led Michael to his office, between the rows of desks where detectives of the other day teams were making phone

calls, researching on computers and moving around on the business of solving other homicides on open file. Inside his tiny office, Jack pulled up a chair to his desk for Michael and turned the computer monitor so they both could see it. The tapes had been converted into discs and loaded onto the mainframe, which he accessed for the hours in question. They watched each individual who came up to the door, making note when possible of the apartment the visitor had dialed. They watched the man with the boxes prop open the front door.

"There's Bob Miller," Michael said, watching Miller walk up to the door, look at the directory, then pass through the propped open doorway. Miller hadn't bothered calling up to let Kent know he was there. "If the door had been locked," he went on, "Kent obviously wouldn't have buzzed Miller in anyway."

Jack nodded. His awareness of Michael heightened in that moment to include the attraction he felt for him. He was glad to have Michael there, watching the tape with him, as if he had an ally or a secret weapon that made the investigation proceed more smoothly. Michael certainly had been helpful with Miller's interview.

There was now a stretch of time before the next person on the tape showed up. Jack fast-forwarded the tape then let it run at normal speed. "There she is." He leaned in, aware his movement also brought him closer to Michael. "Looks like the same woman from earlier."

"Yes, it does." Michael sipped his coffee while they watched. "Except that you and I both agreed earlier that the killer is probably a man."

Jack pressed a key and zoomed in on the apartment number the woman punched in for entry. "Same apartment she went into that morning," he said. Then he heard Michael pull in a breath. "Something wrong?"

"Zoom in on her and pause." Staring at the image, Michael set his cup down.

Jack did as he said and then turned.

Michael appeared mesmerized. He barely blinked as he studied the woman. Even his breathing seemed so quiet it appeared nonexistent.

"What do you see?"

Michael didn't answer. He continued to stare. "What are you?" he asked under his breath. "Who are you?" Michael closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His long dark eyelashes rested on his cheeks.

Jack frowned. Was he meditating or something? Instinct told him to remain quiet and let Michael work. From what he'd seen so far of the man, he worked in a weird way. But he was effective. And brilliant. He fought back the urge to stare at Michael's profile of clean lines, clear skin and long lashes.

"Who are you?" Michael whispered again. "What are you doing? What did you want?" His whisper continued, a litany of questions that gave Michael an air of madness. The impression intensified when Michael wheeled his chair back, vaulted up and began pacing, his lips moving. Michael's hand disappeared into his jacket then

moved up to his mouth. His cheek bulged out with a sucking candy. Eyeing the dry erase board in the main room, Michael approached it.

Jack followed him and stood nearby, watching. Michael halted. One hand agitated through his dark brown hair. The smooth strands sifted between his fingertips. Then he resumed pacing. "Were you punishing him? Was it his weakness? Was he weak man who let you down? Did he disgust you? What was it?" Michael stopped in his tracks again, head bowed.

Jack stared at him as if watching a fascinating film. He couldn't predict what Michael would do or say next.

Michael put his hands together in fists and stretched them out in front of him. "Was it rage? Indignation? He didn't deserve to live, did he?"

Jack's heartbeat rose. What the hell was Michael doing? His whispered litany of questions continued while he held his fisted hands outstretched. Then it hit Jack. Michael was holding the knife, as if he were wrapped around the victim, in the position they'd assumed the night before on the rug. Jesus! Michael was putting himself in the murderer's place, trying to take on his mindset, emotions, motivations, thoughts.

"Did you love him enough to want dignity for him?" Michael asked, a bit louder now.

The office seemed quieter. The silence made Jack look up. All activity had stopped. Nearly every man and woman in the large room was watching Michael, expressions ranging from fascinated to weirded out.

"You weak bastard," Michael muttered, oblivious to his audience. Righteous anger laced his tone. "There are too many in this world like you. I can't get to them all, but I can get to you." Michael pulled back. His fists slammed into his stomach.

The spell broke. He dropped his arms to his sides and stood in front of the board where the photographs of the victim and crime scene had been taped up and some notes written around them in blue marker. Michael picked up a red marker, pulled off the cap and scribbled on a blank area of the white board.

In less than a minute, words echoing the phrases Michael had been whispering covered a circular area with a question mark in the center. Michael scribbled the male and female symbols next to each other with a slash mark in between them. He stopped and stared, his back to everyone who was watching him, including Jack.

Jack studied the things Michael had written in between glances at Michael's silent figure. Activity trickled back into the office as people resumed their work. When the atmosphere reached its normal level, Michael reached up and drew circles around the male and female symbols.

Only then did he turn and look at Jack. "It's both," he said.

Jack blinked. "Both?"

Michael nodded, an odd fire in his eyes. "Yes. Male and female. Well, not necessarily that the person we're looking for is both male and female," he said and

crossed over to Jack's desk. "The killer is definitely physically and biologically male, but gender-wise, he has issues. He either likes to cross-dress, is fascinated with what he perceives as femininity inside his own psyche, or he's gay and hates himself deeply for it. He'd cure himself of homosexuality if he could. He's horrified by it, hates it and wishes he could destroy it. The chance is very high that he grew up in an abusive home, with a mother who dominated and terrorized him, with a weak father who did nothing to defend him. Or he had a father who was brutal and an emotionally or physically absent mother, such as was the case with Albert De Salvo, the Boston Strangler. Conrad Kent, his victim, appears to have been a weak man, emotionally. Perhaps Bob Miller was right. Maybe Kent was bisexual or gay and his marriage disintegrated because of it. This would make him a target of his killer's hatred. Either that or Kent would be an easier target simply because he was vulnerable. The killer would see the same horrifying qualities in Kent as in himself and murdering Kent would be a way to purge both Kent and himself."

"What about the things you were saying about the death poem?"

"That still goes. If Kent had issues similar to the person the killer was trying to purge from himself, then the killer chose Kent for that reason. Kent would have triggered those responses in him."

Jack had listened carefully, absorbing everything Michael said. Then the implication hit him. "So the woman on the security tape is actually a man dressed as a woman?"

Michael nodded. "I'm ninety-nine and a half percent sure of it."

Jack nodded. "That's a pretty good percentage. Enough to go on for now." He thought about the tape again. "If the 'woman' who visited his apartment that morning was actually the man who had intercourse with him, then it's possibly the same man who returned later and killed him."

Michael nodded. "That's right. Our killer is a man with homosexual tendencies at the very least. Someone with intimate knowledge of *seppuku* and the intelligence to compose a death poem. He is also someone Kent trusted enough to let into his apartment and his life. Kent obviously let him back in later that day, never suspecting the person was coming to murder him."

"Sarge." Jack heard Mal approach him.

"Yeah?"

"I found the doctor whose name is on the prescription. He's a psychiatrist, not an internist. He has a small private practice out of his home apparently. His number is listed in the phone book. No office or anything." She gave him the number, which he jotted down in his pad.

Jack turned his eyes from the board. Another guess Michael had gotten right. "So turns out you might be right about why Kent was taking propranolol."

Michael nodded. "I'm correct sometimes. Perhaps Kent had post traumatic stress."

"There's only one way to know." Pulling out his cell phone, he dialed Dr. Kinsey's number and waited. Someone picked up on the third ring.

"This is Dr. Kinsey. May I help you?"

"Dr. Kinsey, this is Sergeant-Detective Jack Cade from the Boston Police Department. I need to come and ask you some questions regarding a patient of yours, Conrad Kent."

"Oh? Is something the matter? I hope Mr. Kent is all right."

"Actually, I'm sorry to tell you he was murdered last night."

Silence. After several moments, Dr. Kinsey cleared his throat. "Oh my God. The poor man."

"I need to ask you some questions about him."

"Of course. Anything I can do to help. I regret that I have sessions this morning but I do have some free time around two o'clock? There's a café on Newbury Street around the corner from my office. I could meet you there. That's when I can grab some lunch in between patients."

"That would be fine." Jack jotted down the name of the restaurant and ended the call. "He can see us at two," he told Michael. "Unless you have a class?"

Michael shook his head. "No. I'm free."

"Good. I don't want to interfere in your other job."

A rare smile flashed across Michael's lips. "Don't worry," he said, humor touching his voice. "You're not."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Kinsey was already sitting at a sidewalk table when he and Michael walked up. Dressed in a light gray suit, the solitary man at the table against the café's plate glass window had to be Dr. Kinsey. "Dr. Kinsey?"

The man looked up. He had salt and pepper hair, strong features and dark eyes that appeared to assess a person in one glance. "Detective Cade?"

"Yes."

Kinsey half stood and offered a quick handshake.

Jack introduced Michael to the man who then invited them to join him at the table. A waiter approached. "Can I treat you gentlemen to a cup of coffee?" Kinsey asked. "Espresso?"

"No, thank you."

"Please, I insist." He ordered two coffees for them then pulled his chair in a bit closer. He picked up a spoon and stirred the coffee already on the table in front of him. But before Jack could ask him anything, Kinsey pinned Michael with an interested look. "Michael Di Santo," he said. "That name is familiar. You're a profiler." He smiled, looking in turn to each of them. "I admit I have a pet interest in profiling myself and read the trade journals. I believe you were featured in an article, maybe a year and half ago?"

Michael cleared his throat. Jack looked at him, noting the set of his lips, as if someone had just pushed a piece of lemon into his mouth. "Yes," Michael said softly.

Kinsey shook his head. "Incredible what you accomplished. An asset to the profession." He looked at Jack. "Dr. Di Santo profiled a case almost thirty years old. A child had been abducted. The trail went cold and then thirty years later Dr. Di Santo profiled the man who was then found and arrested and the child's body recovered. The child was —"

"Dr. Kinsey," he said, "about Conrad Kent." Jack didn't like the pain in Michael's eyes. Michael obviously didn't want to remember it and a protective urge swelled in him.

Kinsey started, as if physically jolted from his fascination with Michael's accomplishment. "Oh yes. Please forgive me. I tend to get carried away with admiration for brilliance." He shook his head. "Just terrible about Conrad, Detective."

The waiter returned with the coffees and Kinsey waited for him to set the cups and saucers down. "What did you need to know about him?" he asked when the waiter had left.

Jack poured some cream into his cup and set the tiny pitcher down. He then opened a sugar packet, dropped the contents into his cup and stirred. From the corner of his eye, he saw Michael sit, head slightly bowed. Michael made no move to sip his coffee or even pick up his spoon to stir in cream or sugar. "Well, anything you can tell us might help. To start, how long had he been your patient?"

Kinsey moved the creamer to the other side of the table, close to Michael's place then put his hand in his lap. "Conrad started coming to see me when he and his wife were getting divorced. I would say a little more than a year ago. We had weekly sessions. I encouraged him to attend my men's group too, but he didn't want to."

"So he came to you for help coping with divorce?"

Kinsey took a sip of coffee and set the cup on the saucer. "Not only to deal with the divorce." He paused, a cautious look rippling over his face. Then he sighed. "I suppose now that the poor man is gone, it wouldn't be a violation of patient confidentiality to tell you. Conrad was struggling with his sexual orientation. He married his wife to... legitimize himself in the eyes of the world." Kinsey shook his head. "But of course, the truth always comes out, doesn't it? His marriage failed because of it and he just absolutely couldn't learn to accept himself as he was."

"Was he suicidal?" Feeling a pang of concern for Michael, Jack glanced at him. The other man had turned his attention to Dr. Kinsey, his expression inscrutable.

Another sigh and Kinsey sipped his coffee. "I'm afraid so. He was very depressed. He couldn't sleep. His work life was failing also. He didn't get along with his co-workers."

"Dr. Kinsey, you'd prescribed propranolol for Kent. As far as I know, that's a drug for heart problems. Why was he on this drug? His medical records show he didn't have a heart condition."

Kinsey shook his head and sipped his coffee. "Conrad suffered from post traumatic stress. When he was a child, he was staying in a motel room on a family trip and two men broke into their room in the middle of the night and held him and his parents at gun point. Poor Conrad had never gotten over that experience. To this day he still had nightmares. The propranolol helped mute the agony of the memory, allowing him to process the trauma. I had hopes he would be able to get on with his life."

"I see. Did he ever mention someone who might want to hurt him? Someone who bore a grudge or hated him?"

Kinsey seemed to reflect a few moments then shook his head. "Not in his workplace. There was some friction with his former wife's new husband, I know. Hm. Oh yes, there was something he mentioned a short time back. I don't remember exactly when. He was...involved with someone. A man."

"What's this person's name?"

"Well, he never told me the person's whole name or anything like that. He'd only refer to him as Dick. No last name, no description. They met at a nightclub. Apparently Dick works there as a bartender. Club Moritz, I believe he said it was."

"Was it serious?" Michael asked.

Kinsey looked at him and Jack didn't miss the flicker of attraction in the psychiatrist's eyes. Just then, the waiter served Kinsey a sandwich. Kinsey thanked him and took a bite of one half. He chewed almost daintily for several moments before swallowing and continuing to speak. "It was...turbulent. I'm not sure if you could call it a serious relationship. At least not based on what Conrad would tell me about it."

"What did he tell you about it?"

"As I said before, Conrad was never able to accept his homosexuality. I believe that's why he avoided the men's group, you see. Yet, he couldn't keep away from Dick. It seemed to be mutual even though they had friction at times. Conrad would tell him he couldn't see him anymore. Dick would get upset. He'd do anything to hang onto Conrad, even dress as a woman whenever he went to Conrad's building. Conrad didn't want his neighbors to think he was having sex with a man. Dick didn't like that condition, but he complied if it meant being with Conrad."

Jack glanced at Michael who returned the quick look but remained otherwise unusually quiet. Quite a contrast to the way he'd barged into the interview with Angie Miller and her husband.

"It sounds like Mr. Kent was quite open with you in spite of his shame," Michael said to Kinsey.

Kinsey's gaze whipped to him, as if surprised by the statement. "Well, you and I both know what we get per hour in our profession. Conrad wanted his money's worth. He used to say that sometimes."

"I see."



Jack sipped his coffee, observing the interaction between Michael and Kinsey. Michael's normally smooth skin had small lines and his eyes had a look in them of distinct pain. It was time to wrap up this interview, if anything, to get Michael away from the man who'd dredged up something obviously painful for him. Jack took another sip of coffee. The liquid had cooled sufficiently that he drained it in a few more sips. When he set the cup down, preparing to leave, he saw that Michael had barely touched his. When he stood, Michael stood also. "Thank you for your time, Dr. Kinsey," Jack said. "I'll be in touch if there's anything else. Sorry to have disturbed your meal."

"Not at all, Detective. I'm glad to be of help." He shook Jack's hand and then offered Michael a handshake. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Di Santo. Perhaps sometime we could chat?"

"Certainly." Michael shook his hand politely but Jack sensed the residue of distress that clung to him.

"Where can I get hold of you?"

"I have a card."

Jack watched Michael fish one from his wallet and hand it to Kinsey. Sudden jealousy pricked him. He shrugged it off. Ridiculous. He'd only met Michael yesterday. They'd had one brief sexual encounter. How many of those had he had in his adult life? He thought of the condoms he'd stuck in his pocket this morning before leaving his apartment. The fact that he'd been hoping for another chance with Michael struck him with force. Pushing his chagrin away, he turned to go and Michael fell into step behind him. He flipped open his phone and called Mal. "Hey," he said when she answered, "Listen, we have a possible lead."

"Shoot."

"Check through Kent's cell phone contacts again and see if there's anyone named Dick on the list. I'll wait."

"Sure thing. I happen to have it right here at my desk." Jack heard a few clicks in the background as Murphy accessed the address book on the phone. "Ah," she said after barely a minute. "There is someone named Dick."

"Any last name?"

"No. Just Dick."

"Kent's psychiatrist said Kent was sexually involved with someone named Dick who works as a bartender at Club Moritz on Tremont. Give the place a call and see what you can find. Then call me right back. I'm bringing Dr. Di Santo back to Cambridge."

"You got it, Sarge."

"Thanks." Jack closed the phone and slipped it into his pocket.

"I can take the T," Michael said. "I'm not going back to work. I'm going home."

Jack looked at him. That protective feeling emerged again and he shook his head. "Wherever you're going, I prefer to drop you back myself."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Okay. Thank you."

Once they were in the car, Jack buckled his seat belt and took a deep breath. "Hey, are you all right?"

Michael slid his seat belt down and clicked it shut. He was looking straight ahead, giving Jack the feeling he was avoiding eye contact. "Are you referring to my response to Dr. Kinsey's remarks about that article?"

"Well, yes."

Michael glanced in his direction. It seemed as if a wall were closing around him, one Jack couldn't see, but was palpable. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking." He looked straight ahead and fell silent.

Jack started the ignition.

## Chapter Five

Jack pulled up to the curb in front of Michael's place. He put the car into park and kept the motor running. "Here you are."

Michael had been silent the entire ride to Cambridge and now sat, staring ahead, as if he didn't want to leave. "Are you in a rush?" he asked.

Jack raised his eyebrows. Was this an invitation? Of course, he needed to get back but he was too concerned about Michael to rush off. "I don't think so."

"You want some tea?" Michael glanced at him and away.

Jack's heartbeat sped up a bit. If Michael hadn't seemed so upset, Jack would have been amused and charmed by what seemed a shy invitation from a socially inept, strangely likeable man who also happened to be hot. "Sure." He turned off the ignition and got out, following Michael up to his front door.

In the entryway, Michael slipped off his shoes and set them neatly aside. Jack followed his lead, setting his shoes next to Michael's.

"Sorry about the mess," Michael said, sounding truly embarrassed. "I still haven't finished unpacking."

"It's not so bad." Jack took in the surroundings as he followed Michael through the hallway and into the living room. The first thing he noticed was a statue of the Buddha in a corner, a tall, stone carving. On the floor around it sat incense, candles and a small bell, like an oasis of peace in the middle of Michael's unfinished work.

"That's my altar."

Jack looked up.

Michael was in the kitchen, which adjoined the living room to make one large room. "It's the only thing I've taken the time to settle so far." He filled a kettle at the sink and set it on the stove.

"I see. It's nice." He crossed to the black leather sofa, shrugged out of his jacket, which he laid aside and took a seat, trying his best not to appear as wickedly curious about his host as he was. So far, there wasn't much in the way of personal things to satisfy that curiosity. "Are you Japanese?"

"Half. My mother's side."

Jack grinned. "Italian on the father's side, right?" Michael's last name was a giveaway.

Michael's eyes widened as he measured tea leaves into a porcelain teapot, one that had a basket weave pattern and a bamboo handle. "How'd you guess?"

Jack laughed. "The detective in me."

"Really?"

Jack's humor faded. Michael's sense of humor wasn't working, apparently. Showed how distressed he was. "I meant, your last name is Italian. I kind of did the math."

"Oh. I see."

Jack sighed. *Never mind.* His eye fell on two photographs in frames on the side table. He tried unsuccessfully not to stare at the images, one of two little boys, both smiling. One was a little older and taller than the other, holding a soccer ball. Dressed in matching t-shirts and jeans, they were grinning. The taller boy had an arm across the smaller boy's shoulders in a way that gave Jack the impression they'd been called in from playing together to pose for the picture. He'd have thought maybe they were Michael's kids or nephews, but judging from the hairstyles and clothing, as well as the slight yellowing of the matte finish, the picture dated back to the late '70s. Which meant that one of the boys was probably Michael.

The other picture was of a solitary figure, a young, unbelievably handsome Asian man standing in what appeared to be the front entryway of a house or apartment. He was dressed in a casual suit, a drink in one hand. Jack looked a bit closer. Was that Michael? On closer scrutiny, he saw that, no, it wasn't, even though Michael was easily as good-looking. Judging from the man's longish, wavy hairstyle, rolled up jacket sleeves and very narrow tie, the photo was from the late eighties. Was that the other little boy from the photo of the two children?

A cat's meow pulled his attention. A tabby cat sat on the floor by his feet, looking up at him with huge green eyes. The cat mewed again, its gaze even on his.

"Hi there," he said.

The cat blinked, as if to acknowledge the greeting. Chuckling, Jack leaned over and scratched its head. The creature immediately started purring, moving its head this way and that so Jack wouldn't miss a spot. "You're friendly, aren't you?" In the background, the kettle bubbled and hissed. He heard Michael pick up the teapot and pour the water into the pot.

"That's Chie," Michael said. "She loves attention."

"She's cute."

"Thank you."

Jack watched Michael set the pot and cups onto a tray, which he carried over and set on the glass coffee table. Steam curled from the spout of the teapot. He sat back against the sofa. If he'd seen Jack examining the photographs, he gave no indication. "I hope Chie isn't bothering you too much."

"Not at all." The cat's purring was like a motor humming in the background. Jack gave her a final pat on the head and sat up, giving his attention to Michael. The heavy air that had settled on him since Dr. Kinsey's remarks hadn't lifted and for the first time, Jack thought maybe there was a connection between Michael's response and the near anxiety attack he'd had the night before on the rug, just before they'd...

Jack cleared his throat. No need to have erotic memories distracting blood from his brain into his groin area. "Listen, Michael, I know it's rude to pry. We just met. But if you need to talk about anything, I'll listen." When Michael didn't answer, Jack tensed. The other man seemed to be in another world and it was hard to know if the offer to talk was unwanted or not. "However," Jack added quickly, "you can also tell me to mind my own business."

For several moments, Michael didn't say anything but then looked up and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to withdraw like that."

"It's okay. I just noticed that what Kinsey said bothered you."

Michael sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "Yeah," he said softly, "It happens anytime I meet someone who's who read that article. When Dr. Kinsey mentioned it..." He fell silent again and shrugged.

"I saw that. That's why I'm concerned. I know from experience that working on a case involving a child is the worst. It doesn't leave you."

Michael exhaled and leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "No, it doesn't. But this case was more personal. The murdered child I helped to find was...my brother. That's what he was about to say when you stopped him."

Jack felt a bolt of heat down his back. "Oh my God, Michael, I'm sorry."

Michael nodded. "Thanks. Dr. Kinsey was at least polite enough not to mention that." Reaching over, he picked up the photograph of the two boys. "That was me and Peter, a few months before it happened. He was eight. I was ten."

"Jesus. I don't know what to say."

Michael replaced the photograph and glanced at him, pain in his eyes. "Don't worry. There's nothing to say." He busied himself then with pouring the tea and set a strainer over the cup to catch the tiny leaves as they spilled out with the yellowish-colored tea. "There's sugar here, if you need it."

"This is fine, thanks." He picked up the cup and took a small sip. Horror still reverberated through him. Made him remember Billy. "I lost a brother too," he said softly.

Michael turned large, wide eyes to him. "Really?"

He nodded. "I'm the youngest of five brothers. I was only six months old when Billy was drafted back in '69. He died there so I never met him, but I grew up with the loss haunting my family." His other brother, Danny, came back alive, in a wheelchair, but Jack didn't mention this part out of consideration for Michael's feelings since his brother was dead.

Michael was still looking at him. Sympathy had replaced the wide-eyed shock and most of his heaviness. "I'm so sorry too." He was thoughtful a few seconds. "Everyone suffers," he said gently.

"Yes." Jack took a sip of tea, feeling suddenly awkward, as if they'd shared a... moment. Michael's burden seemed lightened by having told it to another human being.

Was it his imagination? His mind flickered to a thought of the other photograph. The hot guy in it obviously wasn't Michael's brother.

But Michael didn't volunteer an explanation.

"The thing is," Michael continued on after a moment, "Peter would be alive if I hadn't..." He fell silent and sat quietly, rubbing a fingertip absently along the rim of his cup. "We were playing in the yard. If I hadn't run into the house to get a drink of water, he'd not have been kidnapped."

"What?" Jack stared at him. How could Michael blame himself for such a thing? "You were ten years old. It's not your fault there are sick bastards in the world."

Michael nodded, avoiding his eyes. "I left him alone. It had to be less than a minute, but when I came out, he was gone."

Jack palmed the small porcelain cup he held. The heat simmered into his flesh. "Where were your parents?"

Michael glanced at him with a pained look. "Away, visiting a friend of theirs who had cancer. Peter and I were staying with our grandparents."

Jack sat quietly, watching Michael's finger rub absently over the rim of his cup. It explained the anxiety. Anyone who carried that kind of self-blame and guilt around couldn't feel peaceful. Without thinking, he reached out and laid a hand on Michael's shoulder. "That's why you profiled the killer all those years later, isn't it?" he asked softly.

Michael didn't look up, as if he were embarrassed. "Yes. I couldn't rest until I'd found the killer. And Peter." He canted his face up slightly, still not making eye contact. It seemed he had great difficulty voicing his feelings yet was unable to keep the burden to himself any longer. "It didn't bring the peace I expected it to."

Jack set his cup down and turned fully to Michael. "Is that why you did it? To find peace?"

Michael stared at him, his almond-shaped eyes misting. "Yes, but it didn't work."

Jack felt a pang. "I'm sorry." An impulse made him touch Michael's cheek.

"It was stupid of me to think that."

"No," Jack said firmly. A man who'd done what Michael did should never have to feel that way. "Not stupid. Honorable and brave."

"Yeah, brave." Michael sighed and Jack felt him withdrawing again. Best not to push. At least Michael had unloaded a bit of his troubles. He saw Michael's gaze go to the photograph of the two boys.

"Maybe that wasn't the only reason," Michael said finally. His voice was a near-whisper. "I did it also because...life is precious."

"Yes. Life is precious," Jack said. He brushed his fingertips across Michael's cheek again. Michael's eyelids fluttered a bit as Jack traced the contour of his cheekbone. "Friendship is precious."

Michael's features tightened. "I don't have any friends," he said. "Well, no close friends."

Jack frowned, reminded of the other photo, the one of the movie star handsome Asian guy. Obviously not Michael's brother. "Isn't he your friend?" he asked and pointed to the photo, daring this little deeper foray into the other man's personal life.

Michael started. His gaze jerked to the picture and back. "Ah, Toshi. Sort of. I don't know. We had a...romance, a long time ago. Back at Berkeley."

Jack digested that information. It was none of his business, of course, but it only made his curiosity worsen. He caught Michael looking at him and saw understanding light in the other man's eyes.

"Oh you were thinking that he...that he and I still..." Michael shook his head then heaved a sigh. "It's been twelve years since we broke up." He gestured toward the picture. "We dated during his undergraduate, my graduate years. Then he returned to Tokyo."

"You don't have to explain, Michael. It not my —"

"I don't mind." The way Michael said that made it clear their encounter the night before occupied his thoughts. "I know it's weird to keep the picture out like this, especially when we've barely spoke since he left. Last year, not long after I found... Peter...the University of Tokyo invited me to guest lecture. I ended up helping the police there on a murder case. Toshi was one of the detectives."

Jack's gut made a small flip. "He's a detective." It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes. And he's in a serious relationship. I met the man. A Gulf War vet who helped with a serial murder case not long ago. A psychic who developed an intense sixth sense due to post-traumatic stress disorder. He moved to Tokyo to be with Toshi."

Jack sat up a bit. "I think I've heard of him. He's helped solve cases all over the place." The coincidence only partially distracted him from attempting to tell whether Michael was upset over Toshi's non-single status.

"John's a good guy," Michael said. "He moved all the way to Japan just to be with Toshi."

That was the second time Michael had mentioned this fact. Something about it bothered Michael. "Were *you* planning to get back together with him?" he ventured, his more subtle way of asking whether Michael still had feelings for this man, Toshi. His heartbeat sped up a bit and he chided himself even as he waited for the answer. He and Michael had shared a few moments of lust. It wasn't the first time something like that had happened, but it usually took more than once with someone before it mattered to him.

Michael shook his head. "No. But that's what's always bothered me. We were each other's first serious relationship. He had to go back because of family pressure. We talked about him staying in America. He wanted to, but he gave in to his family."

"I'm sorry."

Michael canted his gaze upward. The expression in his eyes showed frustration. His hand came out and Jack saw a flash of orange as he popped one of those sucking candies in his mouth. The candy went *click click* against his teeth and his cheek bulged out the side, putting that erotic image again into Jack's mind. Jack tried not to remember the condoms stashed in his pocket.

"I thought about following him," Michael went on, "but I couldn't. I just couldn't leave home. That's when I became fixated on finding Peter's killer and Peter's remains. It took me years. Years of studying, learning, getting my degrees and teaching others. I garnered the knowledge and experience I needed to follow a trail gone so cold."

"That's incredible, Michael." He would have asked Michael how he'd actually profiled for such a cold case but to do so would have been absolutely insensitive. So he remained quiet and tried not to stare too much at the way Michael worked the candy around in his mouth.

"Then I was free," Michael continued, not noticing the effect his oral fixation was having on Jack. "For the first time in my life I was able to leave home. I went to Tokyo for that job and ended up working with Toshi. We spent some time together. Not romantically," he added quickly. "I'd never realized it was my need to find Peter that had been keeping me in California." Michael paused and sipped his tea. The candy bobbed in his cheek when he swallowed.

Jack watched that too, caught between wanting to hear what Michael would say next and wanting to pull the man into his arms and lick every inch of his body.

Finally, Michael continued, "I was disappointed at first that Toshi had found someone. But then I was relieved. I didn't want to move there to Tokyo, which I would have had to do to be with him. I could have done it. I could have stayed there. I speak the language. I have family there. John didn't speak one word. He knew nobody but Toshi."

Jack had continued to stare at Michael's cheek as he spoke. There were other ways he could think of for Michael to satisfy this oral thing he had. In spite of that, however, Michael's words penetrated his consciousness. Interesting that this was the part of Michael's story he made certain to share. It was as if the man had his own language and needed someone else to decipher it. "You're upset that you didn't love him enough, aren't you?"

Michael's gaze whipped to his. The man's beautiful eyes were wide and his lips slightly parted. The expression went from shock to a look that said, "*I'm* the psychologist here. Why didn't I figure it out?" For several cock-hardening moments, Michael's perfectly shaped lips rubbed together while he sucked the candy and processed his thoughts. Finally he nodded. "Yes," he said softly.

And yet Jack noticed when Michael looked back at the picture, there was a distinct softness in his gaze. In spite of what Michael was saying, he hadn't let go of Toshi completely.



The wave of disappointment Jack felt surprised him. He shrugged it off, reminded of how the intensity of a murder investigation often skewed his perception in other areas of his life. No doubt, Michael suffered with it the same ways he did and that made Jack feel a connection to him he'd not felt with lovers who weren't in his line of work.

Yes, he decided, that was it. They were both lonely. It didn't matter that Michael was still hanging on to his lost lover. At least they could have some pleasure together. Why push for more than that? In the meantime, Jack admitted to himself, he genuinely liked the guy. "Hey," he said in a quiet tone, "you're awfully hard on yourself, you know. It's not your fault. You can't tell your heart how to feel. How old were you then?"

"Not quite twenty-three." Michael sounded forlorn. His cheek moved as he rolled the candy against it. With his tongue, no doubt.

Jack ignored the increased tightness in his cock. Was Michael really this unaware of the effect he had? "You were both young," he said, speaking past the haze his mind was fast falling into, "in case you haven't noticed, it takes a long time to get to know yourself. What good is being angry at yourself for something like that?" It struck Jack as cruel, actually, to criticize oneself for such a mistake, but he didn't say that. He merely felt moved by the bit of relief that trickled into Michael's expression. The conversation seemed to be helping him, which was what Jack had wanted. "Anyway," he said, touching Michael's shoulder again, "*I'm your friend.*"

Michael's tan cheeks actually deepened in color and he glanced away. Though Jack didn't miss the smile that passed over his lips. "Thank you," he said softly.

"You're welcome." Jack reached out and brushed his fingertips over Michael's cheek. The man's skin was so smooth, so perfect. Truthfully, Michael was every bit as good-looking as his past lover, Toshi. Just different. And the way Michael was looking back...sweet and hot all at once, made him melt. The look was similar to the one the night before, when Michael's hard-on had pressed into his ass and Michael had pulled back, horrified and bowing in apology. When Jack had lifted Michael up, not wanting him to be sorry, Michael's eyes had blazed with embarrassment, desire and a look of being lost and sad, so in need of...compassion. That was the only word that had come to Jack's mind then, and he'd given compassion the only way he knew how. Whether Michael was conscious of this combination he radiated, Jack couldn't know, but the force pulled him to Michael again, made his insides feel all mushy and...sweet. He glided several fingertips over Michael's bulging cheek again.

Michael's eyelids lowered. His breathing deepened and his upper body sank back against the sofa cushions as Jack caressed his skin.

Jack sank a bit closer. "And," he said, his voice huskier, "as your friend, I must insist you cut back on the sweets." He tapped Michael's cheek with the pad of his index finger.

Michael's eyelids rose again. For a second he looked puzzled then nodded. "You're right. It's become an unconscious habit."

He started to take the candy out but Jack caught his wrist and held it. "Let me," he said and leaned forward. He closed his lips over Michael's and stole inside with his tongue. Michael sighed and sank deeper into the cushions.

Jack's eyes floated closed. His fingertips caressed Michael's cheek as he pressed down against him, their mouths joined. Jack cupped Michael's cheek, gently holding him while he sought the candy with tiny licks over Michael's tongue. A burst of sweet orange pervaded the kiss.

Jack felt a hand on his back, rubbing his muscles over his thin shirt. Michael's scent, light soap from the shower this morning, mingled with the orange tang of the candy and his natural scent. He rubbed Michael's cheekbone with the pad of his thumb while he swirled his tongue around the candy and against Michael's tongue. Mmm, the closest to heaven he could imagine. His heartbeat rose and hot blood seemed to swirl faster through his veins. At this point, he should have been undoing the buttons of Michael's shirt, opening the fastener of his slacks and reaching in to rub his cock. Which he wanted but found himself trapped in the orange kiss.

Keeping his lips against Michael's, he let his breath pass into the other man and Michael's into him. With tiny licks, he engaged Michael's tongue in an erotic dance around the sweet orange ball. So strange. So different, as if he could infuse Michael with the comfort the man so desperately needed.

One of Michael's hands slid into his hair. A tiny movement of surrender that made Jack sigh and swirl his tongue more feverishly against Michael's. The candy was dissolving bit by bit between their tongues. Neither of them moved except for the chafing of their lips, the shared licking of the candy and Michael's fingers agitating in his hair.

They stayed like that, for what felt like a long time, until the candy had dissolved to a tiny dot of flavor. Jack pulled away and looked down at Michael whose hand slipped from his hair. The man's face was flushed. His lips glistened from the kiss. His eyelids were heavy. The sensuously hungry man gazing back at him was a far cry from the sad, withdrawn man he'd been just a short time earlier.

Jack couldn't help the flush of pleasure through his chest. He tugged lightly at the top button of Michael's shirt. "Should we keep going?"

Michael stared up at him. For one scary moment, Jack thought he'd say no. Michael had proven so far to be quite strange and unpredictable. But then he nodded and slid his palm over Jack's triceps.

Jack grinned and worked open the top button of Michael's shirt. That smooth tan skin he loved showed a bit more. He tugged open the second button, enjoying the simple act of revealing Michael's chest, like someone opening a gift slowly, teasing himself, knowing his delight will be all the more intense for the anticipation.

He opened the third button then the fourth. Almost there, except he needed to pull Michael's shirt out from his slacks to get it undone the rest of the way. Michael's chest

rose and fell deeply and he was staring, watching his torso being revealed, as if surprised that someone else could want so bad to see him without clothes on.

Finally, the prize. Jack grinned and smoothed his palm up Michael's taut stomach and over his lightly chiseled pecs. He had just the right amount of soft, dark hair sprinkled in the center. Jack raked several fingertips through it and traced one dark nipple. Michael pulled in a breath and tilted his head back in obvious enjoyment. "You're perfect," he breathed and slid his fingertips to the other side of Michael's chest. If he'd been able to create his own perfect guy, a man whose skin he wanted to taste, whose body and hair and eyes he wanted to stare at and touch, whose scent he wanted to inhale, he couldn't have created someone who turned him on more.

"Thank you."

He leaned in closer, hovering a mere few inches from Michael's lips. He slid his hand from Michael's chest to the side of his waist. "You're welcome," he whispered and took Michael's lips again.

Michael's tongue swirled around his, a dance of full, eager surrender. Jack sank into the kiss while his thumb brushed back and forth over the lower portion of Michael's rib cage. His eyelids sank closed again as he lost himself in the kiss. The sweetness of the orange candy lingered on Michael's lips and tongue, mingling with his natural flavor. A wild surge of possession gripped Jack and he licked deeper into Michael's mouth. His heart crashed in his chest, sending hot blood to every nerve in his body. Never had a simple kiss made such a fire in him.

Suddenly a phone rang. Michael pulled away and fumbled in his pocket. "Damn," he mumbled, groping with the obvious disorientation of a man pulled away from sexual activity. Finally he yanked it out and flipped it open. "Hel-hello?"

"Dr. Di Santo?" Jack heard a youngish female voice say. Unbidden, that tinge of jealousy snaked in. But it was gone just as quickly when he noted the sterile yet courteous way Michael addressed the woman, telling her, no, he had a few minutes to talk. A student in one of his lecture classes, apparently. She was asking him something about profiling.

Jack stared down at Michael's chest and abdomen. Sleek, this man's body was, and graceful, like the body of someone who spent time moving, biking, running, swimming. Without his clothes on, Michael completely lost the geeky part of his appearance and looked like a man who could grace the pages of a men's fitness magazine. Unable to resist, Jack trailed his fingertips down the center of Michael's chest through the soft patch of silky hair. He heard Michael's breath catch in the middle of a sentence.

He glanced up at Michael and saw the struggle in his face, heard it in his voice as he tried not to let his arousal come through. Instead of making Jack stop and wait for Michael to finish the call, it sparked a flame of pure mischief in him. He slid his hand down Michael's abdomen and traced a light circle around his belly button.

"Yes, Katy," Michael was saying, "that's, um, right. Yes."

Jack grinned again. Was that “yes” for his student or for him to continue his impish trail?

He decided to continue. Michael didn’t seem inclined to stop him so he undid the man’s belt and unbuttoned his slacks.

“Oh um, yes. That’s right too.”

Katy’s voice chattered on with an excited tone at Michael’s response.

Jack slid his fingertips under the waistband of Michael’s briefs and pulled them down. The man’s hard cock sprang free and Michael hitched a breath.

Jack grinned up at him, into Michael’s glazed look. His chest was panting and he obviously struggled to keep his voice steady on the phone.

For a few glorious moments, Jack savored the sight of Michael’s cock, noting its upward curve as it strained away from his body. Like the night before, he’d felt that stroke of luck. Even this part of Michael was perfect for him, not too thick, not too slim. The devilish urge overcame him again. He leaned over and pulled the head into his mouth.

“Oh!” Michael’s hand grabbed ineffectively at Jack’s collar.

“Dr. Di Santo, are you okay?” Jack heard the woman on the phone say. “Did I call at a bad time?”

“No, no. Not at all. But...really...” He paused for a breath as Jack slid his mouth down the shaft, swallowing him practically to his dark pubic hair. “We should talk more in person. Why don’t you come...I mean attend my office hours tomorrow? I... have a...list of further...reading.”

Jack grinned around Michael’s cock. He tasted incredible, the skin silky over the hardness. But it was nearly as much fun teasing him through his phone call.

“No problem, Katy. You’re welcome.” The phone fell onto the cushions from Michael’s hand and then slipped to the floor. The sound of Michael’s harsh panting filled Jack’s ears.

Jack thought to raise his head and tease Michael some more but couldn’t stop sucking long enough. Sliding up, he feathered the tip of his tongue around the head of Michael’s cock.

“Oh my God,” Michael breathed. “Ohhh.” His hand clutched at Jack’s hair, fingers agitating. Yet that was the only movement he made. The rest of him sagged deeply into the sofa cushions, immobile, a prisoner of Jack’s mouth.

Encouraged by Michael’s absolute appreciation, he lifted his mouth away and started stroking, small quick pumps with his hand while he explored Michael’s balls with his tongue. That was a favorite place on a guy and Michael was especially tasty. In long strokes he licked across the underside of the plump sac. Michael groaned each time, lifting his hips in a rhythm against Jack’s hand.

Michael was seeing stars. Behind his eyelids, little points of light dotted the dark, fathomless world. His body felt like a giant puddle soaking into the sofa, ecstasy replacing even the shock of having opened up his emotions to Jack earlier. Never before had he spoken about his grief from the depths as he had with Jack. Yet Jack's mouth pushed all that into the background.

The hot wet suction of Jack's tongue and lips on his balls and the quick deft strokes of that large hand on his cock held him prisoner. One hand clutched into Jack's hair but it wasn't a tight hold. Jack's dark blond hair was soft and merely brushed the pads of his fingertips. He had no strength to hold on. The pressure was building hard and fast deep in his shaft and if Jack didn't stop his stroking and licking, Michael was going to explode. Maybe even the top of his head would spin off, it felt so incredible.

Where had he been? When had sex ever been like this? Not in his experience. Was Jack the only guy in the world who could make a person feel like the hottest thing going and a worshiped god? His only real long-term experience had been with Toshi, a younger man who was just as inexperienced and even more reserved than he was. The few men he'd been with after Toshi were just like that too. Jack was a different world. Hot and commanding. Someone who'd listened to his troubles and offered a sympathetic shoulder without judgment. He was amazing.

And he seemed to be relishing his feast. Michael gazed down at him through partly raised eyelids. Jack's eyes were closed and from this angle, Michael could see how long his lashes really were. The man's cheeks were flushed and he appeared absolutely absorbed in his task of pleasure. Jack's other hand rested on Michael's hip, anchoring him in place against his licking and stroking.

The pressure became too great. A few more quick strokes and he came, one blissful spasm after the next, leaving him mindless, speechless. All he could do was lie there and stare at Jack, breathing heavily and feeling his entire body wrung out in the most incredible way.

Jack's hand stilled on his cock and he finally looked up at Michael, a sensuous grin across his lips. "Was that okay?"

*Okay?* The thought flashed through Michael's mind, calm and peaceful for the first time...well, maybe the first time in his life. In spite of the Buddhist influence in his life, the meditative mind had always eluded him. *Okay* seemed a pitifully meager way to describe what Jack had just done to – and for – him. Wordlessly he nodded. "More than okay," he whispered.

Jack's smile widened. He looked like an eager student who'd just been given a top grade from his beloved teacher. Leaning in, Jack ran his tongue along Michael's inner thigh, working his way upward until his body was situated again between Michael's thighs. "I want you so badly," Jack whispered, his voice husky. His blue eyes had darkened and simmered like devilish pools. "I want to be inside you, Michael. Do you want it?"

Michael's heart flipped. His thoughts flew to the night before, when Jack had laid him on the rug and climbed on top of him, rubbing their cocks together. It had felt so wild so...natural to be possessed that way. Even before that, the way Jack had said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't think," and then kissed him, had rocked him to his core. Jack had made passionate love to him, opened his home to him in the middle of the night, made a great breakfast for him then later that same day, listened to his deepest troubles with a sympathetic ear. If there was anyone he'd try surrendering to this way, it had to be Jack. He nodded. "Yes, I do," he whispered back.

Jack grinned again, as if he'd just been given his greatest wish. He leaned in and feathered more moist, hot licks over Michael's stomach as he undid the buttons of his own shirt and worked them open rapidly. When he'd finished, he slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small packet.

Michael's insides jumped.

Jack grinned, looking slightly sheepish. His lips were a dusky pink within the frame of dark gold stubble. "I know how this looks," he said, "but after last night, I really hoped we'd get another chance." He ripped it open. "I hope you don't mind."

Wordlessly, Michael shook his head, his heart pumping. "Not at all."

"Good." Jack slid a hand over Michael's thigh. "So," he said, his voice as dusky as his eyes. "Keep going?"

Jack's shirt hung open and Michael saw the small tawny points of his nipples, hard from arousal. The sight made his mouth water. Even though he'd just had an incredible climax, his body tingled again, reawakening the way it used to when he was younger and his troubles hadn't settled so completely heavily on him. Something about Jack made it lighter, made him feel younger, like the man he'd once been. He nodded.

Jack's little smile widened into a hungry grin. Without speaking, he reached for Michael's undone slacks and pulled them the rest of the way off, briefs and all, not stopping until he'd worked them off Michael's feet. Still kneeling between Michael's legs, Jack yanked off his own shirt and shucked his slacks and briefs.

Once again, he smiled down into Michael's face and smoothed his large hands over the tops of Michael's bare thighs. Each stroke sent waves of heat through Michael's skin, right into his re-awakening cock. Then Jack sat up and rolled on the condom.

Michael watched, rapt, as the thin sheath slid down Jack's cock.

Jack's grin stretched into a sexy, seductive smile. "Now for the lube," he said. "We have what we need right here." He dipped several fingertips into Michael's cum, still on his stomach, and reached down.

Michael jumped at the contact of Jack's fingers on his hole, the cool warmth, the delicate tickle of the probing. His body stiffened a bit. He and Toshi had taken turns with each other on top. Since then, he'd always topped. After Toshi left, he'd not let someone else have that kind of control over him.

Jack frowned. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Yes."

But Jack's concerned gaze studied his. "Talk to me. What's wrong? Don't you want it?"

Embarrassment glazed over him. "Yeah. It's just..." He glanced into Jack's eyes again. The sincerity in them made a pang in his chest. How could he explain such a thing to Jack? It seemed...wrong. "It's just been a long time," he said finally.

Jack rubbed delicately over the small puckered opening. A look came into his eyes that Michael could only describe as...tender. "Don't worry, I'll be gentle." He slid his other hand over Michael's thigh, found Michael's hand and covered it. With his other, he continued his erotic exploration. "Just relax," he said, his voice a husky whisper. He circled around Michael's ass with a creamy index finger and pushed.

Michael pulled in a breath. His body tightened around Jack's finger. The thick digit pushed in deeper, sliding carefully in, stretching and rubbing the passage inside. The sensation was pleasant, at once tingly and oddly tight.

"How's that?" Jack slid his finger in and out several times before Michael could even answer.

Michael's eyelids fluttered. His entire body began to relax and unclench. The new world opening up to him at this point in his life made him feel at once foolish, embarrassed and wildly pleased, as if he were soaring, free and wild through a great open space. "Good," he whispered, his body sagging deep into the sofa cushions.

"I'm glad." Jack pushed a second finger in and the stretching feeling intensified. As did the pleasure.

Michael groaned and clutched at the sofa. Jack pushed in deeper and touched his prostate. Licks of heat shot through Michael's lower body, down his ass cheeks and over the tops of his thighs. He opened his eyes, stealing a look at Jack's flushed face. Jack's muscular body was taut, flexing, his thick cock straining upward. He was so obviously holding back, making sure Michael was ready for him.

That feeling of instinctive trust came over Michael again. Without thinking, he reached out, grasped Jack's arm and pulled the man toward him. Jack groaned and took his mouth in a hot deep kiss. The rigid shaft of his cock grazed the underside of Michael's balls and then Michael felt the taut head push at his now-ready opening.

Jack licked deep into Michael's mouth, swirling his tongue wildly around Michael's, suckling his tongue while one hand reached under and squeezed one of Michael's ass cheeks. When Jack finally pulled away, he was panting, his rugged face dark and wild. "Are you ready?"

Michael nodded, his body alive, open.

Jack smoothed more of Michael's juices up and down his sheathed cock and then pushed again at Michael's hole. "Just relax, Michael," he whispered and tilted his hips back and forth, pushing. The head of his cock penetrated, a quick pinch and then that erotic fullness again.

Michael pulled in a breath, his hands clutching Jack's back muscles. Jack pushed again, a bit harder and groaned. His cock slid in farther. Jack stopped and kissed him again, his body covering Michael's. "How's that?" Jack whispered.

Michael's senses filled with the experience. Jack's heady scent drifted upward, surrounding him. The sweat and juices between their bare torsos molded them together and their breathing rose and fell in a crashing rhythm. "Good."

Jack smoothed back Michael's hair. That tender look simmered in his blue eyes again. "I want you to feel good, Michael." Before Michael could answer, Jack claimed his mouth again, dipping his tongue in hot, languorous strokes against Michael's.

Then Jack pushed. Hard.

His cock slid all the way in. Their bodies met.

Michael's hips lifted, as if by their own accord. He lifted his legs and wrapped them around Jack's hips. His heels rested on the backs of the other man's hard thighs. He felt his body interlocked with Jack's, a part of him, deep inside. The whole world shrank down to the primal scent of two bodies mating.

Jack pulled away from the kiss, panting. Bracing himself against the sofa cushions, he pulled back and plunged into Michael, slowly at first, then faster, harder. "Michael," he breathed, "you feel so damn good."

"Thank you." Michael grasped Jack's hips, his arms bending and unbending with Jack's rhythmic thrusts. The light slap of their bodies filled the air, together with their tight, harsh breaths.

"Oh my God," Jack panted. "I'm not going to last." He thrust faster, his eyes squeezing shut.

Instinctively, Michael pulled his legs back more, as wide as he could. The tightness in his passage relaxed and each stroke of Jack's cock deep inside rubbed his prostate. Shivers of heat passed from the point of contact between them, down Michael's legs, up his back, into his chest. Even down his arms. The pleasure felt as if it shimmered through his soul.

"Yesss," Jack hissed. He stroked faster, deeper, his body slapping against Michael's until Michael felt the shaft twitch inside him. Jack groaned, pushing in short jabs as his climax gripped him. Michael felt each spasm inside his passage. Jack's eyes rolled back in his head and his body stiffened until the waves passed and Jack collapsed on top of him. "Wow," he breathed, panting against Michael's chest.

Michael lay still, breathing heavily, his hands resting on Jack's hips. He stared ahead at a crack in the plaster on the opposite wall while Jack's body heat simmered against his torso. His body was languid even while his heart pounded. Jack's cock, still hard, rested deep inside his passage. His mind reeled. Where had this passionately submissive lover inside him come from? Was it really possible he'd not known this about himself for so long? Had he really been subconsciously searching for someone to trust, to let that part of himself out with?



Jack caressed his hair. The larger man's breath pulsed close to his ear where he rested. "Was that okay for you?" Jack lifted himself up and looked at him. "It didn't hurt?"

Michael shook his head. "Not at all."

Jack smiled again. He seemed incredibly concerned about Michael's enjoyment. "Just making sure." Then something passed through his blue eyes. Was it concern? Michael couldn't be sure. His own feelings and thoughts were muddled. Jack's hand stilled on Michael's hair. "Don't worry, Michael," he said softly, "I won't start making demands on you."

Before Michael could answer, Jack pressed a kiss to his lips then leaned his weight on one arm, so that he could stare down into Michael's face. The man's tan skin glowed with a sheen of sweat and his large eyes were dreamy.

And yet, he seemed distant again. Well, Michael *was* deeply troubled, as their conversation before had revealed. Then there was the fact that Michael kept a twelve-year old photograph of a former lover out on his shelves. That was strange. Almost a... warning not to get *too* close. Jack sighed. As usual, he was thinking too much. Hey, after all, Michael had opened up to him earlier about something intensely private and painful. Apparently, Michael trusted him that much.

Jack sighed and let his fingers wander through Michael's soft hair. It would have been heaven just to rest here like this and fall asleep, but of course he couldn't rest while a killer was out there running around. They'd already taken long enough. He stayed on top of Michael as long as he dared, loving the feel of the man's sleek body against his and the way Michael's hands rested on his hips. So damn erotic.

"I'd better call in," he finally murmured. Leaning over Michael's naked body, he fished his cell phone from his slacks on the floor. He was about to flip it open when it rang. It was Mal. "Hey, Mal. I had the phone in my hand to call you. What do you have?"

"I tried the number for the person named Dick but it went immediately to voice mail. However, I called Club Moritz and they have someone named Richard Latham who works there as a bartender. It could be the same person. He's working a shift tonight starting at ten o'clock."

Jack slid down, maneuvering himself off Michael. "Good work. We'll go there tonight and pay him a visit."

"Oh, one more thing. Detective Chin went through Kent's laptop and there's something in his browsing history that's of interest."

Jack glanced at Michael who'd sat up and sat next to him, still naked, watching him. "Go on."

"We found a website Kent had visited, a samurai role-playing site called Bushido Spirit. The site lists all the members, real name and their role-playing name side by side."

Jack held the phone tighter to his ear and looked at Michael again. "Does Kent have a role-playing name there?"

"No. He's not listed as a member, but according to his browsing history, he's been on the site numerous times in the last couple of weeks. That's as far back as his browsing history is set. There is another member on the list, name Dick L. It could be Richard Latham."

"What's Dick L's role?"

"His Bushido Spirit persona is Tetsuya Harimoto, a high-ranking samurai who warred with a neighboring province and vanquished the ruling lord who, it says here, forced his enemy to commit ritual *seppuku*."

## Chapter Six

"Okay, here's the possible scenario." Excitement coiled in Jack's voice. His hands gripped the steering wheel. "This Dick Latham is going with Kent. They're lovers."

A shiver ran through Michael at the word "lovers". He glanced at Jack who, thankfully, had his eyes on the traffic ahead of them. Hard to believe less than ten minutes ago, Jack had been lying naked on top of him in the aftermath of incredibly hot sex. After the phone call, they'd cleaned up, thrown their clothes on and ran out the door to get to Homicide so that Jack and the team could formulate the strategy for getting to the elusive Dick Latham. "Go on," he said quietly.

"Latham is sick of Kent feeling ashamed of him. As an obsessive-compulsive personality, he wants things to be cut and dried, right? He wants to know that Kent isn't ashamed of him and they can have a legitimate relationship. But Kent doesn't want this. He's depressed over his divorce. He misses his kids and just can't get himself together. He continues to let down his lover. The pressure between them builds. Latham becomes angrier and angrier. Maybe he even suspects Kent of wanting to get back with his wife or wanting to see women. He hates Kent's weakness because it threatens their relationship. He goes out of his mind with jealousy and because of his knowledge of the samurai culture, he transfers his rage into the murder, using his online persona as a shield against the act he's committing."

Michael reflected on the proposed scenario. On some level it made sense, but there was something nagging at him about the whole thing. "It sounds good," he said finally, "but it doesn't ultimately hang together. It doesn't fit."

Jack took his eyes off the road for one second to give Michael a skeptical look. "Yeah? Why not?"

"What you're suggesting is an act of passion. A man who kills his lover out of extreme jealousy and rage wouldn't take the time to plan it so meticulously. Even a samurai now and then gave in to passion and killed on the spot. He would be punished for it, but it happened."

"But you said the killer wanted his victim to suffer horribly. Isn't that a form of passion?"

"Yes, of course it is. But there's a different quality to something so planned out. It's not a spontaneous outburst of emotion. It's emotion that's been nurtured, given great amounts of attention and importance over a period of time."

"Oh." Jack nodded and Michael's eye fell on the dark blond spikes of his hair, still a bit mussed from having Michael's fingers raking through it while Jack was thrusting zealously in and out of him.

Talk about passion.

He looked away and distracted himself with continuing their discussion. "There's also the inner conflict about his homosexuality. If Latham himself was so conflicted, he wouldn't push at Kent to have an open homosexual relationship with him. He'd remain content with hiding. He also wouldn't work in a gay strip club."

Michael saw Jack's thick fingers tighten on the steering wheel. A quick memory of those fingers on his skin and around his cock sent another frisson of heat through his body.

"All right," Jack said, "but how do you explain the whole samurai scenario? How can that be some crazy coincidence? How many people do samurai role-playing?"

"Not many, I'd think. But it could be someone else who's registered on that site. We don't know who else Kent may have been involved with."

Jack glanced at him and this time smiled. "True enough." He drove quietly for a few moments and then Michael felt the energy between them shift, a silent reminder of what had happened back in his house, on the sofa. "Hey," Jack said quietly, "thanks again for...you know...earlier. I had a really great time."

Michael's cheeks heated. Damn, why did he have to blush like a kid? "Me too."

Jack's eyebrows rose. "Good." But there was a catch in his voice that made Michael look at him. "You seemed to be into it, but I wanted to be sure."

"Why do you ask?"

The other man shrugged, a gesture that made it seem as if he were trying to act more casual than he felt. "I just wasn't sure. It's hard to know with you. You *seemed* to be really into it, but then afterward, like last night, you didn't show any indication that something had happened. It's like you're two different people."

"Oh." He looked down. "I'm sorry." From the corner of his eye he saw Jack glance at him.

"Oh geez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you, Michael. I just wanted to make sure it was, you know, as good for you. That just slipped out. I have a big mouth."

"I'm not offended. I know I'm...uncommunicative." He sighed. It was the way he responded to trauma.

"Shit. I really put my foot in it. I'm sorry. You're not like two different people. That was incredibly rude."

"Really, don't worry about it."

Jack glanced at him again. "Are you sure? You're not just saying that?"

"I'm sure." He looked out the window as they drove. He certainly felt like two different people much of the time. It always came back to the way he'd been with Toshi. Confident...in spite of his own inexperience and in spite of how handsome Toshi was. Since he and Toshi had split up, this other person had emerged. A loner. Someone who couldn't relate to other human beings except through his field of study. It wasn't even an exact science, as far as he and other critics of the field of profiling were concerned.

His having tracked down Peter's killer had been as much an intuitive process as one based on hard evidence. In fact, all of the cases he'd helped with, including the case back in Tokyo, had been largely driven by his gut feelings, backed up by loose configurations of psychological diagnoses.

"Shit, Michael. I offended you. I'm sorry."

"Really, you didn't. I promise. But I appreciate your...apology." Michael sighed and looked out the window.

"I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"There's nothing to make up. I promise *you*."

To his surprise, Jack grinned. "All right. I'm not going to get into a fight about it with you. If you're going to insist I'm not a horse's ass, I'll concede."

Michael chuckled. The tension had broken. But only because Jack had a sense of humor. He looked out the window again, a pang in his chest. Would he always be this way? Would he ever be able to just be with someone in a healthy relationship?

\* \* \* \* \*

Club Moritz hadn't filled up yet at ten o'clock. The bass from the music thumped through the room as if a crowd of people were mashed together, writhing to the driving beat. Only a few sat at the bar and the tables lining the room. The stage where male strippers did their teases sat empty in shadows, waiting for a full crowd.

Jack flashed his badge at the bouncer who let him right in. He crossed the empty dance floor to the bar where one man worked, polishing a glass. In the multicolored lights, Jack could see the bartender was tall with dark hair but couldn't otherwise distinguish whether this was the man he sought.

Approaching the bar, he caught the bartender's eye and showed his badge again when the man approached him. "I'm looking for Richard Latham. I was told he works here."

The tall man grinned, an expression that made his features appear bird-like. "When he does work, he works here."

"What do you mean?"

The bartender set the glass down and picked up another one. "I mean he's not exactly what you'd call a hard worker. He knows a million drinks, though and that keeps him from getting fired. I'll consider it a blessing if he shows up tonight."

"Would you mind showing me the employee's entrance? Maybe he's clocking in right now."

"Sure. This way."

The large man came from behind the bar and Jack followed him. The thumping music receded as they moved into the back corridor, dark and cool in temperature. A

small room at the end of the hall held a time clock with its stack of cards in the holder attached to the wall.

The bartender scanned the cards. "He hasn't clocked in yet. Like I said, he's not much of a worker."

"Do you have a phone number and address on file?"

"I'm not supposed to give it out."

Jack flashed his badge again. "This is a murder investigation. Your cooperation would be greatly appreciated."

The guy shook his head, blowing out a breath, as if to say, *you guys think you can push everyone around*. But he motioned for Jack to follow him and brought him to the manager's office where Richard Latham's address was quickly pulled from a Rolodex.

Jack returned to the van and climbed in. He left two team members of the team at the club in case Latham showed up then drove with Michael and Mallory to the address he'd been given. On the way, he called the Arlington police to send a cruiser with uniformed officers for backup.

Latham lived in Arlington, in a row house on a side street off Mass Ave. A light was on in the first floor apartment. Latham's apartment. Jack and the uniformed officers went up to the door and Jack knocked. No one answered.

"Richard Latham?" Jack called through the door, "Boston Police Department. We need to speak with you." He knocked again.

No answer.

"Shit." Jack crossed the porch and peeked through the curtains of what appeared to be the living room window. Inside, a man lay on the sofa, his head back. A near empty liquor bottle sat on the coffee table in front of him. Jack rapped on the window. The man lifted his head and stared in Jack's direction with a bleary-eyed gaze.

"Richard Latham, we need to speak with you." Just then, his cell phone rang. It was Mal, calling from the van. "What is it?" he said after flipping the phone open.

"Jack, listen. Richard Latham is a registered sex offender. His fingerprints were in the system. And they match the set of fingerprints on the murder weapon and all over the victim's apartment."

"All right. We're bringing him in. Get ready." He hung up, dropped the phone in his pants pocket and signaled to the uniforms. "Break it in." He stood aside while the larger of the officers kicked in the front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack shoved another cup of black coffee across the table. Richard Latham's eyes were bloodshot but the first two caffeine-laden cups had restored him enough to be questioned. The man had refused a lawyer and sat, eyes red-rimmed, long face miserable.

"Let's begin this again," Jack said, sparing a glance at Michael whom he'd requested sit beside him at the interrogation table rather than behind a glass with a radio to prompt his questions. "How long had you known Conrad Kent?"

A tear slipped from one bloodshot eye and tracked down Latham's unshaven cheek. "You mean Robert?"

"I mean Conrad Kent." Jack held up a photo of Kent's body. "This man."

Latham winced and more tears slipped down his cheeks. "Yes. That man. I know his real name was Conrad but shortly after I met him, he said his name was Robert Green and so I always called him Rob."

"Fine. How long did you know Rob?"

"About a year."

"What was the nature of your relationship? Were you lovers?"

Latham nodded. "Listen, I didn't kill him. I loved him," he sobbed.

"So you said. But the security camera has you on tape entering his building just before the time of the murder and leaving shortly thereafter."

"I was only in the apartment once that day. In the morning."

"The security camera shows you coming and going twice. The first time in the early part of the day. Kent's autopsy revealed he'd had sex the same day as his death. Did you and he have sex that day?"

Again Latham nodded. "Yes. I visited him the first time but not the second time. I swear."

"Then where were you?" Jack worked to keep his tone neutral, non-judgmental.

A look of fear creased Latham's face. "I...was hanging out with a friend. In Harvard Square."

Jack sat back and raked one hand through his hair. "Who's this friend? We'll need to speak with him to confirm your alibi."

Fear slipped into Latham's eyes. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"If you call his home, you'll get him into trouble. He lives at home."

"And if you don't give yourself a solid alibi, you'll be in much bigger trouble." Suddenly Jack felt a hand on his knee under the table. His insides jumped. He glanced at Michael who kept his gaze on Latham. Michael's touch seemed to say, 'Stay calm'.

"Why don't we forget about the alibi for the moment," Michael said gently. "Mr. Latham, let's talk a bit about your relationship with the man you knew as Robert Green. Is that all right?"

Michael's tone seemed to calm Latham for the man sighed and his shoulders sagged a bit. Finally he nodded. "Yes. Ask whatever you want."

"How did you feel about having to dress in women's clothes to see Rob?" Michael asked quietly.

Latham's gaze flew to him. "I don't know. I didn't care. I wanted to see him and I know he had issues around being gay. I did it to please him. So I could see him."

"It never made you angry?"

Latham shook his head. "No."

Michael picked up Latham's coffee cup and set it down to the man's left. Latham looked at the cup then back at Michael. "I've had enough coffee," he said. "I'm sober now."

Michael nodded. "All right. I won't push it on you." He picked the cup up and moved it over to Latham's right hand side.

Latham sniffled again and swiped at one wet cheek with the heel of his hand.

"What do you know about Bushido Spirit?" Michael continued in the same even tone.

Latham shook his head. "It's a role-playing thing. Just for fun."

"Something you and Rob did together?"

"No. Rob wasn't into it. I used to show it to him. I wanted to share my interests with him."

"How long have you been into it?"

The man shrugged again. "I'm not sure. A few months. If you go on the site, you can see when I registered."

"We already have that information, Latham," Jack interceded. "What we need to find out is how your fingerprints are on the murder weapon when you claim not to have been in the building at the time of the murder." Jack reached to the side for the plastic bag holding the knife, bloodstains still covering the blade. He slid the package under Latham's nose. "Here's the knife used to kill Conrad Kent. Your fingerprints are on the hilt. You do samurai role-playing and have ordered subjects to commit *seppuku*. How am I supposed to believe you when you're not giving me an alibi?"

Latham's hands flew to his eyes and he started sobbing again. "Take that away!"

Michael shot Jack a look and pushed the knife away, sliding it toward Jack. The gesture made it clear he'd taken over. For the moment. Jack sat back and let Michael go with his own interview. "All right, Mr. Latham. No more knife, as long as you tell us everything we need to know."

"Of course I will. I don't have anything to hide."

"That's very good," Michael went on. "But actually, I would venture to say you're lying about the knife in order to protect someone else."

Latham stiffened. At least he uncovered his face, lowering his hands to the edge of the table. His shoulders hunched, he sat, his upper body quaking in little spurts of movement with the sobs he was trying to stifle. "What makes you think I'm lying?"

"I don't think you're lying, Mr. Latham," Michael said, "I know you're lying. Now, if you want to help us catch whoever killed Rob, you need to tell us the truth."



"I'm telling you the truth."

Michael remained silent. His hand still pressed into Jack's thigh, so Jack also stayed quiet, waiting to see what Michael would say next.

"Mr. Latham...Richard," Michael finally said, "would you please tell us about Craig Irish?" Michael asked, referring to the man Latham had been accused of molesting. "What happened?"

Latham was trembling now, avoiding eye contact. "I hurt him. His parents brought charges."

"What did you do to him?"

"I...raped him."

Michael shook his head. "You didn't rape him, did you, Mr. Latham? In fact, you speak to him regularly, don't you? Are you protecting him from his parents, or from the police because you believe he killed Conrad Kent out of jealousy?"

"He wouldn't do that."

"No? You know him that well?"

Jack forced himself not to stare at Michael. Was Michael bluffing or had he really figured all this out?

"Yes, I do know him that well." Latham leaned in, his eyes wild. "Listen, you have to believe me."

"I can't believe you unless you tell the truth," Jack said.

"You doubt Craig Irish," Michael said after a moment's quiet. And you're willing to risk incriminating yourself in his place. Which means you weren't together at the time of the murder, were you? If you were, you'd simply give both of you an alibi. But he's in Bushido Spirit with you as well. Perhaps the knife belongs to him and you were handling it one day. He kept it to commit the murder, making sure his fingerprints didn't get on to the weapon. He's angry and hurt over your relationship with Conrad Kent and this was his way of getting back at you for hurting him."

Latham's eyes shifted back and forth in rapid succession. "No! Craig wouldn't do that! I saw him that day."

"That wasn't the question," Jack interjected. "You could have seen him anytime. What about between four and four thirty-five in the afternoon?"

Then, suddenly, his gaze shot up. "I did it! I confess. I killed Robbie...I mean Conrad. I'm guilty."

Jack leaned forward. "Go on."

"I've been upset with Rob about the way he kept pushing me away and pulling me close again. I couldn't take it anymore but I couldn't bear to let him go and find out he'd found someone else. There. Now you have the truth. Craig left the knife by accident at my house one day so I had it. That's what happened. I went to Rob's apartment and I stabbed him."

Jack looked at Michael, visibly collecting himself. He turned back to Latham. "You need to sit quiet for a while," he said finally. "Why don't you finish that cup of coffee? You want something to eat?"

"No."

Jack rose and gestured to Michael. "Well, just sit and relax then. I never accept a signed confession without a time of reflection. We'll be back." He paused the interview and led Michael out of the room. "Let's go into my office and discuss this. Latham can hold for a while."

Michael followed him to Jack's tiny office. There was barely space for the desk and the two chairs for visitors to sit.

Jack closed the door to the small room then perched on the outside edge of his desk, legs slightly spread. The posture seemed an invitation to Michael to fit himself between Jack's legs, their chests close together while they talked, but of course, the invitation had to be in Michael's head. No way would he cuddle up to the man in the middle of a police department. He did, however, come to stand not too far away, close enough to sense Jack's life force, a simmering of heat in the air between them.

"Michael," Jack said, his tone somewhere in between soft and businesslike, "talk to me. All that stuff you were saying about Latham and Irish being involved and the knife belonging to Craig Irish, you can't possibly know all this."

Michael pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. Before speaking, he saw Jack's eyes flicker to the point at which he'd left the top button of his long-sleeved shirt open and sensed a memory rise in the larger man's mind. Clearing his throat, he pushed his attention past the frisson of energy through his own body. "No. I gathered it from Latham's body language and his response to the knife. He was far more upset at the sight of the knife itself than at the photograph of Kent's body. When he covered his eyes and cried out, it was more from horror that someone he was close to had committed the crime rather than from Kent's death. That and the fact that he said he stabbed Kent. It's a lot more involved than that. He was lying. He's protecting someone else, possibly Craig Irish."

Jack sighed and raked a large hand through his hair. "My thought exactly. I guess you'd also say that Latham confessed to what would be considered an act of passion. No premeditation. Right?"

"Yes, you're right."

Jack nodded. "At this point, all we can do is speak with Craig Irish and see where it leads."

"Besides," Michael added, "any confession we'd get from Latham at this point is probably false."

Jack nodded. "Of course. I know that. I wouldn't just take a confession from him and pass him on to the D.A. without an airtight case."

Michael's cheeks heated. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to say that you would —"

"Forget about it. I know that." Jack touched his sleeve briefly. "Besides, even if you were, it's only fair after that 'two different people' remark I made earlier." He reached out and brushed a hand over Michael's upper arm. Then grew still. A shadow passed over his face. His hand rested on Michael's arm as if the contact had prompted a thought. "That's it." He stared into Michael's eyes. "Godammit, Michael, how did I not think of that?" He released Michael's arm and raked a hand through his tousled hair. "Dammit. I don't think. It makes sense now in light of Latham's so-called confession. It really may not have been Latham entering the building that second time."

The understanding tingled down Michael's spine. "Two different people. In that video," he said softly.

Jack nodded. "Yes. One is Richard Latham."

Michael looked right at him, the energy from before zinging through his body. "The other is the killer."

## Chapter Seven

Gently Jack grasped Michael's shoulders, easing him back while he slid off the desk and went around to the computer, feeling, even as he did so, the desire to touch Michael some more.

Quickly punching some keys, he nodded again. "Here's the surveillance video."

Michael came around the desk and stood behind him. On the screen was the first video sequence. Latham was wearing what appeared to be a blond wig in a medium length fashion, the ends curling up. He hid his male form in a baggy jacket and skirt. Over one shoulder he carried one of those large tote bags many women used that could hold their purse along with books, changes of clothes, and whatever else they needed to keep with them for a whole day away from home.

Jack paused the tape as soon as Latham's face was showing most clearly in the camera. "That's Latham," he said, tapping the screen.

"Yes," Michael agreed softly behind him, "that's Latham."

"However..." Jack fast forwarded the video, past the point Bob Miller came and left, to the hour Latham supposedly re-entered Kent's apartment building. "We actually never get a clear look at the face this time," he said, rewinding to the same point of the person's approach to the door. He let it play again, pausing then rewinding several times. "Whoever it is wore the same outfit, carried the same kind of tote bag and wig that Latham wore."

"As well as sunglasses," Michael added. "He also managed to keep his face tilted from the camera."

"Right. Since we don't have a positive I.D. on this second person, we can't know for sure it's Latham. A trick of the eye. If it is a second person, he obviously knows that Latham visited Kent and knew what outfit he'd be wearing to point us in Latham's direction." He turned and looked up at Michael. "I can't believe I made such an assumption, Michael. This is police work 101."

But Michael shook his head. "You can't see everything the first time. I'm sure you've studied many of the famous cases in history. How many killers have eluded the police indefinitely? Too many."

Jack blew out a breath and turned around. Michael's attempt to soothe his ego was kind and...well, touching, but really, he should have known better. "All the more reason to be *extra* vigilant."

"You're wrong, Jack. Detectives do all they can to find murderers."

That's when Jack realized his mistake. "Shit, Michael, I'm sorry." He rose from the chair and faced the other man. Comments like his probably added to Michael's

suffering over his brother's murder. To think the police may have ever been careless would only drive the stake in deeper. He glanced at his office door, mostly closed except for a sliver of space. Closed enough to give some privacy. He picked up Michael's hand and squeezed it. "Really. I'm a jerk." He dared to brush his thumb back and forth across the soft flesh of Michael's palm and saw the effect of the contact register in Michael's beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

"You're not a jerk." Michael's glance darted away. The sound in his voice indicated he had a strong reason for saying so but wasn't going to express it.

Jack wasn't completely reassured but he accepted it and reluctantly let go of Michael's hand. He turned back to the paused image on the screen. "So," he went on, "even though Latham won't give himself an alibi for the time of the murder, we can't say beyond a doubt that this is him going into Kent's building."

"No, we can't."

Jack sighed. "And you don't believe Latham committed this murder."

"No, I don't. Aside from the inconsistency of his confession, he doesn't exhibit any of the traits I've profiled for this killing."

"There *is* that little detail of Latham's fingerprints on the murder weapon."

Michael nodded. "That is a difficulty. I feel strongly that the scenario I outlined could be what really happened. Although, it doesn't mean Craig Irish killed him either. For Irish too, murdering Kent out of jealousy would be an act of passion, not a premeditated, cold-blooded execution."

Jack continued to stare at the image on the screen, the supposedly female person about to open the door. He thought about that a moment longer and felt the truth in what Michael had said about Latham after the interview. "What would Latham's motive be anyway?" he asked finally. "We could surmise that Kent somehow found out about Latham's sexual offender status and either threatened to use it against him or to break up with him. I've seen that kind of killing take place before. A spouse kills so that the other won't leave him or her. A pure act of passion. But then, you said this murder was too planned out, too premeditated to be spontaneous."

"Yes. Besides, at the interview table, Latham showed remorse at having sexually molested Irish, if in fact, he did molest him. As long as he's not playacting, it means he's not a psychopath, while Kent's killer is. Latham was obviously *not* trying to conceal his crime. If Conrad Kent had threatened to blackmail him, it wouldn't have been effective."

"So really, Latham doesn't have an apparent motive anyway, at this point."

"Not as far as I can see."

Someone knocked on the door then. At Jack's call, Mallory came in, a pile of papers in her hand. "Sarge, we finished the sweep of Latham's apartment. We found emails in Latham's computer and text messages on his cell phone between him and Craig Irish, some of them dating right up to the day of the murder."

Jack glanced at Michael who stood close enough to him that anyone casually observing would believe there was something going on between them. Clearing his throat, he came around his desk to examine the printouts. "Anything suspicious?" Of course, Michael *had* guessed that much correctly. Again.

"Well, Latham and Irish did discuss Latham's relationship with Kent. In some of the correspondence, Irish seems upset, jealous maybe, about Latham's relationship with the victim. I haven't read all of it yet. I brought this to you as soon as I found it."

"Fine, thanks. I'll read through these. Have you located Irish?"

"Yes. He lives in his parents' house on 96 Dorcar Road in Newton. He's twenty-seven years old. Works as a computer programmer from home. Makes occasional house calls to clients. That's all the radar has picked up on him so far. His phone number is here."

"Excellent. Thanks, Mal."

"Sure thing." Her hazel eyes flickered between him and Michael before she turned and left.

Jack's stomach tightened but he ignored it. It didn't matter what he did with his personal life. And they had a murderer to catch before he worried about that anyway. He stifled a sudden yawn.

Morning. Technically it was morning already and he'd not slept more than a few hours since Kent's body was found. There was a point at which even the strongest brew of coffee wasn't going to do the trick. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and turned to Michael. "Feel like taking a ride to Newton?"

Michael looked tired too. Tiny lines ringed his eyes and the rich brown color of them was slightly dulled, but they brightened a bit and he nodded. "Sure."

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig Irish's residence was a split-level modern house, the kind of part stone, part wood contemporary style built in the 1950s and 60s. Jack parked quietly at the curb opposite the house and turned off lights and motor.

A light at the front doorway illumined the flagstone path bordered by low-clipped arbor vitae and lilac shrubs whose blooms had long fallen away. The small lawn was neatly manicured as were all the homes in the upper-middle class suburb.

Taking a long sip of coffee, Jack surveyed the windows. Most were dark except for the upper right hand window whose curtains were still pulled back in spite of the late hour. The room was dark but glowed with a bluish light, as if from a television or computer screen. "I'm guessing that's Irish's room," he murmured. "Maybe he's working on the computer."

"Or role-playing online."

Jack's gaze whipped to Michael, who sat, coffee cup in hand, about to lift it to his mouth. "Do you think he's a member of that site?"

"I wouldn't rule it out, knowing he and Latham have a relationship of some sort."

Jack opened his phone and pushed the speed dial for Mallory. "Mal," he said when she answered, "check that role-playing database for Craig Irish, please. Michael... Dr. Di Santo thinks it's possible he's involved."

"Sure thing. It'll just take a minute."

"I'll wait." He heard the click of the keyboard in the background as Mallory navigated the screens and searched the database. "Ah," she said after less than a minute. "Yes, he's here. One Craig Irish. Online identity is Aisu Kazunori, a samurai retainer of a powerful dai...daim...I can't say that word."

Jack looked at Michael. "There's a word we don't know. Sounds like dime something."

"*Daimyo*. It's the word for the feudal lord."

"Ah." He repeated it to Mallory.

"Okay. So that's it. Are you there at Irish's residence?"

"Yeah." Jack looked toward the upstairs room, contemplating the blue glow within. This was one of those calls he often had to make. Was there probable cause to knock on the door at this hour and bring Irish down to the station? No, he decided. Best to wait and speak more informally with the man. "We'll go in in the morning. I'll call for you."

"Will do, Sarge. Get some rest."

"You too, Mal."

Jack closed the phone and sat back, thinking. If Irish was the killer, he was too crafty and intelligent not to find a way to slip their grasp. Jack yawned then took a sip of coffee and set the cup in the holder in the console. Though he was technically off-duty, his actual shift began in a few hours. He felt his head jerk back. Damn, he'd almost fallen asleep. He looked over at Michael, who also was sagging back in his seat, eyes half-closed, then grinned. "I think it's not a good idea to drive right now," he mumbled. He picked up the box of doughnuts they'd gotten before driving out here and held it out to Michael. "Here, keep your strength up."

Michael nodded and quietly plucked out a chocolate one. Jack set the box down, picked up a honey glaze and they ate together in silence.

Michael sat, sipping his coffee, his face half-turned. "Jack."

"Mm?" When he looked up again, Michael was looking straight ahead, though that now-familiar reserve filled the air.

"I've been meaning to...thank you. For listening to me earlier, about Peter." He turned briefly then faced forward again. "I appreciate it. I don't ever talk about it. Even to Albert."

Dr. Wittig. Michael's predecessor. Apparently the two men were friends. That admission made a warm flush in Jack's chest, in spite of his exhaustion. "Hey, no problem."

"He was dying of cancer when they pulled him in."

The stark statement jolted Jack. Eyes wide now, he looked at Michael.

"Peter's killer, I mean. Darren Phelps. His parents lived in our neighborhood."

"Wow." Without thinking, he reached for Michael's hand and held it.

Michael's fingers curled around his with soft pressure, hanging on. "He only had a few months left at most. I contacted some of the men he'd served with in Vietnam. It turned out he'd gotten a Vietnamese woman pregnant and ended up shooting her."

"Oh my God."

"The psychiatrists who examined him reported he was having a flashback when he grabbed Peter from the yard. They claimed he saw Peter as one of those children in the rice paddies with grenades strapped under their clothing. But his fellow company member told me how much he hated the Vietnamese, how he said he'd kill them if he met any once he got back to the United States. It seemed he knew what he was doing. It didn't matter that Peter was an American kid, playing in his yard. To Phelps he was Asian. The enemy."

"I'm so sorry, Michael." Jack watched Michael's profile as he spoke, his chest aching for the man.

"I couldn't bring myself to go and see Phelps, to speak to him in person. To see for myself if that was true. Cowardly of me. That's why I didn't agree with you when you said it was an honorable and brave thing to do."

"Jesus, Michael. What are you supposed to be, a saint? No one would be expected to hear out the man who'd murdered his brother, especially a child."

Michael sighed. He continued to stare straight ahead, seemingly lost in the world of his thoughts. The clutch of his hand in Jack's seemed to anchor him in the present. "It was cowardly."

"No. You're going too far saying that." He brushed his thumb in Michael's palm again. That wild, almost primal need to comfort the man streaked through him, especially since Michael remained silent.

In the dark, Jack watched Michael's eyelids flutter. His breathing calmed, grew even. Then his head tilted to the side. His hand slackened in Jack's.

He was asleep.

Jack heaved a sigh. His own exhaustion took him again. Perhaps he'd be able to convince Michael another time. Perhaps not. He sensed a stubborn streak in the man as deep as the core of the earth. No matter. The sensation of Michael's hand still in his touched off a wave of protectiveness. Too bad he'd not been the detective who'd pulled Peter's killer in. There were times to rough a man up. That, for him, would have been one of them.

Still holding Michael's hand, he settled back and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*



Michael awoke to a shrill ringing nearby. He opened his eyes and looked through a window onto a residential street. Blinking out the sunlight coming through he heard movement beside him. A hand slipped from his. Jack.

The larger man was in the driver's seat of the car they'd fallen asleep in, fishing for his phone while it rang and rang. "Shit, shit," he mumbled, his face pale with sleep, his dark blond hair sticking out here and there from leaning against the headrest. Michael watched him, still feeling the ghostly pressure from Jack's hand around his. Judging from the slant of the morning sun, they'd slept that way for hours.

Jack got his phone opened and answered. "Mal, hey." He raked a hand through his mussed hair. Stubble shaded his jaw and chin. "Yeah, we're fine. We both fell asleep." He chuckled. "Yes, on the street in front of the house." He looked at his watch. "Geez, it's after eight. Yes, you and Chin get over here. Call the Newton police for a cruiser, just in case. Michael and I will approach the house. See you soon." He closed the phone and turned. "How are you?"

"Fine." Michael remembered having spilled more of his story to Jack before they fell asleep. He raked a hand through hair and sat up. "Just stiff."

Jack grinned. "Me too." He picked up his coffee cup. "Cold and hours old," he said, "but it will have to do for now."

"I'll make you some more at my house later," Michael heard himself say.

"Sounds good. But don't you have a class to teach?"

"In a few hours." This was the day he taught a graduate-level seminar on criminal profiling.

Jack nodded, gulped from the cup and made a face. "Battery acid." He put the cup back in the holder and opened his door.

Michael followed him up the front walk of the house. The Mercedes that had been in the driveway the night before was still there. Jack rang the doorbell and took out his badge while they waited.

In moments, the door opened. A slim woman probably in her late sixties opened the door. She had frosted hair and a tight-lipped, pale face. She wore a cream-colored sweater and slacks to match. Up early for a Sunday morning. "Can I help you?" Her blue eyes regarded them suspiciously.

"Good morning, ma'am," Jack said, showing his badge. "I'm Sergeant Detective Jack Cade and this is Dr. Michael Di Santo. We're looking for Craig Irish. We need to ask him a few questions in connection with an investigation we're running. Is he available?"

The woman's thin lips pressed together and her eyes widened but then she seemed to collect herself. "Yes, he's here. Come in." She stood aside and closed the door behind them.

Inside the foyer, Michael surveyed a home as formally and coldly decorated as the woman who'd answered the door. Colonial furniture accented by rugs and a formal

seating area made up the room he could see. The portraits on the walls showed men and women he imagined were the tight-lipped ancestors of the current inhabitants of the house. The only thing indicating any warmth was the smell of fresh coffee drifting in the air.

Thankfully, the woman offered them some. They accepted and took seats in the living room where she led them before going to fetch Craig.

In moments, Craig Irish. He was tall, his reasonably strong build almost hidden by a football jersey and baggy sweatpants. His brown eyes surveyed them with the same manner of suspicion as his mother's. "I'm Craig. You wanted to see me?"

"We're conducting a murder investigation and need to ask you a few questions about someone you know who's connected to our inquiry. Richard Latham."

Irish's face immediately clouded. "Ricky? He's not...dead?"

"No," Jack said. "But our records indicate that he was arrested and charged with sexually assaulting you eleven years ago. However, there are numerous cell phone calls and emails between you. Are you aware that someone he was seeing was murdered?"

Irish's eyes widened and he stiffened. "You don't mean Robert Green, do you?"

"Yes. He was found in his apartment, stabbed."

Irish looked down. "Oh my God." When he looked up again, his already pale face had whitened more. "You think Ricky killed him?"

Jack ignored that question. "What's the nature of the relationship between you and Richard Latham?"

Michael watched Irish's eyes fill with fear. The younger man's eyes darted in the direction of the doorway then he crossed over to the sofa and perched on the very end. "See that house across the street?" He pointed through the large picture window through which a colonial style white house was visible.

"Yes," Jack said.

"Ricky and I grew up as neighbors. He's three years older than I am. The summer I was sixteen, my parents hired him to clean our swimming pool and do some other handy work. Well, he and I had been friendly for years, even though he was older. We just got along really well and felt comfortable together. He was here a lot, working while my parents were out. I was home all the time. I already had a computer business." He glanced again toward the kitchen. "He and I...we...started...in my room."

"Are you saying you had a sexual relationship?"

Slowly Irish nodded. "My mom came home early one day and caught us. She screamed and freaked out. No son of hers was going to be a homosexual. Because I was a minor, my parents had him arrested and pressed charges. But Ricky would never hurt anyone. He's the gentlest person I ever met. Too gentle."

Just then, Irish's mother came in with a tray. She set it down, served the coffee and left again when no one asked her to stay.

"I wanted to move into Boston and live with him," Irish went on after he'd made sure his mother was out of earshot. "But that was impossible. My parents threatened to make more trouble for Ricky if I went near him so I've just stayed here. It's expensive out there."

"Yes, it is." Jack took a sip of coffee and glanced at Michael as if to ask with his eyes what Michael saw, but then he turned back to the questioning. "Tell me about the role-playing site, Bushido Spirit."

Again, Irish's posture stiffened. "I've been involved with it for almost ten years. Initially, I got Ricky involved so we could communicate without my parents' catching phone calls because I was still underage."

"But you call and email each other anyway," Jack said. "We have the records."

Irish nodded. "They can't tell me who to see now that I'm an adult, but..." his look grew sheepish, "it's easier if they just don't know what I'm doing, you know what I mean?"

"You get hassled?"

Irish nodded.

"I understand. Go on."

Bushido Spirit was a role-playing costume group, which became an online site as well. Since he's been involved with Robert Green, I became really insecure. Until then, it was just him and me. Then he met Green and just...I don't know, couldn't stay away from him."

"That must have made you really angry," Jack said.

Irish's eyes widened. "I know what you're saying. That I killed Green. You're wrong. Role-playing is one thing. Real life killing. No. I couldn't do that. I know Ricky cares about me. He just can't help himself. He's tried to be faithful. It just happened."

"Tell us about Tetsuya Harimoto," Michael cut in.

Irish shrugged and glanced out the window, as if expecting Latham to come out of the house he'd lived in before. "It's a role I randomly assigned to him. It was a long time ago and back then I had some idea that if he had this role, it would make him feel stronger in real life. I was wrong. It doesn't work that way."

"No, it doesn't," Michael said softly. "I'm sorry you've had these difficulties."

"It sucks loving someone all this time and watching him get involved with someone like that. There were times I wanted to hurt Green. It's only natural to feel that way, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's natural." Michael remembered his own revenge fantasies. Years of pondering what he'd do if he found Peter's killer. Yet, when the man had been found, Michael hadn't even been able to talk to him. Craig Irish could be the same. Angry and wanting to kill Conrad Kent, yet unable to actually do it.

"Ricky's so gentle," Irish continued. "No one should hurt him. He doesn't have anyone else to defend him. Besides, I owe him after what he's gone through because of me."

Michael let his words sink in. It came down to nothing but guilt on Craig Irish's part. However there still was the issue of the murder weapon with Latham's fingerprints all over it. The knife could very well have belonged to Irish. "May I use your bathroom?" He smiled innocently. "Coffee does that to me." He ignored the feel of Jack's questioning look on him.

Irish shrugged. "Sure."

"Thanks." Feigning cluelessness as to where the bathroom would be, he headed up the carpeted steps to the second floor. He moved slowly at first, but when Irish didn't stop and redirect him toward a guest bathroom on the first floor, he continued. The plush carpeting absorbed his steps. He was unused to walking around in someone's home with his shoes on but had left them on when he entered the house with Jack so as not to seem strange.

The first bedroom on his right was obviously the master bedroom with its king-sized bed covered in a cream, formal damask cover. More colonial-style furniture and portraits of hunters atop their horses made up the décor. Definitely not the son's room.

Michael passed the bathroom and went to the end of the hall. A door stood ajar. He peeked in. Definitely Craig Irish's room.

And *definitely* suspicious.

Made up like the room in a traditional Japanese home, *tatami* mats covered the floor. A *soji* screen stood in folds against the far wall, in front of which was a black futon on the floor. Irish even used a wooden block instead of a soft pillow for sleeping. The only out of place items were Irish's home office in the other corner, complete with bookshelves, several computer monitors and keyboards. However, the most suspicious item was on a chest of drawers, a weapons stand holding the traditional arrangement of swords in order of their length. On the bottom was the long sword in its scabbard. On top was the knife, also in its scabbard. But the middle sword, the short sword, was missing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What are you doing?"

Michael jumped at the stern female voice behind him. He took a second to compose himself and turned, giving her an innocent smile. "I'm sorry. I got lost on my way to the bathroom."

She pressed her lips together, resembling all those staid family portraits on the walls. Uncrossing her arms, she pointed. "The bathroom is *that* way."

He bowed his head and followed her manicured finger, hearing her close the bedroom door firmly. Ducking into the bathroom, he locked the door and turned on the

taps. With the water running, he leaned on the counter and waited while his heart pounded. He'd really not had sufficient time to see everything he'd have needed to form a sufficient profile of Craig Irish. Physically, the man was tall enough and appeared strong enough to have committed the crime. Irish was obviously into and highly knowledgeable of samurai culture, right down to the tiniest detail of how a samurai sleeping room would appear.

And then there was the weapons stand and the missing weapon.

Michael turned off the water and flushed the toilet before going back downstairs. Jack and Craig Irish were both standing up near the bottom of the stairs.

"We're finished here for now," Jack told him.

Michael nodded, trying to act as if nothing were wrong. He didn't see the mother anywhere as Irish escorted them to the door and saw them out. Then he followed Jack out to the car. The backup Jack had requested waited a short distance away.

"You were in the bathroom an awfully long time." Jack looked at him sideways as they walked. "What did the guy's bedroom look like? Anything relevant?"

Michael glanced at him before going around to his side of the car. "You knew I was checking out the room?"

Jack raised his eyebrows with an "are you kidding me?" expression.

Michael's heart lurched. Again, he could get Jack into trouble. Once in the car, he turned fully to Jack, explaining what he'd seen.

Jack shook his head. "You shouldn't have done that, but it helped." He pulled out his phone and pressed a button. "Operations, yes, I need a search warrant for a residence on 90 Dorcar Road in Newton, ASAP." He explained what he was looking for and why then hung up and pressed the button again. "Chin, yes, I need you right now. We're bringing Craig Irish in for more questioning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig Irish now sat on the opposite side of the table where Richard Latham had sat the previous night. Unlike Latham, who'd shaken and gotten emotional, Irish looked almost defiant and sullen, staring down at the table top for long moments at a time.

Jack recorded the preliminaries of the questioning and let the tape run. "All right, Mr. Irish, let's begin with the missing sword. The search of your home did not produce the weapon missing from the stand in your room, which incidentally is the same type that was used to murder Conrad Kent."

The young man bowed his head and said nothing.

"Richard Latham has confessed to the killing and he's already lied to us. We believe he's protecting you. What do you need to be protected from, Mr. Irish?" He fell silent, aware of Michael once again sitting beside him, quiet. For now.

"He doesn't want my parents to know we see each other. They're the only reason Ricky had that horrible stain on his record."

"What about the knife? Why was it in Latham's possession? His fingerprints are all over the hilt."

Irish looked down. "You won't believe me if I tell you the truth."

Jack leaned forward. "Try us. You'll find we're very understanding when people tell us the truth."

Irish glanced up. A look of desperation touched his gaze briefly then vanished. "Like I told you before, we started as a live role-playing group. A bunch of us who belong to Bushido Spirit still get together. Ricky and I both go because it's a way for us to see each other and I don't have to lie about where I'm going. My parents don't know we're involved. Anyway, last weekend was the most recent event. I went over to Ricky's apartment a little early and we practiced using it, in its sheath of course.

"We went to the role-playing event and then I went back to Ricky's with him. I wanted to hang out with him for a while and then Robert Green...or whoever he was, called Ricky's cell phone. Ricky wanted to run out and see him right away. Like I told you before, Green had some kind of emotional hold on him. He was like a drug Ricky was addicted to. They had this weird effect on each other." Irish's face darkened. "We argued for a couple of minutes and then I left. It wasn't until I got home I realized I'd forgotten to bring the knife home with me. The next night I called Ricky to let him know I wanted to get the knife back and he said it wasn't there. I didn't believe him at first. I thought he was getting back at me for walking out on him, but really, I don't think he'd do that. We both looked everywhere for the knife. It had vanished."

"And you're positive you brought it back from the role-playing?"

"Positive. That thing is worth a lot of money. I'd never have left it there."

Jack studied the guy a few moments before continuing. "Did you report the theft?"

Irish shook his head. "No."

"Wait a second. You just told us that knife was very expensive and you didn't report it to the police?"

Irish looked pained. "I was afraid if I called the police about it, Ricky would get into trouble, like the police would believe he stole it or something. I'm really careful because of what happened to him before, you know? But someone definitely took it."

"Were there any signs of a break-in?"

"No. It was as if someone had a key to his place. The knife was the only thing missing. But Ricky was the last one who handled it. He put it into the bag we carried it in."

Jack digested this information before continuing. In light of Irish's answers, Latham must have thought Irish took the knife and was lying to him. Latham believed Irish had left him that day and killed Conrad Kent. That explained Latham's impassioned confession.

"Are you ready now to tell us where you were between four and six o'clock the day of the murder?" Jack asked.

"I was with Ricky. In his apartment. For a while. We were..." Irish's cheeks bloomed red.

"You were what?"

"Having sex."

"What time did you leave?"

"I'd say about quarter to five."

Very close to the time of the murder.

"Are there any witnesses who saw you enter or leave Latham's house?"

For a moment Irish looked down then his head popped up. "Yes! His neighbor, a woman named Dahlia, was outside tending her garden when I left just after six. Oh, and I just happened to have this receipt. I stuffed it in my pocket." He dug into his pocket and produced a white slip of paper. "From the Chinese takeout right by Ricky's place. I got some food after leaving Ricky and went home." He handed Jack the receipt to the restaurant on Mass. Ave in Arlington. The time stamped on it was four fifty-five.

There was no way Irish would have had time to get over to Kent's apartment on Boylston Street and perform the elaborate death ritual committed on Conrad Kent. "All right," Jack said. "We'll contact the neighbor and as soon as she can confirm your alibi, you can go."

## Chapter Eight

Back in the car on the way to Cambridge, Michael watched Jack's profile. His eye lingered an extra moment on the man's heavy stubble. The sudden urge to lick it seized him. He wiped his hands on his slacks. Jack hadn't said a word to him since they'd gotten into the car. Even though he didn't know Jack well at all, it seemed unusual for him to be silent for any length of time. Unless something was wrong. "You're not angry at me, are you?"

Jack didn't answer right away. He turned a corner onto a busier road. Then he grinned. "No." He glanced over. "But you are somewhat of a fruit loop. Police work 101. Don't snoop around in a character witness' home or a suspect's home or anywhere during an investigation without a warrant. Aside from being illegal, it hurts our credibility."

Michael looked down. "Sorry. I couldn't resist. I had a feeling."

"Believe me, I know. In any case, we've mostly ruled out Latham and Irish, so like I said before, it helped."

They rode in silence for a few more minutes and Michael looked out the window, running the morning's happenings through his mind, including having woken up with Jack's hand around his. The sudden urge for a sucking candy gripped him. He reached into his jacket and pulled one out. Red. Cherry. The flavor he liked best.

"You haven't even had breakfast yet," Jack said.

Michael looked at him. Jack hadn't taken his eyes off the road. Seemed he had perfect peripheral vision. "I know. I was...going to make breakfast once we got to my house. For you too."

"Thanks." Another silent few moments passed. "Hey, Michael, may I ask you a personal question?"

Michael's stomach fluttered a bit but he nodded. "Certainly."

"Where did you and Toshi meet?"

He bit suddenly down on the candy with a loud crack. "Um, at a social event for the Asian students' organization at Berkeley," he said around the dissolving cherry ball. "There's a welcoming dinner at the beginning of the fall semester each year, a mixer, I guess you could call it. Toshi and I sat next to each other."

"I see." Jack's voice sounded subdued.

"Toshi had just gotten to the states ten days earlier and didn't speak much English. I speak Japanese so it was easier for him to talk to me." As he said the words, he knew it wasn't completely true. There were other bilingual people there and native Japanese speakers. Toshi could have conversed with any one of them, but the attraction between



them had been instantaneous. "Well, that, and we liked each other," he added so as not to be lying to Jack.

"Right."

"Why do you ask?"

Jack glanced at him and smiled. "Just getting to know you a bit, I guess."

"Oh." Michael sucked hard a few seconds on the broken pieces of candy while he tried to think of something to ask Jack. His mind hazed however, and tension suddenly pulled in his neck.

"You all right, Michael?" Jack glanced at him, concerned. They were in Cambridge now, almost to Michael's house.

"I'm all right."

"Did it bother you, my asking you about Toshi?"

He shook his head. "No."

Jack was quiet for another moment. "What was he studying?"

Michael swallowed the nearly disintegrated candy. Of course, the fact that Toshi's picture was still up after all these years had probably stirred Jack's curiosity. Michael's discomfort grew. Why *did* he keep Toshi's picture out all this time? Kind of lame, wasn't it? How must it seem to Jack, the man he'd been having sex with? "Business and philosophy."

"But he ended up a detective?" Jack pulled the car up the curb and parked.

"Yes."

"Was police work in the family?"

"No. He defied his father's wishes to become a policeman. His father is an important diplomat. Police work is not...well, considered a high status job that fits with his family's social class." Michael had met Toshi's father several times, twice when his parents had come to the States to visit their son and a couple of times when Michael had visited Toshi in Japan during summer breaks. Toshi's father had been a stern, reserved man, someone with whom you could never feel at ease.

Toshi had always wanted to be a detective and Michael was sure that four years of watching Michael pursue criminal psychology and discussing his thesis work and classes with Toshi helped push him in the direction he took when he got back to Tokyo. It had been quite a feat for Toshi to rebel and pursue a career he wanted, but his years in America had made it nearly impossible for him to readjust to the strict conformity expected of him. His life had become a balancing act between familial duty and the career in crime solving that drove him from deep within.

Michael got out of the car, taking his empty coffee cup with him, and led Jack up the steps into the house. After slipping off his shoes, he turned. And bumped into Jack.

Jack's hands shot out and grasped Michael's upper arms. "Whoa," he said, righting them both. Then he smiled down at Michael. "Seems this is a regular thing with us."

Michael's heartbeat rose. He nodded dumbly. He wanted to tell Jack he'd take the photo of Toshi down, put it out of sight somewhere, but the words froze on his lips. The thought made panic heat up his chest, as if he...*needed* that picture to remain visible.

Jack's thumbs brushed Michael's upper arms. The taller man seemed reluctant to let go. Even through Michael's jacket sleeves, Jack's touch made his skin tingle. Jack released one arm and brushed his thumb pad along Michael's jaw. "You have a spare razor I could use?" He glided his thumb up and across Michael's cheekbone.

Again, Michael nodded, words trapped inside him. "In the medicine chest," he murmured.

Jack's hands dropped away. "Thanks."

Michael led him through the living room to the kitchen where the bathroom adjoined the kitchen and the bedroom on the other side. Jack went in and Michael listened to the water running and Jack's movements in the bathroom while he took out the breakfast things. He was always glad for the time to cook. He'd learned some incredible recipes from his Italian grandmother and made them whenever possible. This morning he decided to make Jack a frittata.

The smells of cooking food made Jack's mouth water. He patted his face dry and opened Michael's medicine chest again in search of aftershave. Michael had the most basic, inexpensive generic stuff from the drugstore. Not surprising. The man didn't seem like someone who ever really indulged himself. Jack poured some aftershave into his palm, set down the bottle and patted the stuff onto his cheeks. He found himself lingering in the bathroom, needing to put a bit of space between himself and Michael.

Even though what he really wanted to do was pull Michael into the bedroom, yank his clothes off and have more hot, incredible sex with him.

Jack sighed, staring at his reflection. He studied his blue eyes, squarish jaw and rugged cheeks. Even clean-shaven, he always had a slightly rough look. Not smooth and refined like Toshi.

He looked down. Why he'd asked Michael those questions about his first lover, he wasn't sure. Mere curiosity? Getting to know Michael better? Really? Or had it been trying to figure out Michael's intense attachment to the man? Getting a sense of the competition?

Yes, Michael had said all that stuff about not having loved Toshi enough to follow him to Tokyo and stay with him. But people said all kinds of things, even brilliant, good-hearted people like Michael. One thing Jack had learned in his experience was that human beings were a hell of a lot more complicated than the things they said would indicate. The fact that Michael was kicking himself so hard about it all these years later said more.

Jack pinned his reflection with a look. *Get a grip*, he thought. *You've known this man barely three days*. Another second passed and he felt the futility of such a warning. It

didn't matter. Just met or not, there was something about Michael that had soaked into him. Fast and hard.

After another moment staring at his reflection, he couldn't procrastinate any longer. He grabbed his shirt, which he'd hung on the hook behind the door while he shaved, slipped it on, leaving it unbuttoned, and returned to the kitchen.

The first thing that struck him when he walked in was Michael. Michael's back was to him where he stood at the stove, flipping something in a pan. Was it an omelet? An omelet on steroids, maybe. It was huge, much too big for a spatula, but Michael, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, flipped the whatever-it-was onto a serving plate as deftly as a professional chef would. The spatula in one hand, the plate of steaming strange omelet in the other, Michael turned. When their eyes met, he smiled. The lines of concern and seriousness were gone from his face. He seemed almost..joyous. A changed man. Cooking suited him. "Hi," he said, "did you find everything you needed?" He set the serving plate on the kitchen table and sliced the thing he'd made with the edge of the spatula.

"Yes, thanks.

"Have a seat. It's ready."

Jack obeyed, seating himself at a table nicely set. A large coffee press sat on the table, and there was everything else one could want, including a pitcher of cream and a plate with a large wedge of crumbly cheese and a small hand grater.

"That's fresh parmesan," Michael said and pulled his chair back. His tan skin gleamed from cooking and he'd pulled off his tie and unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt.

Jack caught a glimpse of Michael's soft chest hair as he leaned forward to slide his chair in. "Looks great," he murmured, not only referring to the food. "For a guy with blood sugar issues, you seem to feed yourself well enough."

Michael laughed softly. "That's why. I have to make sure I eat." He pushed the top of the coffee press down until it stopped then lifted it to fill Jack's mug.

The difference in him was astounding.

"Actually," Michael went on, "I don't have time to cook too often, but I wanted to make you a frittata."

"Is that what this is?"

"Yes." Michael slid the spatula underneath a large slice and lifted it onto Jack's plate. "My grandmother taught me to make them."

"On the Italian side, I take it."

Michael smiled again. "Yes."

A sudden meow caught their attention. Jack looked down and saw Chie, sitting primly by Michael's chair, staring up at him with imploring green eyes.

Michael chuckled. "Chie loves eggs." He broke a small piece off with his fork and fed it to her by hand.

"I've never seen a cat beg like a dog before."

Michael looked up. "Chie is very smart."

"I see that." Jack took a forkful of the frittata. Immediately, the rich flavors of eggs, peppers, onions and what was probably olive oil, not butter, melted in his mouth. He almost closed his eyes in the enjoyment. Damn, it was amazing.

"You like it?"

He nodded, unable to speak around the mouthful he'd taken.

"I'm glad." Michael took a knife and broke off a piece of the parmesan. "Have you ever had the fresh stuff right off the block?"

Jack shook his head.

Michael smiled. "I promise you'll like it."

The cheese was great too, of course, and Jack washed it all down with the coffee, also wonderful, something gourmet from the taste of it. Michael spent money on nice food but for his grooming, he bought the cheapest stuff. He probably gave his cat gourmet cat food too.

He sipped his coffee. "Look, Michael," he said, setting the mug down, "I'm sorry I was so nosy earlier, asking you about Toshi and how you met. It's none of my business."

But Michael shook his head. "No, don't apologize. I'm sorry not to have asked you about yourself in return." A sheepish look passed through his eyes. Chie jumped up on his lap and he petted her, not at all disturbed at having his animal so close to the food. "I'm so used to reading people silently and putting together a profile of them in my mind that I forget simply to ask. It's as if I can't turn it off anymore."

Jack shifted in his seat. He found an imaginary itch on his neck to scratch. Why he'd thought this wouldn't happen, he wasn't sure. It was Michael's work. And he knew from his own experience that his mind became saturated with work. Sometimes he couldn't even walk into a convenience store or pharmacy without checking out the people around him for possible suspicious activity. "You mean you have a profile of me in your head?"

Michael nodded. "Yes."

The imaginary itch on Jack's neck became a real itch of curiosity. "Well, why don't you tell me what you've gathered about me and I'll fill in any blanks?" He leaned forward, elbows on the table. He just *had* to know now what kind of profile Michael would have put together on him.

Michael looked at him. Something flickered across his eyes, a look of hesitation. "Well, I would say you grew up in a working class family. You've already told me you're the youngest, but even if you hadn't, I'd have said that. You're close with your older siblings." He glanced down. "I know about your brother in Vietnam because you told me," he said softly, respect for Jack's feelings in his tone. "But I would guess that from your age, there was probably at least one other brother who went to Vietnam as

well but returned. He was harmed physically, mostly, but also psychologically. I would say he's in a wheelchair and lives with your parents or with one of your other siblings and works at home."

Michael paused, one hand still stroking Chie's back. "Your older brothers have always looked out for you," he went on, "they were protective of you and you love them but you've also always been conscious of your social class. Not ashamed really but wanting to surpass your family because they saw something special in you and encouraged it. That created in you a strong sense of morality and you struggled in your younger years with your feelings for men. You couldn't help feeling that way though. The loss of your brother in Vietnam did something inside you that made you want to find a man and be with him always, keep him safe and protected so you eventually came to accept that in yourself but you tend to become possessive and intense, scaring off men who are emotionally weak. By emotionally weak, I mean people who are ruled only by their desires and goals. They end up accusing you of wanting to hold them back because you'd rather sit together on the sofa and watch a movie together than see them running off here and there to promote their careers. You know how frightening the world really is and you don't want them out there. But they don't understand." He fell silent and took a sip of his coffee while his other hand rested on Chie's back. The cat sat, her face appearing just at the line of the table, her green eyes staring at the remains of the frittata on Michael's plate but politely not grabbing at it.

Jack stared at him. Only then did he realize his jaw had dropped too. Finally he found his voice. "How the hell did you do that? Are you psychic? I mean, you seem to go into those trances and pace around."

Michael's eyes became strangely sad and he shook his head. "No. I'm not psychic. I just work that way." He sighed and scratched Chie under her chin. The cat tilted her head up, eyes closed, and purred. "I've just learned that every single detail about a human being is relevant. Nothing is accidental and I read them all." He tilted his head, still giving Chie her chin massage. Chie's purring filled the brief silence. "Well, to be honest, the part about being gay, that I knew because...it happened to me."

Michael's voice softened on those last words and Jack felt them almost physically, as if the feelings behind them had emanated from Michael and passed through his own heart. He looked into Michael's eyes. And felt himself falling, as if his insides were melting. Toshi or no Toshi, it was too late. He was a goner.

The skin of Michael's forehead crinkled and he frowned. "I hope I didn't violate you by saying all that. I'm sorry if I did."

Without thinking, Jack covered Michael's hand, which rested on the table. "No, not at all. I'm the one who asked you. You just surprised me."

Relief smoothed out the lines in Michael's forehead. "I'm glad. I would never want to do that."

Jack lifted his hand from Michael's and touched the other man's cheek. "You could never do that." He brushed his thumb over Michael's cheekbone and pulled away. Both Michael's cheeks reddened and he looked down as if fascinated by the cat in his lap.

Just then, Jack remembered the time. "Hey, don't you have a class to get to?"

Michael looked up at the wall clock. "I have about thirty minutes."

"That's not much time. I'll do the dishes so you can get out of here." He pushed back his chair and started to lift his plate. A hand on his arm stayed him.

Michael had leaned forward. "No, don't worry. I'll do them when I get back later. You don't have to."

Jack paused. Michael's hand rested on his arm. Even after Jack put the plate back down, Michael's hand remained. In the silence, Chie jumped off Michael's lap and sat by his chair, busying herself with cleaning a front paw. "All right. If you're sure."

Michael nodded, his eyes large, his face shy. "I'm sure. I'll just put away the leftovers." He stood up and took the leftover frittata to the counter.

Jack stood, rooted, watching Michael open a cabinet of storage containers. His body tingled simply from watching Michael move around. He followed Michael's gaze up into the cabinet, noticing how neatly everything was piled, according to size and shape, the lids stored separately in a separate container. A strange contrast to the opened, half-unpacked boxes here and there in the living room.

Michael reached up and leaned forward. The movement made his ass press against his slacks.

Heat shot into Jack's groin. "Here, let me help you," he said and went up to Michael. He pressed the front of his body to Michael's back, his hands around Michael's upper arms.

A breath escaped Michael. He lowered his hands to the counter and pushed back against Jack.

Jack caressed the man's triceps through the thin material of his shirt. Just touching Michael, feeling the warmth of his body heat up between them made his eyes close. He nuzzled the back of Michael's neck, savoring the smooth skin while he let his hands wander to Michael's front, feeling the man's gracefully sculpted chest through his shirt.

He rubbed his cock, hard and straining in his briefs, against Michael's ass and pushed in. The upward straining length fit perfectly in Michael's crevice, even through both their pants. Tilting his head, Jack pressed a kiss to the side of Michael's neck, his lips parted, just enough to give Michael a sensuous lick.

The other man exhaled and sagged against Jack's front.

Jack pushed again into Michael's ass and wound his hips, back and forth, a sensual figure eight that sent wild licks of heat through his cock, down into his balls. "I promise I'll try not to possess you," he whispered against Michael's skin.

Michael didn't answer but he turned his head so their lips touched. Jack groaned. His control slipped. He'd wanted to make sure Michael wasn't late for class, but the

incredible softness of the other man's lips undid him. He plundered Michael's mouth, one hand against Michael's cheek, keeping the man's face tilted up, while his other hand yanked Michael's shirt out and stole underneath.

God, this man was so hot. The feel of his taut stomach and smooth skin under Jack's hands fired his kiss. He plundered the depths of Michael's tongue, tasted every recess while he worked open the man's pants. He felt a hand on his belt and fire streaked through his middle. Michael was working his pants open at the same time.

He'd try to be as quick as possible.

Getting Michael's pants open, he broke their kiss so he could turn Michael forward. With both hands, he pushed down Michael's pants and briefs all at once, stopping them at his knees.

Michael was panting, pushing his ass against Jack, whose pants he'd barely managed to get open before Jack had turned him around. "Jack, do you have another one?" His hand pushed at Jack's pocket.

An erotic shiver traveled through Jack's body. "Yeah," he breathed and groped into his pocket, displacing Michael's searching hand. Quickly he tore open the wrapper, worked his own pants and briefs down and rolled it on. Then he eyed the bottle of olive oil nearby on the counter, the one Michael had undoubtedly used to cook with. He grabbed it, poured some into his palm and smoothed it over Michael's hole.

The slimmer man groaned. His shoulders slumped and he sagged forward. The sound was liberated, hungry, and urged Jack to put his cock in there as soon as possible.

Gladly.

One hand splayed on Michael's hip, Jack guided his cock to Michael's opening and pushed. The oil made the head slide right in. Michael was much more relaxed than the first time. Resting a second, Jack breathed hard, not with exertion but with the soaring feeling within him. He put his other hand on Michael's hip and held him firmly while he pushed. Sheer pleasure whipped through his entire lower body. Michael's passage was tight, yet pulled him in eagerly. Michael groaned and pushed back against him, seemingly as anxious to feel Jack deep inside him as Jack as to *be* deep inside him.

He squeezed Michael's hips and pushed, hard. And slid in all the way, his body flat against Michael's. He slid one hand from Michael's hip and splayed it over his middle, while he pressed his lips to the back of Michael's neck. Was this sheer ecstasy just an illusion? Did Michael and he really have that deeper connection he'd felt earlier between them, the way his heart and body told him? Or was he just desperate, just letting off steam, grabbing a moment's comfort? His mind teased him with these thoughts as he tasted Michael's smooth skin, listened to his harsh breaths, felt the weight of the man's back pressed into his front. He pulled back and slammed in again. Then again, fast and evenly until their bodies found a rhythm.

Jack lifted his face and accidentally noticed the clock. Michael had about fifteen minutes to get to his class. Shit! He didn't want this to end, didn't want to let Michael

out of his sight in case this was just an illusion and Michael would disappear. He pumped harder, faster, felt Michael pumping against his strokes in an even, quick rhythm. Jack reached around and closed his hand around Michael's cock. The hard length fit perfectly in his palm. He stroked it, his own movements more subdued while he concentrated on Michael.

It didn't take long. Michael was close and he groaned. His body stiffened and Jack felt the splash of hot cum on his hand. That made Jack hotter. He grasped Michael's hips again and thrust, not stopping until he went over the edge. His fingers dug into Michael's hips, as if marking him as his alone while his climax washed through him.

Jack slumped against Michael's back, holding him, breathing heavily against the skin of his nape. The feeling of Michael disappearing unnerved him, made him feel a bit crazy even in the aftermath of incredible sex.

And this sex, he had to admit, was the best he'd ever had. He heaved a deep breath and forced himself to lift away from Michael. In one movement, he pulled out, one hand on Michael's back. "I'm sorry," he panted, "I'm making you late."

Michael turned his head and looked up at him, dark eyes glazed, satisfied. "It's okay." His voice was breathy, relaxed and rushed at the same time. "You can write me a note."

Jack chuckled and reached for paper towels so they could clean up and Michael could get to work. But not before stealing a kiss. He pressed his lips to Michael's and tasted him deeply. Their tongues swirled together, half-lazy, half-mad passion. A pang gripped his chest. When he pulled away, it was all he could do not to ask Michael to promise they could do this again.

Instead, he handed Michael a couple of paper towels and concentrated on wiping himself so he could pull his pants up.

Michael wiped himself off, stealing glances at Jack. The man seemed troubled even though they'd just had what he thought was blissful sex. "Are you all right?"

Jack looked up, blue eyes wide. "Yeah, fine. Just in a rush."

Michael nodded. He pulled up his briefs and trousers. Just as his cell phone rang. He fished it from his pocket and looked at the ID screen. Then he looked at Jack. "It's Dr. Kinsey," he said just before pressing the button to answer. "Hello?"

"Dr. Di Santo?"

"Yes?"

"This is Don Kinsey. I was Conrad Kent's psychiatrist. You and the detective spoke with me yesterday?"

"Of course. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you, and you?"

Kinsey's voice was so refined, almost lyrical, with a directed charm that pulled Michael in. "I'm fine."



"I just so enjoyed meeting you, Dr. Di Santo, or may I call you Michael?"

"Michael's fine." He felt his cheeks tingling. The praise in Kinsey's voice shouldn't be affecting him this way, but it was. He became aware of Jack nearby, buttoning up his shirt and felt an odd...stab of guilt.

"Oh wonderful, Michael. Like I said, I was honored to meet you and hoped we could get together and just experience the delight of two colleagues discussing the work we love so much. It's rare that I find someone I feel this way about. Please forgive my forwardness. Life is short, you know. One must take the opportunities when they're presented. You understand."

"Yes, I do. That's kind of you." He glanced again at Jack. Jack was now slipping on his gun holster and buckling it.

"My pleasure. It so happens I have business today right around Harvard Square and I was hoping that if you were available, we could meet somewhere. I would love to treat you to lunch."

Michael swallowed. His heart thumped. "Well, I teach until two-fifty. Is that all right?"

"That's perfect. There's a place that serves wonderful coffee and sandwiches, right by the T station. Just across from the Out of Town newsstand, you can't miss it. Say, three o'clock?"

"Three o'clock is fine. Thank you."

"See you then, Michael. I so look forward to it."

Michael ended the call and closed his phone.

Jack had put on his jacket and stood, watching Michael. "What did he want?"

"He invited me to lunch."

"Oh."

Michael slipped his phone into his pocket. "Seems like a good opportunity to ask him some more about Richard Latham."

Jack nodded. "Can't hurt." A funny look slipped through his eyes. "Seems like he *likes* you."

Michael stared at him. "Do you think so?"

Jack stepped up and slipped his arms around him, pulling him close. The heat from his hard body already made Michael feel a bit weak. "You're kidding, right? Don't you know a come on when you hear it?"

Michael looked down. "I really don't think of myself that way."

"What, as desirable? Please." He slid his hand across Michael's back and leaned down, brushing a kiss on the side of his neck. "However," he murmured against Michael's skin, then licked the spot before straightening. His blue eyes were already dusky again. "In spite of what I said before, I'm possessive and I want you to myself." He grinned and pulled Michael closer.

Michael returned the embrace and let his cheek rest against Jack's shoulder. It felt damn good to have this protective feeling around him, something he'd never had. He'd always tried to be that person for others...and failed.

Finally Jack released him. "I'd better go. Please call me and let me know what Kinsey says, if anything."

He nodded. "I will." He saw Jack to the door, watched the man slip his shoes on and put his hand on the knob. He started to open it, but Jack stayed him with a hand on his arm.

Jack's blue eyes simmered into his. "Thanks, Michael," he said softly.

"You're welcome. But what for?"

Jack touched his cheek gently and then leaned in and brushed a kiss over his lips. "It's hard to explain." He hesitated then released Michael's hand. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, definitely."

\* \* \* \* \*

Instead of going back to Homicide, Jack drove to Conrad Kent's apartment building. He'd already set Mallory on the task of tracking down places where the killer could have bought the identical wig and coat Latham used. It seemed a hopeless task but it was one of the only leads they had at the moment. In the meantime, he hoped to find something, anything, that would help from Kent's residence.

He opened the door to Kent's apartment and ducked under the yellow crime scene tape. Now that Latham and Irish's alibis had come through, he'd had to release both of them. Which meant that someone *had* broken into Latham's place and stolen Irish's samurai knife, using it to kill a man both Latham and Irish knew. Apparently "stalker" could be added to the psychological profile Michael had been building of the killer. The person who'd stolen the knife and dressed up exactly as Latham had dressed up in wig and coat to enter this building was someone who'd taken the time to follow Latham and Irish around, learn their routines and learn where both Latham and Conrad Kent lived. Certainly there were possible suspects within the role-playing group. Detective Chin was checking on them right now. Those people also had knowledge of samurai culture, but none of them had been interviewed yet.

Jack checked his watch, which he'd done repeatedly since leaving Michael's. Michael was still in class and had a little while before he met Kinsey.

That niggled at Jack. Even though Michael didn't seem interested in the man, Kinsey was attractive, intelligent and displayed a certain genteel charm that Jack lacked. Though he did have a sense of style, he was still that rough around the edges Irish kid from Dorchester. He'd never be able to compete with a refined, highly educated man like Kinsey. Michael had pegged him with that profile he'd given at the breakfast table.

Jack's phone rang. It was Chin. "Yes, Detective Chin, you have something?"

"Maybe. One of the members of Bushido Spirit, one Sarah Thomas, owns a store in Allston. She deals in samurai swords. The member I spoke to who told me this said that there had been a small argument between her and Craig Irish at the last get-together."

"Irish failed to mention that. Of course."

"Of course. I'm going down there to talk to her now. I'll try to find out the truth."

"You have backup with you?"

"Yes, Sarge."

"Okay. Report back as soon as you've finished."

"Yes, sir."

Jack hung up and proceeded into Kent's living room where he perused the shelves again. Nothing new there. Nothing that could give any insight into Kent's psyche beyond his love for cheesy action films of the 1980s. Moving toward the bedroom, he forced himself to shrug away that nagging feeling. He wasn't a kid. If Michael ended up interested in someone else, there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't about to get into a fistfight to win Michael's affection. Michael was kind of distant anyway. Something about his heart was remote, untouchable. As if it still belonged to that detective in Tokyo. Why else would Michael keep that photograph out?

An exhaustive search of the kitchen was equally unrewarding. Even though there was an address book sitting on the counter by the telephone, only a few numbers had been scrawled in, belonging to names Jack already recognized, Angie and Bob, Dick. The man's life had apparently been quite small.

Or secret.

With a sigh, Jack moved to the bedroom. The bed had been unmade from when Kent had last used it, the sheets and covers rumpled. Aside from the box of condoms in the bedside table and a box of tissues, there was nothing there. He checked his watch. Michael was meeting Kinsey in about fifteen minutes. That green-eyed monster chewed at his insides again. Once this case was over, Jack decided, he would try to discourage Michael from developing a relationship with Kinsey. No, he couldn't do that. That would be controlling and possessive. If Michael decided he liked the guy, not much he could do.

He turned his attention to searching for anything that might have been missed the first time around. Drawer by drawer, he went through the bureau. Just clothing, underwear, socks, undershirts, the usual.

Until.

In the bottom drawer was a photo album. He picked it up and flipped open the cover. Nothing the police would have thought suspicious at first.

Until now.

His heartbeat sped up.

One the very first page, a yellowed newspaper clipping was inserted under the clear plastic. The article, dated from 1962 in a newspaper in Falls River Massachusetts,

was about a man, Donald Green, who'd flown fighter planes in the Pacific Theater of World War Two. Jack read further. Donald Green had been shot down and survived the crash only to be taken prisoner by the Japanese where he was kept in a prison camp for almost an entire year, where he was starved and tortured.

After the first few paragraphs, Jack carried the album over to the bed and perched on the edge so he could read more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Like the previous day when he and Jack had interviewed the psychiatrist, Michael found Kinsey seated at an outdoor table of the restaurant. This time, however, on Michael's approach, the older man stood up and offered a handshake. He was a good head taller than Michael and even a bit taller than Jack.

"Michael, it's so nice to see you again." Kinsey released him and gestured to the other chair at the small round bistro table. A canvas umbrella covered them from the afternoon sun and the air was warm and pleasant, though laced with the usual city smells of car exhaust and cigarette smoke.

"Thank you," he said and seated himself, putting his briefcase down at his feet. He'd come straight from the seminar he taught so that he'd be on time.

"I took the liberty of ordering you a coffee," Kinsey said, indicating a large porcelain cup and saucer. "I hope you don't mind. The brew is extraordinary here." He indicated the cream and sugar and then stirred his own.

"Thank you. That's fine." Michael picked up the creamer, poured some in and put it down on the other side of the table. As he was stirring, Kinsey picked up the small pitcher and set it back where it had been.

Michael's stomach tightened. He glanced at Kinsey's cup, but Kinsey's coffee was black and he was making no move to put cream in it.

"So, Michael, how are you finding life here in Boston? It must be so very different from California."

Michael picked up his cup and nodded. "Very different. But so far, I'm enjoying it. I like Cambridge."

"Yes, so do I. A vibrant little city. And Harvard's campus is so beautiful." Kinsey shook his head. "Though I must say, my experience here is dampened by the death of a client." He looked down and sipped his coffee.

"That must be terrible." Michael took a sip of coffee and set the cup on the saucer. In spite of the cream, the brew was quite bitter. Probably Sumatran. "You may not know but we've found the man Conrad Kent referred to as Dick. He was in custody, but he has an alibi for the time of the murder."

Kinsey smiled. "That's enough about such things. I invited you to lunch so I could ask you about yourself."

The tightening in Michael's stomach increased. Kinsey made no move to order food in spite of the invitation to lunch. No matter. He wasn't really hungry and took a couple more sips of coffee. Maybe later, he and Jack could have supper together. The thought brightened him. "There's not much to tell, really."

Kinsey nodded. "Nonsense. After what you've accomplished in your field of expertise? You're fascinating."

Now Michael's heartbeat sped up. Jack had been right. Kinsey *had* invited him here on a date, not a casual get-together of colleagues. How could he not have seen that? "Not really."

"You're too modest. Now please, I beg of you, let me ask you about yourself."

Michael sat back in his chair. "What do you want to know?" Now that he'd actually sat down, the lack of sleep from the last couple of days was rapidly catching up with him. He took more sips of coffee, hoping the caffeine would awaken him enough not to appear rude. He picked up the creamer again and added more then set the small pitcher again on the opposite side.

Kinsey's brow furrowed. Again, he picked up the pitcher and returned it to the original spot. "Let's start at the beginning. Where are you from?"

Michael cleared his throat and sipped his coffee. "Um...I'm...from..." He started to say, "California", but another wave of exhaustion gripped him and he lost the thread of speech. His vision blurred so he blinked and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger.

"Are you all right, Michael?" he heard Kinsey ask.

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Just tired."

"I can imagine. Murder investigations take all one's time. I can't imagine you've gotten much sleep."

"No, not much."

"I should have considered that." Kinsey's voice was suddenly heavy. "We can go to lunch another time. Perhaps I should drop you home?"

Michael sagged back in his chair. His head swam now. No exhaustion he'd ever felt, no matter how deep, had ever been like this. Dragging his eyes open, he looked at Kinsey.

The other man had taken out his wallet and left some money on the table. With a kind smile, he rose and approached Michael. "Come, Michael, I'll drop you home." Before Michael could reach for his briefcase, Kinsey had retrieved it from the ground.

"Thank you," Michael said. His voice sounded so far away, as if coming from the other end of a dark tunnel. His vision blurred again, so badly, he bumped the table in his attempt to rise. He felt a hand on his elbow, guiding him. "I'm sorry," he managed to say and leaned heavily on Kinsey's guiding arm.

"My pleasure. It's so rare I meet someone who sparks my interest so intensely. I've been waiting for a very long time to meet someone like you." Kinsey's voice had taken on a darker edge.

He stumbled, nearly falling against Kinsey. *I'm drugged.* The words echoed from the end of his tunneling mind. Kinsey had drugged him. He tried to pull away from Kinsey but his movement only made him nearly tumble over.

Kinsey's grip tightened on him. "Whoa there, Michael. You'll be all right in a little while. We're almost to my car."

*Kinsey...*

Michael struggled to turn his head. "You," he managed to whisper. Whatever Kinsey had put in his coffee was strong. And probably lethal.

*Need to call Jack.*

He pushed his hand into his pocket just as Kinsey stopped and leaned Michael against the side of a car.

"Here we are, Michael, my dear. No worries. You'll be home in a few minutes."

Michael worked on getting his phone out of his pocket. The world around him dipped and swayed, forcing him to lean all his weight on the side of the car. He heard the passenger door click open. Kinsey took his arm, guiding him with a small tug. Just then, his phone rang. And rang. But he didn't have the strength to answer it. Still holding the phone, his hand slipped out of his pocket. But his fingers were weak, numb, and the phone tumbled from his hand and hit the sidewalk.

*No!*

"Don't worry about your phone, Michael. Where you and I are going, you won't ever need it again."

## Chapter Nine

*Holy shit.* Donald Green had been through absolute hell, torture unimaginable to the average human being. Jack set the album aside a moment and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. The images sparked by the article haunted his mind. Locked in a box just large enough to crouch in for days on end, with only a few minutes a day to use the toilet and have a bite of food. Deprived of sleep for several days at a time, beaten and starved. Could a person ever come back from something like that? The article had concluded with a small paragraph about Green's life after returning to Falls River. He'd settled down and become an insurance salesman. He'd married Dorothy Green, née Smethers. They had three children, Robert, Caroline and Bart.

An article on the next page was an obituary for Donald Green who died of heart failure in a hospital in Falls River in 1978.

Jack looked up and raked a hand through his hair. Why would Conrad Kent have taken on the identity of Donald Green's son, Robert? And why would someone want to kill Robert Green?

Jack remembered what Michael had said the other day about the death poem. He'd gotten the feeling that the killer had put an identity into Conrad Kent in order to kill that person. He turned the page. There was yet another article done on Veterans' Day 1975, a spread about veteran war hero of Falls River, Massachusetts, Donald Green. This time, there was a photo of the man taken with his family.

Jack studied it. The photo had been taken sometime in the sixties judging from the hairstyles, clothing and faded quality of the picture. One person in particular caught Jack's eye, causing his heart to lurch. The son, Robert. He was tall and strong-looking, with a thick head of dark brown hair and an affable smile. Jack looked closer. And closer. The face was familiar. He studied it some more. He'd seen that face before, but where?

No. It couldn't be.

Kinsey, the psychiatrist?

Suddenly his phone rang. It was Mallory. Jack pressed the button. "What is it, Mal? Have you found something?"

"I think so, Sarge. After the thirty-fifth place that sells wigs in the Greater Boston area, we found one store off of Government Center, a place that specializes in larger sizes of women's clothing for cross-dressing men. It turns out about eleven days ago, a man purchased the identical wig using a credit card. We traced the transaction to a Donald Kinsey. The phone number on the transaction matches the number we have on record for him.

"Shit!" Jack jumped from the bed so quickly, the photo album slid to the floor. "Michael's in trouble. Really bad trouble."

"Sarge?"

"Listen, call Chin. You and he get all the backup there is under the sun and go immediately to 65 Upton Road in Cambridge. Get there now!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm so sorry, Michael. I never wanted it to happen this way."

Kinsey's voice, like the rest of the world, came to Michael as if from the other end of a dark tunnel. He felt his head lolling with the movements of Kinsey's car, unable to do anything except passively listen to the man's psychotic ramblings.

"You must believe me." Kinsey's voice sounded somewhat mournful, as if he truly didn't want to do what he was doing now. But he certainly didn't feel badly enough. "I wanted to take the time to get to know you. I believe you could have grown to love me given the chance. We're compatible, I just feel it. I'm intuitive about people that way. But you're also brilliant and I knew it would only be a short matter of time before you figured out the truth. I would have lost you forever."

Michael worked to turn his head. A core of strength welled up inside him from a depth his hazy mind registered as previously unknown, something he could only think of as the will to live, to survive. "Why?" he managed to ground out.

He felt the car turn a corner and vaguely recognized the end of his street through the windshield. Of course. The pieces all fell into place. Kinsey had stalked Kent and Latham. He must have stolen the sword from Latham's house. It made sense Kinsey had probably followed him and Jack too.

Kinsey didn't answer right away. He pulled up to the curb, turned off the ignition and got out of the car. Michael's eyes followed Kinsey around the hood of the car to the passenger side. The other man opened the door and slid an arm behind Michael's back. "I'm going to help you inside now, Michael," he said softly, "then I promise I'll answer your question."

Too drugged to fight him off, Michael could only succumb to the larger man's arms pulling him out of the car. In his head swam images of Jack and of his cell phone lying uselessly in the curb gutter back in Harvard Square. No one who picked it up would know that its owner had been drugged and kidnapped by a psychotic killer and desperately needed help.

Kinsey half-dragged Michael up the front walk to the steps and up to the front door. To a casual observer, Michael knew he appeared drunk or injured and was being helped into his house by a friend, a man who appeared gentle and courteous to the outside world, especially dressed as he was in an expensive suit and tie. Underneath his deceptive clothing, Kinsey's body was strong, muscled, with the coiled strength he'd needed to plunge a sword into a man's gut from behind and hold it there.



Kinsey's hand slipped into Michael's front pocket. "Ah, here it is." The man's fingers closed around the front door key. He pulled it out and unlocked Michael's door. He pushed it open, revealing the shadowy interiors of the house to Michael's blurred view.

Kinsey dragged him over the threshold. *Oh shit, Chie!* She always came out to greet him when he came home. *Stay out of sight*, he prayed silently. God only knew what Kinsey would do to poor Chie.

Unfortunately, his friendly cat appeared before them from her favorite spot on the living room rug where a splash of sunlight gave her a nice place to sunbathe. She meowed and walked in circles.

"What a beautiful cat," Kinsey said. Still holding Michael, he lunged forward and grabbed Chie by her scruff.

"No!" Michael tried to cry but could only whisper and hang onto Kinsey's arm so as not to crash to the floor.

"Don't worry, Michael, I would never hurt your cat," Kinsey said, "I love you. But you won't be here to take care of her, so she's better off outside where someone can see her and adopt her." He dropped Chie onto the front porch and closed the door firmly behind them, locking it. He slipped off his shoes and bent again, this time pulling off Michael's shoes as well. "Now I can answer your question, Michael," he said and started dragging Michael down the hall, toward the bedroom. "I've tried my whole life to get rid of the poisons inside of me. My father showed me how poisonous I am, what a useless, vile, stupid creature Robert Green was. He tried to purge me, but he was always unsuccessful. I did my best, really I did. When he locked me in the box, I tried not to cry. I tried to endure it, even to love it. When he tried to cleanse me by not letting me eat, I told myself it was for a higher purpose, that it would make me stronger, newer. Not the dismal failure Robert Green. Nothing worked."

Michael helplessly watched the hallway go by as Kinsey dragged him down it and through the bedroom door. Instead of depositing him on the bed as he expected, Kinsey held Michael up and with one hand, pulled off Michael's jacket, then unbuttoned his shirt.

"I'm not really a psychiatrist, you know. It's not my fault I couldn't get into college. I'm just not good at taking tests. But I learned anyway. I studied book after book, hoping that understanding my poisons and the poisons of others would help," Kinsey went on as his fingers worked open Michael's shirt. "I know as much as any of our colleagues and I have helped people. What is a degree but a piece of paper? *That* I made in a copy shop."

Michael couldn't answer. He hung in Kinsey's grip, feeling the cool air in the house touch his bare skin. Terror melted into the drug haze. He watched the room tilt slightly with his body's movements in Kinsey's hold. Kinsey was undoing his belt now while going on about having purged his worthlessness through channeling his evil self into

Conrad Kent through constant suggestion and the use of the propranolol to aid in suppressing Kent's actual memories. It worked perfectly.

"Only becoming Dr. Donald Kinsey helped relieve the pain," Kinsey continued. "Kinsey is refined, brilliant, a man his patients can look up to. My life became nearly perfect, except that Robert Green was always lurking in the background, taunting me with who I was, threatening to come back and make me endure him again. Dear Michael, please understand. *You* know how it feels to have emotional pain so excruciating you wish you were anyone else in the world." Kinsey pushed Michael's trousers down and helped him out of them. "Now," he said, laying Michael's pants over a chair and hauling Michael over to the bed, "I can die. Once I met you, a beautiful, sweet, compassionate man to die with, I knew it was time."

*Oh God.* Michael's mind fought to stay awake. He'd been right about the death poem, about how the killer had been placing a different man's persona into Conrad Kent in order to kill him.

"I could never purge myself of the desire for men, Michael," Kinsey said and gently laid Michael down onto his back on the bed. "That would never happen, but perhaps this way, I will have burned it out, so that in the next life, I will start fresh. And you will too." He dragged Michael up so that his head rested on a pillow and then proceeded to undress.

*Jack, please,* Michael pleaded silently. He could only pray that Jack somehow figured out the truth about Kinsey and got here before it was too late. How that was possible, Michael couldn't imagine, but he didn't want to die in this bed with Kinsey.

He wasn't ready to die. The realization struck him, now being faced directly with the immanent moment. He'd struggled for so many years with Peter's death, finding Peter's killer, living a solitary existence so that he'd never again love anyone so much that he'd get ripped apart inside over death. He'd given Toshi up for that very reason. Why else would he have let Toshi walk away from him that day in the airport, suitcase in hand? Always inevitable death. And then he'd met Jack.

Jack's face rose in his mind again even as he stared ahead, unable to move, forced to watch Kinsey undress to his white briefs. Jack was someone Michael had never dreamed he'd meet in his lifetime, especially not after Toshi. Everyone Michael had met, even the men with whom he'd succumbed to attraction and need for physical touch, hadn't been like Toshi, beautiful and innocent yet dark and mysterious, with untouched depths that pulled him in. Except for Jack. The first person in his life he'd trusted to speak of his torment to. Not even Toshi had inspired that trust.

Kinsey pulled something out of his pants pocket. Michael saw syringes and another small bottle of clear liquid. "I'd just given you enough of this to get you here, Michael," he said, pushing the end of the needle into the top of the bottle. Depressing his thumb, he caused the syringe to fill. "Now we'll both get enough to send us into the next world. Together."

Kinsey's gray-blue eyes misted. He pricked his own arm with the needle and emptied its contents into a willing vein. "Not much longer now, Michael," he said, his eyes looking almost dreamy now. "We can both end this miserable, lonely existence and find a better place." He refilled the needle and knelt on the bed. "Certainly after what happened to your brother, an innocent sweet child, you can't help hating this world and the people in it."

*I love people*, Michael wanted to say. That was the truth, even though he'd been afraid of love. He just couldn't get the words out. He tried to pull his arm away, but Kinsey grasped it, not needing any force to hold him still.

"Don't be frightened, Michael." Kinsey's voice was frighteningly soothing and without any choice, Michael succumbed. He felt a slight pinch and saw the syringe empty into his arm. "Michael, I've been in situations in which death would have been the greatest relief imaginable, a friend like no other. Perhaps no one else has ever told you this about your brother, but I'm a friend to you to say this. The poor child's situation made death a welcome freedom for him. Freedom from pain and suffering, from missing his family and knowing he would never see them again. Freedom from the terror his captor was putting him through."

Each word sliced through Michael's drugged haze with stunning force. Did this man realize what he was saying?

There was no more time to wonder. Michael's haze deepened. His eyes blurred and he could only lie perfectly still and accept the weight of Kinsey's body as the man lay down on top of him.

"You'll see, Michael," Kinsey said, his breath passing over Michael's lips, "this is good. This is the way everyone should go. Not through war or old age, disease, but gently, in the arms of a lover."

*We're not lovers*. The words remained unspoken. Michael's eyelids fluttered. Kinsey's body heat closed around him.

"Michael, how beautiful you are. So refined and intelligent and gentle. The kind of person I always prayed I would meet." He followed the praise with a kiss. Moaning with the obvious pleasure of their lips together, Kinsey slipped his tongue between Michael's slack lips.

Michael whimpered at the moist intrusion, the slide of the other man's tongue over his. Kinsey rubbed against him, their bare torsos sliding together. Yet the other man didn't get hard. Maybe from the drugs, maybe from his mental condition. The world dimmed. Michael's eyes drifted shut. The moist heat of Kinsey's mouth and the weight of his body began to fade. The world grew dark, like a womb or tunnel, the end of which showed a tiny light.

Slowly, the light grew bigger, like a star exploding. Whether Michael was moving toward it, or it toward him, he couldn't tell, but it grew so bright, the darkness lightened to gray. Shadows, shaped like people, appeared on the edges and as he moved closer, faces appeared. His grandparents, his parents, people both alive and

dead, were looking at him with smiles. They stood as if watching him pass them in a parade. Toshi was there too, in one of those eighties style suits he used to wear, a white jacket with the sleeves rolled up and thin tie. Like in the photograph Michael had of him. Albert Wittig stood there, watching him and waving.

Farther down, closer to the light, he saw Redwood trees. At his feet, soft earth was being flung. He looked and saw the grave, dug by Darren Phelps. Police were flinging dirt as they dug for Peter. Michael moved on. The light grew closer, brighter than a thousand suns yet not hot or blinding. Darren Phelps stood there now, watching him. The man's scraggly dark hair partly hid his face. He wore a blue denim long sleeve shirt, flapping open over a dirty t-shirt of the American flag. His jeans were full of holes, as were his sneakers. His unwashed, unshaven face didn't smile as Michael passed him.

The light was closer, so close now, Michael could reach out and see its glow around his hand.

Then he saw Peter. *I'm dying*, he thought, coming to a standstill before his brother, the age Peter was when Phelps snatched him from the yard. Michael blinked, staring down into Peter's face. Peter's eyes shone up at him as if to say, "I missed you so much". Peter still wore the green and white horizontal striped t-shirt, bell-bottom jeans and tennis shoes he'd had on that day. He was untouched, as if nothing had happened except time freezing him in his eight-year old form.

*Peter.* The name rose in his mind though he didn't speak. Peter smiled at him and held out his hand, saying without words that they'd go into the light together.

That's when the humming started. Was it angels? He'd never believed in angels, though he knew about the light. He'd read about it and had heard others speak about the light. Now he understood what they meant. He held out his hand and grasped Peter's, barely feeling it. Peter's face faded, invaded by the light. The humming grew louder. It sounded like shouting voices now. The thread that held him to his body felt as if it were being tugged, lightly at first, then harder. *Yank!* The light receded a bit. Peter's hand slipped from his grasp.

Another yank and he moved back in the direction he'd come. As if on a wheeled vehicle, he rolled backward, passing the people he'd seen before. One by one they faded into a mist...

\* \* \* \* \*

"Breathe, dammit, Michael! Breathe!" Jack pumped with both hands on Michael's chest. Judging from the empty syringes on the floor, Kinsey had filled them both full of deadly doses of something. Michael's eyes remained closed, his body limp. Lifeless. He pinched Michael's nostrils shut with thumb and forefinger and blew air into his mouth. With two fingers on the pulse in Michael's neck, Jack could discern the faintest beat.

In the background, sirens blared up the street, growing louder and stopping in front of Michael's house. From his peripheral vision, Jack saw Detective Chin working

on Kinsey, whose body Jack had dragged off Michael and onto the floor after they'd broken the door in and rushed up the stairs.

In seconds, the ambulance workers were there with a stretcher. They lifted Michael onto it as if he weighed no more than a feather and had him in the ambulance in moments. He left Chin and Mallory with the Cambridge police and the second ambulance for Kinsey and climbed in after Michael's stretcher. He'd let Operations take care of the rest, securing the crime scene and all the other administrative crap. Right now, he needed to make sure Michael lived.

The EMT had an oxygen mask over Michael's nose and mouth. While they rode, the man prepared an IV of fluids to get the drug out of his system. God only knew what Kinsey had given to Michael. If they'd been in a restaurant, Kinsey had most definitely drugged Michael's food or drink.

Shit! How had he not even suspected this? Kinsey had a strong connection to both Kent and Richard Latham. Yet nothing about the man had given them anything of a lead until he'd found that photo album.

Jack stared down at Michael's unconscious face, his heart pounding mercilessly. He reached for Michael's hand and squeezed it. "Please live," he said softly. He'd never been a praying man, but he sure as hell gave it a try now. *Dear sweet God, let him be all right*, he prayed silently until they reached Mass. General and Michael was rushed into the emergency room.

Jack remained in the waiting area and paced, unable to sit or concentrate on anything else. The only thing that distracted him was his cell phone ringing. It was Detective Chin. "Hey, Chin, what's the report?"

"Kinsey didn't make it," Chin said. "He was already dead when we found them."

A chill ran through Jack's entire body. He thought of Michael, so still, eyes closed, deeply drugged. What if he'd not guessed correctly that Kinsey would take Michael back to Michael's house to kill him? He forced his mind away from that. The doctors were working on him now, pumping his stomach and bowels, giving him fluids to flush the drugs from his system. There was absolutely nothing Jack could do to help. "All right. What else?"

"We searched Kinsey's residence and found the wig and coat. There are also more photographs and identity cards, high school and college diploma with the name Robert Green."

Jack sighed and stopped pacing. His gaze rested absently on the television, playing one of those afternoon talk shows. The chatter and laughter from the set droned in the back of his consciousness.

"How's Dr. Di Santo?"

Jack closed his eyes briefly and rubbed them, as if warding off the dread that threatened to envelop him. "I don't know yet. They're working on him right now."

"Oh. I hope he'll be all right."

"Me too."

"Keep us posted please, Sarge."

"I will." Then Jack thought of something. "Oh, Ken?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you still on the scene?"

"Yes."

"Michael...Dr. Di Santo has a cat, a tabby name Chie. Could you please make sure the cat's safely inside the house with food and water before you leave?"

"Sure thing. I see her. She's standing in the front hall."

"Great, thanks." Jack closed the phone and stood there, still staring at the TV, the phone in his hand. If...no, when...Michael woke up, he'd no doubt be worried about his cat. Jack remembered seeing Chie sitting on the small front porch, staring at the front door, when they'd approached the house. That's how Jack knew he'd guessed right that Michael would be there with Kinsey. Michael would never have left his cat, a declawed indoor pet, sitting outside like that.

Holy mother of God, how could he not have seen this coming? The self-reproach stabbed him relentlessly. Logically, there'd been no way to know. He had to follow the trail as it led him. Truthfully, Michael's profiling had brought them there a million times faster than if they'd not worked with him. They might have spent much more time trailing after Bob Miller or working on Richard Latham, yet Michael had kept pulling them back, nudging them with his evaluations in directions they would not have so quickly followed.

And now, Michael might be dead for all his trouble.

## Chapter Ten

"Detective Cade?"

Jack whirled around.

One of the doctors he'd seen going in to work on Michael stood there. Jack rushed over to him. "How is he?"

The blond man smiled. "He'll be all right. He authorized me to tell you what was happening. There was a frighteningly large amount of secobarbital in his system, but we were able to pump most of it out and the fluids should help flush out more. We've moved him to a room upstairs. Room 312. He just needs to rest."

"Thank God." Shivers of relief passed in continuous waves through Jack's body. His vision blurred and he felt his eyes sting. "Can I see him?"

"You can go in. Just know he's sleeping right now. Very deeply."

"Thank you."

"Stay as long as you need to."

Jack nodded and followed the doctor's directions to the elevators then looked for Michael's room.

Jack paused and walked in, taking care not to wake Michael. An IV dripped fluid into his right arm and when Jack drew closer, he noticed Michael's breathing was so soft he had to lean in closer to hear it.

For several moments he stood, watching Michael sleep, then settled into the chair next to the bed. He wanted to be here when Michael woke up, to reassure him about Chie. And well, also to be near him.

Unbidden, the image rose in Jack's mind of Michael pinned underneath Kinsey's naked body. A sensation like insects crawling over his skin passed through him. How had they gotten into that position? Had Michael gone to bed with the man only to find that Kinsey planned to inject him with the drug that would kill them both? The possibility cast a shadow over him, a horrible feeling he wished he could gouge out of his heart. He wanted to think Michael wasn't the type to jump into bed with someone so quickly, but really, he and Michael had their first sexual encounter the first day they'd met, so why wouldn't he go to bed with Kinsey too? Jack didn't really know Michael at all and Michael seemed such a nervous and insecure person in some ways.

Jack remembered the way Michael had seemed somewhat giddy when Kinsey had invited him to lunch, as if he'd been terribly flattered by the invitation. Jack had shrugged off his own jealousy at the time, but his cop's instinct knew that Michael had been flattered.

On the other hand, if Michael had brought Kinsey back to his house to have sex, why had Chie been on the front stoop? Michael wouldn't have allowed that, he was so attached to that little cat. The only explanation for that was Kinsey had drugged Michael's food or drink at the restaurant and then took him home when he was helpless to fight back. Kinsey would have been able to put Chie outside and Michael couldn't have done a thing about it. That made much more sense.

And gave Jack more hope about the two of them.

Either way, he was relieved as hell that Michael was alive. With a deep sigh, he raked a hand through his hair and sagged into his seat.

As if the sound had been loud enough to awaken him, Michael opened his eyes. His dark irises were glassy and his lids only dragged up halfway, but Jack saw them turn toward him. Relief and something else, something like shame, seeped into Michael's pale features.

Jack leaned forward, heart pounding. "I thought you were asleep."

Michael's head moved back and forth slowly on the pillow. "No," he whispered. His eyes flicked from Jack to another point in the room, as if it were too painful to make eye contact.

Jack reached for Michael's hand and squeezed it. "Thank God you're all right." He'd expected Michael to be out cold for quite some time, but he was seeing that the other man had a deep core of strength. He must have fought as hard as he possibly could against the drugs in his system. Kinsey, a larger, broader man than Michael, had succumbed to the drug while Michael had lived. Michael was strong. A weak man didn't search for his brother's killer.

Michael blinked. His lips moved as if he were trying to speak. Jack heard the sticky dryness in his mouth and lifted a cup of water to him, putting the straw to his lips.

Michael took a long drink and released the straw. Jack replaced the water on the tray. When he turned back, he saw Michael's eyes now misted.

"Jack," Michael whispered. "I'm sorry."

Jack smiled at him and rubbed his thumb back and forth over the soft flesh of Michael's palm. "You've nothing to be sorry for, Michael. If anything, I needed to have seen this coming."

Michael shook his head again. "He...drugged my...coffee."

Jack sat forward. "You mean while you were at the restaurant?"

Michael's head nodded against his pillow. He continued to stare up at Jack, his eyes looking watery now. A tear slid from one eye and rolled down his smooth cheek. He swallowed before speaking again. "Yes. I could barely walk after the drugs took effect."

"Shit." Jack raked a hand through his hair. "Michael, he didn't...rape you, did he?"

"Since I passed out, I wasn't sure, so I asked the doctor who examined me. He didn't find any physical evidence of it."



*Thank God for that, at least.* What Kinsey had done was horrid enough. Tension clenched Jack's back muscles. In spite of his relief that Michael hadn't gone to bed with Kinsey, he, himself, had been horribly negligent not to have included Kinsey in the realm of suspicion. "I shouldn't have let you meet him," he muttered. "This is my fault."

The misty appearance of Michael's eyes intensified. He squeezed Jack's hand, making a flush of warmth through Jack's chest. "Not your fault, Jack." He swallowed. Then his eyes opened wide. "Chie." The name burst out on a whisper.

Jack rubbed his thumb over Michael's palm. "Chie is fine, I promise. One of my detectives made sure she was safe in the house with food and water."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." A surge of protectiveness came over Jack. He glanced up, as if to see if anyone was coming to threaten Michael again. The door was partially open but Jack saw no one except the nurses passing back and forth and the murmurs of them speaking at their station. A squeeze of his hand pulled Jack's attention back to Michael.

"You," Michael said slowly, "you pulled me from death." He blinked, staring into Jack's eyes. "I saw Peter," he whispered. "At the light." His eyes misted again. "And then you pulled me back."

The words blasted through Jack, shook him in a place so deep, he hadn't known it existed. Michael had seemed dead. Jack had heard people speak of going toward a light as they were dying. Some came back to tell about it. Most did not. The reality that Michael had come back blasted him again. He smiled. "You're damn right I did."

The corners of Michael's lips turned up, but he didn't speak. The bit of a smile faded as quickly as it had come. "What about Kinsey?" Michael stiffened perceptibly. "Where is he?"

Jack shook his head. "He didn't make it."

Michael tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He swallowed hard again. "I still feel him. He'll never go away." A tear dropped from his eye. In moments his hand trembled in Jack's.

"Hey, Michael, it's all right." He watched tears stream down the other man's cheeks and his body trembled under the thin hospital covers. Jack rose, slipped off his shoes and settled in the bed next to Michael, taking care not to disturb the IV tube in his other arm. On top of the covers, he stretched out the length of Michael's body, cuddling in close to him and putting an arm over him. "It's all right. You're safe now."

Michael's hand clutched his and his slim body trembled against Jack. Jack held him close. The scent of fear and death clung to Michael, musty smells that Jack recognized immediately from his frequent contact with death. The recognition sent an icy tremor through him. He held Michael as firmly as he dared, as if his embrace could ward off death again. His body heat warmed the space between them and Michael's trembling slowly ebbed away. After a while, his breathing calmed down and his body relaxed.

Jack still held him, not wanting to let go. He lay there, listening to the sounds, Michael's steady breathing, the various beeps of medical equipment, the nurses' and doctors' voices murmuring, carts wheeling past. Eventually, the smells of food from the dinner cart delivering trays replaced the smell of death. Michael's natural scent returned.

*Thank God.* Tension drained from Jack's muscles. With Michael resting quietly in the curve of his body, Jack closed his eyes and let the rest of the world fade for a while into a background of gray and muted sounds. His consciousness never quite fell into slumber and hours seem to pass in this in between state until he heard murmuring.

The sound was indistinct at first and movement against his body made him open his eyes.

Michael. He was stirring. And whispering something.

"Michael?" he whispered.

Michael didn't seem to hear him. "Toshi, I love you," he said in a whisper. "Please forgive me."

Jack's skin erupted in goose bumps. He rose up on his elbow, looking down at Michael.

Michael's dark eyes were gazing back up at him. "Toshi, do you understand?" he went on. "I love you." He lifted his hand and cupped Jack's cheek. Before Jack knew what was happening, Michael slipped his hand behind Jack's head, lacing his fingers into Jack's hair and gently tugged him down.

Too shocked to react, Jack let Michael pull him down. Their lips met and Michael kissed him, shyly at first, then more passionately. The tip of Michael's tongue tasted the seam of Jack's lips. The warm lick was enticing and Jack's body responded. His blood stirred immediately and his nerve endings came to life. Instinct made him want to cover Michael's body with his and let the desire take hold.

There was just one problem.

Michael was dreaming of Toshi.

As gently as he could, Jack steeled himself against the heat pulsing in his groin and pulled away from the kiss.

Michael stared at him, eyes glazed with need. "What's wrong, Toshi-*chan*?" he whispered. "I love you."

Jack hovered over him. "I—I..." He fell silent. Disappointment made a lead weight in his chest. The relief he'd felt that Michael hadn't had sex with Kinsey evaporated, along with his hope. Thank God they were at the beginning, before he made himself crazy from falling for this man.

Just then, the door opened and a nurse came in. He smiled at them. "Sorry to bother you," he said. "Time to take temperature and blood pressure. Which one of you is the patient?"

"He is," Jack said, lamely trying to play along with the joke. He felt anything but humorous. Slowly he climbed off the bed.

Michael was waking up. He blinked, looking at Jack then at the nurse.

"How are you feeling?" Jack hovered over Michael briefly then moved back so the nurse could work.

"I don't know yet."

Jack sank into the chair and watched him a moment as the nurse wrapped the blood pressure monitor around Michael's upper arm. He still felt exhausted, not having slept at all deeply and Michael's sleep talking only made him feel heavier. He scrubbed a hand over his face, touching the heavy stubble emerging on his cheeks and jaw.

"I'm...really glad you stayed here, Jack."

Michael's soft voice made him look up. The blood pressure monitor made little huffing sounds as it pumped. It released with a long hiss.

"Me too," Jack said finally. He did his best not to let his heavy-heartedness show. Michael had no idea what he'd said in his sleep, but Jack remembered the way Michael had spoken about Toshi the other day at his house. In spite of Michael's words, Jack had sensed Michael's attachment to the man. His intuition had been correct.

"Do you have to get back to work?" The hesitant way he spoke gave Jack the feeling Michael didn't want him to leave but didn't feel he could ask him to stay.

He smiled again just as the nurse popped a thermometer into Michael's mouth. "No. I have the day off. Friday too. I don't go back on duty until Saturday. I can stay here as long as you need me." Truthfully, he preferred to stay. Michael definitely looked traumatized and shouldn't be left alone, even though he gave the impression of someone who tried not to need anyone. It didn't seem he had a bunch of people waiting around, ready to rush to his aid either.

Michael nodded, relief clear in his face.

The thermometer beeped and the nurse removed it. "A very normal ninety-eight point six," he said cheerfully. "Your blood pressure's excellent too. The doctor is going to check you in a few hours when he comes in. Then he'll decide whether to discharge you."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

When the nurse was gone, Michael sagged into the bed again. His eyelids fluttered and he sighed deeply. He looked up again at Jack, his eyes sorrowful. "Thank you again, Jack. For everything."

"You're welcome. In the morning, if you'd like, I'll call into the Psych. department and let them know you won't be in."

Michael exhaled. "God, they'll end up thinking I'm the most unreliable person they could ever find."

Jack moved in closer and covered Michael's hand. "Screw 'em. You solve murders. That's important." He squeezed Michael's hand.

Michael turned his head. "Jack, how did I not see it? That first time we met him."

Jack squeezed his hand. "You can't see everything in everyone from the first moment. Kinsey had a way of being...charming."

Michael didn't answer but his eyes grew sadder. "Yeah, charming."

"You led us to him, Michael, whether you agree or not. We wouldn't have closed in on him so quickly. I mean, we would have spent much more time on Bob Miller and the others, but you kept insisting none of them was the killer. It made us think in different ways."

A faint smile touched Michael's lips, fading again just as quickly. "I suppose so. Being right isn't important."

"But it prevents future killings." Jack held on to Michael's hand. Even if the man was in love with someone else, Michael seemed comfortable with him...comfortable enough to speak openly in a way he didn't with others. For a few minutes, it felt as if they were in their own little world. Even if it wasn't to last.

Michael stared into Jack's eyes. The warmth of the other man's hand around his made him feel safe, as if death and insanity weren't simply lurking in every shadowy corner. Jack had to be the kindest person he'd met in a long time, perhaps ever. The kind of man he'd hoped to find someday after his heartache with Toshi.

*Toshi.* Michael remembered his dream and guilt pricked him. The ghostly images of Toshi, suitcases around him at the airport, still haunted his waking mind. In real life, Michael hadn't begged Toshi to stay with him as he did in his dreams. Nor had he so passionately declared his love when they were together. He'd tried to express his feelings by taking Toshi on romantic weekends to the Redwoods and renting a cottage or driving up the coast during school breaks. Now with Jack sitting here, holding his hand and looking at him with such warmth and longing, why did he have this nagging sense of residue, of unfinished business with his first lover?

"Michael, I have some things to do. Some errands."

Michael's heart lurched. Jack had to leave? The sense of shadows around him immediately returned in their full force. He squeezed Jack's hand. "When will you be back?"

Jack caressed his brow. What a touch he had, sensual and protective all at once. "Soon, I promise." He leaned forward and Michael felt the soft press of Jack's lips on his forehead. "I'll have one of my other detectives come in and stay with you. They'll need to ask you questions about what happened, for the records. As long as you're up to it."

Michael sighed. Heaviness saturated his limbs. "That's fine." He'd expected to have compassion for Kinsey, as he most often did for the disturbed criminals he worked with. The exception had been Peter's killer. Now instead of compassion, all he felt was

the horrifying, irrational fear that Kinsey wasn't really dead and would come back to finish what he'd started. Only Jack's promise of protection gave him any relief. He nodded. "Thank you, Jack."

Jack waited with him until Detective Chin arrived. When he did, Jack smiled at him, touched his cheek and rose. Michael watched him leave the room, his eyelids heavier with each second...

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack ran back to his apartment, showered and changed and called his brother, Russell, to ask for the extra mattress stored in Russell's basement. He met Russell at his house in Dorchester, late morning.

Russ helped him load the mattress onto the bed of a pickup truck. A mechanic with his own garage, he had several vehicles. "After lunch I'll help you bring this over," he said to Jack.

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, Jackie, what are big brothers for?" Russ grinned at him, leading him back into the house.

"You're working though. This is my day off."

Russ clapped him on the back. Five years older than Jack, Russ looked like an older, heavier version of his baby brother. "What's the point of being the boss if I can't take as long a lunch hour as I want?"

Jack laughed. "Okay. Thanks a lot." He had lunch with Russ and Danny who lived with them and worked from home as an accountant, then drove back to Michael's house in Cambridge to move the mattress in and make sure Michael's bedroom was livable again and not a crime scene reminder of the horror he'd been through.

They maneuvered the queen-sized mattress up the front steps and through the front door. "Just be careful of the cat," Jack told Russ.

"No problem."

Making a mental note to clean up the floor after they'd walked in with their shoes, Jack went in first to make sure that Chie was safe. He found her in the living room, curled up on the sofa. The little cat sat up and blinked, watching him as if to say, "Who are you? You look familiar but you're not my usual person." Then he helped Russ down the hallway to the bedroom. Together, they switched the mattresses.

"You must really like this guy to be moving mattresses for him on your day off." Russ stood back and wiped his forehead.

Jack surveyed the room. That was already an improvement. Later, when the old mattress was stowed in the basement and Russ left, he'd find fresh bedding and put it on the mattress. He should have known Russ would pick up on what was happening to him. "Yeah," he said finally, "I do."

"Who is he? I just saw you last week and you didn't say a word."

Jack grinned at his older brother. Growing up, they'd spent a lot of time together, throwing a ball around, wrestling, watching football on TV. Russ had always waited for him to walk home after school. And *no one* ever bullied Jack on the playground at school for fear of getting a bloody nose from Russell Cade. Jack's grin faded. He felt a pang. Had Michael had this kind of relationship with his little brother before he was cruelly, gruesomely ripped from him? "I only met him a few days ago, on this recent case. He's my new profiler."

"Wow. Well, Jackie, you always were one of those people who jump right in with both feet. You live life to the fullest as they say. When the time comes you go before your maker and He asks you if you used all your blessings, you'll be able to tell Him, 'I sure as hell did. Now let me in those pearly gates'."

Jack laughed. "I never thought of it that way."

"I have." After a moment, Russ' grin faded. "I just hope he doesn't stomp on your heart like that last dickhead. What was his name? I forgot."

"Justin."

"Yeah, Justin. What a user that guy was. You sure know how to pick 'em, Jackie."

Jack just smiled. One thing he'd learned was, you didn't grow up with older brothers and not get teased mercilessly. It was a part of life, natural as breathing. Anyway, Russ was right. His relationship with Justin, a sculptor and painter, had lasted a couple of turbulent years until Justin had decided that he was really in love with his agent, whom he'd been sleeping with all along anyway, and had moved out. That had been five years ago and Jack *hoped* he'd learned his lesson. Michael didn't seem like a user at all. If anything, he was the opposite. It was difficult for him to accept help. "Michael's a much more mature, goodhearted person, from what I can see," he said. Briefly he explained what had happened and why he wanted to change the mattress for Michael.

"Jesus. Poor guy."

Jack nodded. "Yes. But he's also brilliant and very strong."

After another minute's rest, he and Russ brought the old mattress down to the basement and stuffed it into a dark corner. Then he walked Russ upstairs and back out to his truck. "Thanks so much for your help, Russ."

"Anytime, Jackie. I should get back to the shop." He walked down the front walk and turned. "Hey, by the way, bring Michael along next time you come to dinner. Knowing you, he's probably a bit of a stray, wounded and in need of affection." Russ grinned and waved. "You're the softest touch I ever met."

Jack waved back, his cheeks burning. "I don't know about that."

"I do." Russ winked and opened the door to his truck.

"Thanks, Russ," Jack called. "I'll bring him." He watched his brother get into his truck and drive down the street. Going back into the house, he gave Chie some food and pulled out some clothing for Michael while Russ' words echoed in his mind. Russ

had always been a good judge of character. Yeah, Michael *was* a bit of a stray, alone and hungry, yet also a survivor. A brilliant man who was definitely wounded, yet also lived with a kind of passion bubbling underneath.

Thinking of Michael this way only intensified the need to see him again. Ignoring the photograph of Toshi glaring out from the table in the living room, Jack gave Chie one last pat on her head before heading back to the hospital.

Back in Michael's room, he found Albert Wittig in the bedside chair, speaking in quiet tones. Both men looked up at him in the doorway.

"Jack," Dr. Wittig greeted him. He started to rise but Jack motioned for him to stay seated.

Jack came forward and shook his hand but turned immediately to Michael. The man looked like hell, dark circles, complexion sallow. Jack's heart squeezed. It didn't seem to matter whether Michael still had it for his former lover. Every time he looked at Michael, he felt pulled.

"I was just telling Michael here that I didn't bring him out to the East Coast for this to happen." Dr. Wittig's face wore an expression of deep concern. He turned to Michael. "You're my dear friend and esteemed colleague. I feel responsible."

Michael shook his head. "Don't, please." His eyes turned up to Jack and Jack saw his legs move to the side underneath the white covers. Jack perceived the silent invitation to perch on the side of the bed.

Jack sat down carefully, one hand on Michael's leg. "I'm the one who feels responsible, Doctor," he said. "I can't help thinking there were signs early on I didn't read."

Dr. Wittig shook his bald head. "Let's not get into that. Who is supposed to observe more carefully, the psychologist or the detective? Silly argument."

"And pointless," Michael interjected.

Jack looked at him again and received a faint smile. He couldn't help worrying about the longer term effect this would have on Michael. He already seemed to have somewhat of a melancholic personality to begin with. He rubbed Michael's leg and squeezed it.

"Michael," Dr. Wittig said, "you are welcome to come and stay at our house if you need to."

Michael shook his head. "Thank you, Albert, very much, but I'll be fine. I'll stay at my house. Besides, I have the cat."

"Chie is also welcome."

"That's kind of you, but I need to get on."

"Michael's been this way since I've known him, Jack." Again, the older man's voice held concern. "Twenty years."

"I think I've become more laid back in all that time."

Dr. Wittig looked at him, smiling now. "You most certainly have not," he said, obviously teasing. "My guess is your pantry is all alphabetized."

"I let it get out of order now and then."

Jack chuckled, relieved to see Michael was enjoying the teasing.

Then Dr. Wittig leaned forward and patted Michael's hand. "Well, my dear friend, I have a lecture to give. I must get back. However, I will be checking up on you later and I know Cynthia will want to bring you large helpings of whatever she's cooking for the next few days."

"Really, Albert, it's not—"

"Quiet now," Dr. Wittig said. He'd lifted his overweight frame and stood on his feet. "There are times to allow others to help you. Right, Jack?"

The words passed like a sizzle of electricity through Jack. How would Michael respond when he saw the new bed? He nodded. "Yes, definitely."

Dr. Wittig shook his hand again. "Let me know if either of you needs anything. Michael, if you need a ride home, please call."

"Thanks, Albert. I appreciate it." Michael sounded as tired as he looked.

When Dr. Wittig had left, Jack sat again on the edge of the bed, not wanting to go to the chair, which seemed too far away. He let his hand rest on Michael's leg again. "Has the doctor been in since I was gone?"

"Not yet." Michael heaved a sigh. "Another nurse was here, though, and said she thought I'll probably be released in a couple of hours." To Jack's surprise, Michael reached out and put his fingertips over Jack's other hand where it rested on his knee.

Jack's insides jumped and he covered Michael's hand. "You can stay with me, if you need to, Michael. Don't worry about the cat. She can come too."

Again, that faint smile. "It's all right, Jack, really. I should stay at my house. I wasn't just being polite to Albert."

"I didn't think that. It's just..." he trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

Michael grasped Jack's hand and squeezed it. "I'll be fine."

Jack lifted his hand from Michael's leg and smoothed back the man's hair. "You're stubborn, you know. Dr. Wittig is right. You should let people help you sometimes."

"Well, actually..." A shy look slipped through Michael's eyes. "I was going to ask you if you'd stay with me. At least for a night. If it's no trouble."

Warmth spread like gentle fire through Jack's chest. "No trouble? Of course it's no trouble. I'll stay with you as long as you need me to."

Michael's smile deepened, grew less faint and actually reached his eyes. "Thank you."

Jack caressed Michael's hair back again. Russell's parting words to him rang in his mind. *You're the softest touch I ever met.* He sighed. "Hey," he said softly, "no problem."



Ignoring the dark feeling that hung in his chest, he sat back with Michael's hand in his to wait with him for the doctor.

## **Chapter Eleven**

"Michael, are you sure about this?" Jack closed his car door and followed Michael to the front steps of the house. "You really don't have to go back in so soon."

Michael looked at him. Though he was still somewhat pale, his features a bit drawn, he took the front steps with eager strength. "Yes. I'm sure. I really have to." He fished in his pocket for the door key Jack had brought to him before he was discharged from the hospital. "Besides, I want to see Chie."

Jack sighed and watched Michael turn the key and push the door open. There was that deep stubborn streak again. No use in trying to get past it. He followed Michael into the foyer.

"Chie!" Michael called while slipping off his shoes. "Where's my beautiful girl?"

Jack suppressed a smile while he slipped off his own shoes. You'd have thought Chie was Michael's girlfriend the way he spoke to her.

Before Michael could go looking for her, the cat came running out of the living room and up to Michael. She mewed loudly, her back arched, tail twitching.

"There you are." Michael knelt down and held his arms out. Chie jumped at him, her paws on either shoulder as if she were hugging him, closing her eyes, purring and rubbing her head against his chin.

Jack stared. It was quite a show between the man and his cat. Michael closed his eyes, one hand burrowing into Chie's fur to ruffle around her ears. Eyes closed, he kissed and nuzzled the top of her head. "Oh, Chie, my sweet little girl," he whispered, "I'm so sorry. So sorry."

Jack's heart squeezed. Though Michael had survived, the realization of what a loss it would have been for him if Chie hadn't also survived hit him with a force he never expected.

Finally Michael looked up, Chie cradled in his arms. The lines around his eyes made the sorrow in them more stark. "Thank you again, Jack, for making sure she was okay. I don't know what I would have done if he'd..."

Jack rubbed Michael's back then rested his hand in the center, over Michael's windbreaker. "It's all right. Anytime."

Michael nodded, still looking at him, his fingers rubbing Chie's head. Her purring filled the quiet. Finally, he sighed and set Chie gently onto her feet. "I guess I'm going to go in there," he said when he'd straightened.

It took a second for Jack to realize Michael meant the bedroom. He opened his mouth to protest but then stopped. Different people worked in different ways. "Okay. You want me to go with you?"

"Yes, please."

Jack brushed his hand across Michael's back again. "All right then." Michael turned and Jack stayed close behind him down the hall, aware that Chie stayed at Michael's heels, mewing, as if to scold him for doing anything but paying attention to her. At the doorway, Chie moved ahead, as if expecting him to follow her. With a light spring, she jumped onto the bed, moving in circles, giving Jack the impression that the two of them had some kind of bedtime ritual that Chie thought they were performing right now.

But Michael hung back in the doorway. "Not now, *Chi-chan*," he said softly, "it's not bedtime."

Chie sat on the bed, staring at him and blinking her large green eyes. Otherwise, she remained quiet.

"Michael, while you were in the hospital I changed the mattress out." Jack put a hand on Michael's shoulder. "I had a spare at my brother's house. I thought that might make it easier for you."

Michael's eyes widened. "You did that for me?"

He nodded and squeezed Michael's shoulder. "Yeah. I hope it's all right."

Michael looked at the bed and then again at him. "It's definitely all right. Thank you." His shoulder sagged under Jack's hand. "I just don't want to trouble you." His eyes, still red-rimmed, looked sheepish. "We've just met and already I'm a burden."

That made Jack upset. "Don't be ridiculous. You could never be a burden. I wanted to do it. I—" He fell silent just before using the "L" word. "Come on. Let's go sit down. I recall something about Albert's wife bringing some food over?"

Michael nodded. "All right."

Jack seated Michael at the kitchen table and found a casserole dish with a note from Cynthia Wittig. "Here we go," he said. "I'll do all the work. Just relax." He busied himself getting out plates and forks and warming up the food. "It's nice the Wittigs look after you this way."

"Cynthia and Albert have been like a sort of family for me, especially once I told them what happened." He stared ahead, his cup in one hand, the other resting on Chie's back. Jack recognized the quiet demeanor that came over Michael just before he revealed something very personal. "Albert met my parents a couple of times. My mother is a professor of Asian studies at Berkeley but they'd never met before I introduced them even though they were both on the faculty."

"Oh. What about your dad? What does he do?"

"High school English teacher. My parents met at Berkeley in the sixties when they were students there."

"I see." Jack's heartbeat sped up a bit. From what he knew of Michael so far, the man wasn't someone just to give out random facts. He was getting around to something. He scooped out the food and poured glasses of lemonade from a plastic bottle Cynthia had also left for them.

"I think that's why Albert and Cynthia kind of took me in, so to speak," he went on after a moment's quiet, filled only with Chie's loud purring. "Even though I didn't come out and tell them, they sensed it." He looked up at Jack with incredibly sad eyes. "It wasn't just that our family had been devastated by what happened to Peter, Jack. It ripped us apart. It destroyed my relationship with them. Especially my mother." He looked down. "Peter was her baby. She screamed at me for having gone inside."

Jack's heart lurched. "Jesus, Michael. It wasn't your fault."

Michael shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"It obviously matters because you're talking about it now."

Michael was silent.

"It matters to *me*."

Michael's gaze shot up. Emotions churned in his eyes even though he didn't speak.

"You were a little kid. Even if you'd been there, you don't know what would have happened. You couldn't have prevented it. That guy might have hurt you too. Or worse. Your mother spoke from grief. She shouldn't have said that. She was wrong. Foolish."

Michael's eyes misted. "Thanks, Jack," he whispered.

Jack put a hand on Michael's leg. He wanted nothing more than to ease the man's suffering. Well, maybe talking about it openly would help him.

"I'm sorry I burden you with these personal things," Michael said, "I won't tell you if you don't want me to."

"No burden. Talk all you want."

Michael smiled again, this time a bit stronger. "It's just, I don't know...something about you makes me talk."

Jack returned the smile. "Hey, I'm glad. Usually I make people want to run the other way."

Michael laughed. "Somehow I doubt that."

After that, Michael seemed better and they spent the rest of the evening talking, eating and watching TV, holding hands on the sofa with Chie in Michael's lap.

Unfortunately Jack got a call from work, asking him to come in the next morning. One of the guys' wives had just had a baby. "Damn," he said, hanging up the phone, "looks like I've got to work in the morning."

"I do too."

Jack looked at him. "You're going to teach?"

He nodded. "Yes. I need to stay on my schedule. Besides, it's only the beginning of the year and I've already had to run out early, miss class as well as office hours. I don't want my record to get worse."

"All right. I'll clean up here. Then we can go to bed." Jack took the dirty plate out of Michael's hands, determined not to let him try to wash the dishes. "Go shower."

Michael surrendered the plate but stood where he was, looking at Jack. "I can't believe you're actually real," he murmured. "I keep thinking you'll disappear if I turn around."

Jack's insides jumped. At first he was too stunned to respond. Then he leaned in and kissed Michael's lips. The kiss was soft and sweet and made him want to throw the plates down and lay Michael back on the kitchen table. "I'm real," he said softly, "I promise. Now go ahead." He gave Michael a gentle push toward the bathroom and turned. Hopefully soon, they'd be in bed together, naked bodies entwined.

Michael almost closed the bathroom door then stopped. He left it partway open, not only because Chie showed up at the door, wanting to follow him in, but also because he felt less alone that way. He turned on the shower then started to undress while the water got hot, finding the sounds of Jack moving about the kitchen, running the water and opening and closing the fridge comforting. Chie seemed a bit calmer as well, though she still mewed for his attention. He bent over and petted her briefly. "You can't follow me into the shower, kitty," he said and straightened, unbuckling his belt and opening his pants.

Finding the water hot enough, he pulled off his briefs, set them on top of the pile of clothing on the closed toilet seat and stepped in. He closed his eyes and stood under the spray, letting it douse him. The feel of the water on his skin and in his hair was crisper, more soothing than he'd ever felt it. Everything was more vivid now, since Jack had pulled him back from the light. Even though he was tired and overwhelmed, still processing what had happened, every nuance of feeling and thought was also clearer, sharper, more focused, as if his body and mind were some kind of super-powered lenses.

Coming back from death, combined with his utter powerlessness over that fragile gift had shaken him to a core so deep he hadn't known it existed. It seemed to have shaken up all the old feelings and problems, things that were deeply a part of his experience but had lain dormant most of his life. Yet in the few days he'd known Jack, he'd told the man about some of the most painful issues of his life. He couldn't seem to stop himself. Something about Jack made him feel safe and had since that first night he'd showed up at Jack's apartment in the wee hours. And it wasn't because Jack was a policeman. Michael had worked with plenty of policeman and hadn't ever felt this way. Yet had he gone too far talking about the rift between himself and his parents? Jack said he didn't mind at all, but it was possible he was trying to be nice, to make Michael feel better, much the way Albert and Cynthia had done all these years because they sensed his aloneness.

He sighed and picked up the soap, rubbing it in circles over his wet chest and down his stomach. Maybe it didn't matter whether Jack just felt sorry for him. After all, *he'd* felt sorry for Chie when she'd crossed his path, hungry and homeless, in need of care. Taking her in had been an act of love and they were both the better for it. Back at Berkeley, he'd felt that way toward Toshi as well, sensing Toshi's homesickness and

aloneness in an alien land. Of course, befriending a man as incredibly handsome, sweet and charming as Toshi hadn't exactly been an arduous task, but there were other great-looking guys around and yet Michael had gravitated toward Toshi. They'd brought fun and sweetness into each other's lives. Had that been a bad thing?

Michael felt a stirring of hope as he rinsed the soap off his body. For years, he'd been having that dream about Toshi leaving him in the airport. In real life, Michael had watched the other man walk away, into the gate without having said any of the passionate words that poured out of him in his dream. The image had haunted him ever since it happened and he'd never been able to understand or shake it. Strange how he'd helped police find murderers by profiling yet had never been able to solve his own personal mystery.

Maybe now he had. Maybe now he'd be free from the burden that had kept him from being with someone new. Turning off the water, he stepped out onto the bathmat, grabbed his towel and dried off. He'd just wrapped the towel around his hips when a knock sounded on the partially open bathroom door.

"Michael?"

Jack's voice excited and relieved him at the same time. He opened the door and Jack's broad frame filled the doorway. The man's blue eyes regarded him with concern and...as they roved over his torso...a stirring of desire. He cleared his throat, giving Michael the impression he was trying not to be lustful.

That alone sent a ripple through Michael's body. His heightened awareness practically picked up the scent of Jack's need.

"You all right?" Jack took a careful step into the bathroom. "I just finished cleaning up and wanted to check on you."

Michael stepped closer and saw his nearness register in Jack's eyes. In spite of everything he'd just been through, the way Jack wanted him was a thrill. Had other guys felt this way about him? Even the ones he'd gone to bed with, Michael wasn't sure about, mainly because he'd probably been so wrapped up in his own concerns he hadn't even noticed. In any case, the sensation was new and intoxicating. It made him forget everything else for a little while, and he so wanted to forget. He reached up and closed a hand over Jack's triceps. The hard muscle twitched with awareness under his touch. "I'm fine," he said, hoping his voice came out in the seductive way he intended.

With his hand on Jack's arm, he moved in closer, daring to let his chest press to Jack's. The broad hardness made him pull in a breath. His cock stirred to life, pushing against his towel.

Jack's eyelids lowered and his breathing deepened. "Good," he said, his voice lower, "I'm glad to see—"

Michael cut him off with a kiss. Closing his eyes, he pushed his lips to Jack's and grasped the man's other arm to pull him closer.

Jack sighed and surrendered. He slid his arms around Michael and palmed his back. His hands were so large they made Michael feel held, accepted, in a way he'd

never experienced before. *I've really been so alone.* The words echoed in his mind and he sought the refuge Jack offered, with his tongue, his hands, his embrace, his passionate lovemaking, his compassionate acceptance. Michael stole between Jack's lips, seeking the moist warmth of his tongue.

Jack's lips immediately parted and his tongue met Michael's, as if Jack understood Michael's quest. His thick fingers stroked Michael's back muscles, exciting and soothing him all at once. Michael slid his hands to Jack's chest, searching for the buttons of his shirt without breaking their kiss. He fumbled with each button until Jack pulled away, breathing ragged, and finished the remaining buttons.

"Michael," he breathed, eyelids heavy, skin flushed, "are you ready? I mean, I don't want to rush you."

"I'm ready." The statement was practically a hiss he was in such a rush. Desire thundered through his body. His cock pushed the towel out almost painfully. With one hand, he took Jack's hand and tugged him toward the bedroom while he pulled his towel off with the other.

By the bed he stood in front of Jack and ran his hands over Jack's hard pecs. He saw Jack's eyes rove over his naked body and linger on his cock, straining upward. Jack was visibly restraining himself, as if he still weren't sure it was time to have sex. No matter. He continued his exploration of the other man's chest, loving the way the soft golden hairs brushed his fingertips. The sensation only intensified his need. "This is *our* bed," he said in a determined whisper. "This bed is from you, for us. No one else."

Jack's eyes simmered yet his understanding registered and he nodded. A sudden grin turned up one side of his nicely arched lips. "Us and your cat." He gestured toward the bed with a nod.

Michael turned. Chie had already jumped onto the bed and stood, watching them. Michael laughed and turned his attention back to Jack. "That's all right." He ran his hands over Jack's chest again. At the other man's tawny nipples, he paused, circling the pads of his fingertips until the disks crinkled to his touch.

Jack groaned again and his chest heaved, but he stood quietly, as if silently encouraging Michael's newfound initiative. Whether it was intentional or not, Michael felt it. He slid his hands once more over Jack's chest then leaned in and pressed his lips to the center furrow that divided the two hillocks of muscle. Jack let out a small breath and one hand slipped gingerly into Michael's hair.

With his hands on Jack's hips, Michael brushed his lips over the rounded muscle. He closed his eyes and explored, breathing in Jack's scent, listening to the larger man's breath pulse into the air. Feeling bolder, Michael licked across one nipple. Jack exhaled and his breathing grew more ragged. Michael licked the tight disk again, loving the erotic effect it had on Jack. Apparently, that part of him was incredibly sensitive. So he kissed his way back in the other direction and brushed his tongue over Jack's other nipple.

"Michael." His name was a harsh whisper. "You're making me crazy." His large fingers raked passionately through Michael's hair, against his scalp.

Instead of answering, Michael smiled against Jack's skin, thinking of the other day when his student called and Jack had started giving him a blowjob while he was trying to answer her questions. Perhaps it was time for payback. He covered Jack's nipple with his lips and licked back and forth across it, flickering the tip of his tongue, teasing lightly until Jack was panting.

"Michael, I beg you."

Michael lifted his face and grinned at him. He felt delightfully wicked. Not only did Jack bring out his secrets, but he also brought out this playful person Michael had never known existed. "Beg me to what?"

Jack's eyes were practically smoldering. His lids were heavy and his lips curled in an almost feral expression, as if he would pick Michael up, throw him onto the bed and jump his bones. The larger man stared down into his eyes, breathing heavily. His hand was still laced in Michael's hair. "To—" He pulled Michael against him and took his mouth in a searing kiss.

Michael felt swept into an overwhelming wave that was Jack's arms around him, pulling him close. Jack's tongue licked deep into his mouth, across his teeth, over his tongue, as if he'd never tasted anything more wonderful in his life. The mischief fled from him, replaced by surrender. He couldn't help it. The kiss, the embrace, the sensation of being held made his bones melt. The sudden, gripping need to be underneath Jack, his legs wrapped around the man's hips, overtook him, guiding his hands to Jack's belt so he could yank it open.

Without breaking their kiss, Jack helped him so that together, they got his pants undone and his briefs down.

Michael tried to slip Jack's pants down without ending the kiss but it was impossible. Before he realized what he was doing, he'd pulled away from Jack's lips and was dropping to his knees, bringing Jack's clothing down with him.

"Michael," Jack breathed, his hands on Michael's shoulders as if to stop him.

Michael looked up. "What?"

Jack hesitated. "I don't know," he said, his voice husky yet still concerned. "I—"

Michael grasped Jack's hands and pulled him down to sit on the edge of the bed. "Whatever it is," he whispered, "don't worry." He slid Jack's pants down to his ankles and pulled them so that Jack lifted his feet.

Michael pulled his pants and briefs all the way off and laid them aside. He pushed his way between Jack's thighs. As soon as he did, Jack cupped the back of his neck and kissed him again. Michael rested his hands on the tops of Jack's hard thighs as he sank into the kiss. The soft sounds of their lips and tongues meeting, pulling apart and meeting again filled the space around them. All of Michael's body felt alive, crackling, spinning with sweet energy. Jack's scent and the hardness of his body, the passion



emanating from him through his touch and his kiss made Michael feel as if his soul were floating, yet completely rooted in his body at the same time.

Suddenly, Jack pulled away and rested his forehead against Michael's, breathing heavily. His fingers pressed into Michael's neck.

"What is it?" Michael asked softly. "Is something wrong?"

Jack's thumb brushed over the tendon in Michael's neck. More passion was coiled in the small touch. "No. I'm just trying to be...careful."

Michael leaned away and looked into Jack's eyes. The blue irises were simmering and...sweet at the same time. "You are careful. Don't worry."

The concern remained in Jack's eyes. He reached out and brushed his fingertips across Michael's cheek. "You're different, Michael. Special."

*Special.* The word and all its unspoken meanings rippled through him. Michael covered Jack's hand and pressed his lips to the palm. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the other man's hand on his cheek while listening to Jack's breathing. He kissed the softer flesh again and felt the sensuality of it simmer within him. The next kiss was a soft lick, a brush of his tongue that made Jack's breath catch. That kiss led to the next and the kisses turned into another shower of exploration. Thought melted away to sensation and Michael trailed his kisses over Jack's inner wrist, his tongue tracing the tendons. He kept going, tasting and feeling the different textures of muscle and of skin. He'd never done anything like this before. It was strange and erotic all at once. He nibbled a trail over Jack's biceps and to his shoulder, inward, over his collarbone to the center of his chest and down.

"Ohhh." Jack's hands went to his hair again and burrowed. Michael felt Jack's surrender to him through the light pressure of his fingertips. At Jack's taut stomach, Michael paused, breathing in Jack's skin. So strange how Michael could sense someone's essence through his smell. No one he'd ever experienced smelled quite like Jack. How a man could smell safe, he didn't know. But Jack did. Safe and erotic all at once.

Michael ventured his tongue out and dragged it down the sexy trail of hair plunging down to Jack's navel.

"Oh my God." Jack arched his back. His hands flew from Michael's hair and pressed down on the bed as if to anchor himself. Michael paused at Jack's navel and pushed his tongue in. Jack's breath hitched again. Another delightfully sensitive spot.

Jack's cock tapped his jaw, as if demanding his attention. Turning his head slightly, Michael captured the plump head between his lips.

"Michael." Jack's fingers rubbed Michael's scalp, tiny movements with each slide of Michael's lips down the thick shaft.

Every inch of the man tasted incredible and his appreciative moans only spurred Michael on. Looping thumb and forefinger around the base, he licked, sucked and feathered the tip of his tongue from the tiny opening in the head all the way down and around Jack's heavy sac.

"Michael." The husky whisper made him look up.

Jack was panting, his eyelids heavy. "That's great, but I'd rather be inside you." One large hand on his arm gently tugged him. Jack leaned over and rummaged into his pockets. He pulled out a foil packet and ripped it open. Then he paused. "Are you... ready?"

Michael kissed his lips. Desire pounded through his body. The ghost of Jack's flavor remained on his lips and tongue. Nothing sounded better. "Yes."

Jack rolled on the condom and turned to Michael. He pulled the covers back and tugged Michael close to him under the blanket. He loved the way Michael so completely, willingly sank beneath him, arms around him, as if being underneath him was the best thing in the world. He reached up and stroked Michael's hair, entwining their bodies so their cocks rubbed together. Slowly he kissed Michael, savoring his lips, loving the way Michael's hands caressed his back and hips. Ten years ago had he been in this position, he would have already slid into the man and ridden him like a stallion, unable to hold back, but time had unearthed a capacity for appreciation within him and Michael was so...luscious, Jack wanted to make it last as long as possible.

But then Michael squeezed his thighs around Jack's hips and clutched at Jack's ass cheeks. Though he didn't say the words, the silent demand couldn't have been clearer. Michael reached down between them and guided Jack's cock to his opening. The lube on the condom gave him enough slipperiness to push the head in. It penetrated Michael's tight bud of flesh with hot friction.

Michael pulled in a breath. His head tilted back, eyelids fluttering. It couldn't be clearer he was loving it. His fingertips dug into Jack's ass and he pulled.

Unable to hold back, Jack thrust his hips and his cock slid all the way in. The mind-blowing sensation spread through his entire body. He took Michael's lips again and kissed him as he thrust in and out. Staring down into Michael's eyes, he fell into a rhythm. His and Michael's bodies slid together and they stared into each other's eyes until Jack felt as if he were floating. "Michael," he whispered.

Michael stared up at him, his eyes glazed with pleasure, a tiny smile on his lips. He looked as if he were in heaven. Suddenly, he stiffened. Tiny groans escaped his throat and warm milky cum splashed between them. Michael's fingers dug into Jack's ass cheeks and his back arched.

Jack captured Michael's lips and kissed him, unable to stop riding him. Michael's lips rested against his. The kiss was sweet, hot. Their tongues danced sensuously while Jack's climax built. A quick breath escaped him, mingling with Michael's breath and Jack felt as if some deep invisible part of him were fusing with Michael. This was the feeling the songs and poems were all about. He understood it now because it was happening to him.

He spilled over the edge. His body stiffened, immobilized from the blissful waves passing through him. Michael's hands clutched his ass, holding him in as if he too, felt

the incredible fusion Jack was experiencing. The pleasurable spasms died away and Jack collapsed, sweaty and panting on top of Michael. While catching his breath, Jack nibbled the other man's jaw, as if to anchor his body back into the present. *Damn*. That had been the most incredible, mind-blowing sex he'd ever had. Pressing his lips to Michael's cheek, he stroked the other man's damp hair. He closed his eyes and breathed in Michael's scent. He didn't dare speak, afraid that any spoken word would ruin the moment and remained content to listen to Michael's soft breathing.

Moments passed and Michael's grip on his ass cheeks slackened. Michael's face tipped to the side and his eyes were closed.

Jack smiled. Good to know their sex had been relaxing enough to put Michael to sleep. He needed it after what he'd been through.

Careful not to wake him, Jack pulled out and rolled away so that he could clean up. He cleaned Michael up too as best he could without waking him and then settled in beside him, daring to spoon Michael's body to his. He smiled again as his own exhaustion overtook him. This was the best way he'd fallen asleep in a damn long time.

When Jack opened his eyes next, he found Michael's back still spooned to his front. *Damn*, they'd spent the whole night curled together. Michael's body was warm, his scent tempting. Jack smiled to himself and lay quietly, enjoying the feel of Michael against him. He resisted the sudden, deep urge to caress Michael's hair or back. The man needed rest and touching him would probably wake him from what seemed a restful sleep.

Breathing in Michael's aroma, he closed his eyes again, only to find his thoughts lingering on the man in his arms. Michael had seemed so free, so wild the night before, as if something had released in him. Did it have to do with his former lover, Toshi? Was Michael finally letting go of him?

Maybe it was because he wanted to know everything he could about Michael, but he couldn't help trying to fit Michael's seeming attachment to the man in Tokyo with the other parts of his life. What Michael had told him about the rift between himself and his parents, the way his mother had yelled at him for leaving Peter alone in the yard, had stayed with Jack. As if those memories had become his own, they haunted his thoughts. He remembered his own response to seeing the photograph of Toshi. He'd thought the man might be Michael's brother, that is, before he'd learned what had happened to Peter. It almost felt as if somehow, Michael was working through that trauma with Toshi. Jack sighed again. He found himself wondering how Michael's parents had felt about Toshi. Seeing a man who so strongly resembled their dead son had probably affected them. With the tension that already existed in their family, it would have probably intensified things, not made them better.

But that was conjecture. Only Michael could tell him what really happened.

Yet it didn't matter. Jack could only feel compassion for him, for what he'd suffered.

Michael stirred suddenly. He whimpered, as if he were having a bad dream. Then he mumbled something. As he repeated the words, they became clearer. One hand shot out from under the cover, as if Michael were reaching out to grab something. Or someone.

Shivers erupted on Jack's body. The hope he'd felt plummeted.

"Toshi," Michael said, "don't leave, please. I love you."

## Chapter Twelve

Michael opened his eyes. A face was looking down into his. *Toshi*? He blinked several times, focusing as his consciousness cleared. Not Toshi. Jack.

Jack was staring down at him. His mouth was turned down at the corners. "You all right?" he asked softly.

Michael lay back, the dream spiraling around in his mind like an eddy of dead leaves in a whirlwind. Damn, if Jack was looking at him this way, it could only mean one thing. "Was I...talking in my sleep?"

The other man nodded. He touched Michael's cheek briefly then sighed and rolled onto his back.

Disappointment surged through Michael. He'd rather Jack had snuggled in closer and kissed him good morning. Unfortunately, he knew why Jack didn't do that. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I don't know what's going on."

Jack turned his head so that his blue eyes looked directly into Michael's. "I believe I could make a safe guess as to what's going on."

Michael's heart lurched. All vestiges of sleep and dreaming evaporated. He almost reached out for Jack and stopped himself. "You think I'm still..." He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

Jack sighed again. "It would seem so, Michael." His tone, though kind, was also a bit distant, as if he were struggling with his feelings. What was undoubtedly disappointment showed in his eyes.

"I'm sorry." Michael took a deep breath to try to steady his breathing. Why was this happening? The first person he'd met that he really, really liked and felt safe with and he was ruining it. "I mean it. I don't want —"

Jack's hand came out and landed on his shoulder. "Please, don't. I told you I wouldn't make demands on you." He glanced down. "Perhaps I'm doing that anyway." He shook his head. "After all you've been through." He squeezed Michael's shoulder and released it. "I'm your friend, no matter what. It doesn't mean we have to..." he gestured between the two of them, "sleep together. You probably need time to sort through...your feelings." Without waiting for Michael to answer, he pushed back the covers. "I've got to get ready for work."

Michael watched the larger man rise from the bed and pick up the bag he'd brought, from which he pulled out a folded button-down shirt. "Can I make you breakfast at least?"

"No thanks. I'll get something around the corner before I go in. You need to rest."

Michael sat up. "Is that really why?"

Jack's fingers paused around the third button down. That tight, inner-battle look was still on his face. "Yes, it is." Quickly he did up the remaining buttons and reached back into the bag.

Jack pulled on a pair of clean white briefs, followed by his slacks and a pair of socks. Michael climbed from the bed and put on his robe.

"You should stay in bed."

But Michael moved to him. "I don't want you to be mad."

Jack stopped in mid-buckle, hands on his belt. "I'm not mad. I'm just not sure what you need."

*I need you.* The words froze on Michael's lips just short of coming out. His heart pumped. Why couldn't he just say them? Wouldn't it solve everything?

Before he could answer, Jack gently grasped his upper arms and placed a small, chaste kiss on his forehead. "I'm not mad. I promise. However, I think you've got things to sort out." He released Michael's arms and proceeded to strap on his weapons holster before shrugging into his jacket. When he'd finished, he looked the way he had the day they'd met. "I'll call you during the day to see how you're doing," he said softly. "In the meantime, get some rest."

Michael nodded. Heart pounding, he followed Jack down the hallway to the front door. With one more look, Jack slipped on his shoes. He hesitated in the doorway. "See you later." Then he turned and went down the walk.

Michael watched Jack get into his car and drive off. Chie rubbed against his leg and mewed for her breakfast, unconcerned about her master's problematic love life. "All right, Chie. Into the kitchen." He closed the door and sighed. Instead of resting, he had a lot of reflecting to do before going to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Sarge."

Kenneth Chin's voice at his office door made Jack look up. "Yeah?"

"It's that time. Mal and I a few others are going to Gianni's. You up to coming?"

Jack blinked and glanced at the time on his computer screen. It was already four o'clock. He'd been so absorbed in the cold case he was following up on, he'd completely lost track of time. Shit, Michael. "Uh, I think so," he finally answered. "I just have a phone call to make and I'll meet you there."

Chin nodded. "Sure thing," he said and left.

Jack sighed and raked a hand through his hair. He wanted a moment to gather his thoughts before calling Michael. He'd been involved in work and when he finally had a chance to call Michael a few hours earlier, he'd remembered Michael was teaching and left him a quick voice mail. Apparently Michael was very busy, for he hadn't returned the call yet. That had been fine. Jack had felt awkward and foolish since waking up and hearing Michael moaning Toshi's name and telling Toshi he loved him. It only made

Jack feel as if he'd plunged in again and bullied his way into Michael's life without knowing him at all. Life seemed to be yelling at him to slow down.

Picking his phone up from the desk, he flipped it open and searched for Michael's number in the address book. Before he could press the button however, it rang. His heart jumped. Michael. He answered. "Hey, how are you?" To his annoyance, his heart began to pound, the way it did when he was in his teens and had a crush.

"I'm...well, Jack. How are you?"

"Okay. Sorry I called you when you were in class."

"That's all right. I waited to call you back when there was time to really talk. Is this a good time?"

Jack raked a hand through his hair again. "Well, actually, I'm not sure. Some of my colleagues are meeting for an early supper at that place I took you to the other day. Would you...like to join us? We can talk afterward." For Jack, it seemed a better way to approach the situation. Socialize a bit, spend time together. Maybe then, he could prevent himself from making every interaction with Michael a way of pressuring him.

"Sure. That would be great. I mean, if it's okay."

"Of course it's okay. I'll wait for you in front of the building and we can go there together." It would probably take Michael at least twenty minutes to get here so he could work a few more minutes while he waited.

"All right. See you soon."

"Bye." With a pang in his chest, Jack ended the call and slipped the phone into his pocket.

"Hi, Jack."

Jack whipped his gaze up. Surprise made him smile. "That was quick." He stood up and went around his desk. At the last second he stopped himself from yanking shut the office door and pulling Michael into his arms. Which was all he really wanted to do. The hell with this possessive crap and worrying about who Michael loved and didn't love. Michael was gorgeous and hot and basically available, at least for sex. Toshi was all the way in Tokyo. Jack had the advantage of being the bird in the hand. In the flash of that moment, he decided to use his advantage. "You were already in the building when you called me, weren't you?" He smiled again and pushed the office door closed.

Michael stood in front of him, looking up. Something was different about him. The lines were mostly gone from his face, leaving smooth, perfect tan-hued skin. Michael's dark eyes had a light in them that had been missing all the time he knew him. A gentle smile came to his lips. "Jack, I understand why I've kept his picture out all this time."

"You do?"

Michael nodded. "I've thought about it all day. I don't want to push you away because of the past. It's not because I'm still in love with him." He paused, taking a deep breath. "All the time I was with Toshi, I...never let myself feel how much of my attachment to him was because of Peter. I would get hints of it and feel terrible, as if it

meant I didn't care about him, that I only wanted to protect him because I couldn't protect Peter. But it doesn't mean that."

Jack remained quiet, letting the relief wash through him. Unable to resist, he picked up Michael's hand and rubbed his thumb in tiny strokes on Michael's palm. Damn, it felt so good to touch him. How could he even have considered just being friends with this man? "Thanks for telling me that," he said softly.

"No problem. Thanks for listening." Michael's eyes misted. "It's been a burden all this time. I just hadn't been able to see it. There's more to it than that, but we can talk about it later in private. You are coming back to stay with me, aren't you?"

Jack grinned. He felt like a kid who'd just got asked to dance by the guy of his dreams when he thought that person would never acknowledge his existence. "Absolutely."

Relief washed through Michael's features. The sweet look in his eyes made Jack's heart speed up. "Good. For a while there I was really afraid I'd lose you. He looked down. "I hope I made it clear what I'm trying to say. I've always been terrible at this."

Jack put fingertips under his chin and gently tilted his face up. "You're not terrible at it," he said. He leaned forward and pressed a small, sweet kiss to Michael's lips then looked into his eyes, his beautiful eyes. "Don't worry. You said it perfectly."



## About the Author

Award-winning, multi-published author of erotic romance, Sedonia Guillone spends her days writing deliciously naughty romances—when she's not cuddling with the man she loves or watching kung fu and samurai films and eating chocolate.

Sedonia welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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