



*Grand
Jeté*

EMERGENCY

DIANA COPLAND

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 SILVERPUBLISHING
Published by Silver Publishing
Publisher of Erotic Romance

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Cover Artist: Reese Dante
Editor: Paula Schemery

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PUBLISHER
 SILVERPUBLISHING
<http://www.silverpublishing.info>

DEDICATION

For Jayme

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CHAPTER ONE

Jordan Armstead was not a ballet fan. Oh, he didn't hate it, exactly. But he didn't love it either. So finding himself in the packed audience watching Act One of *The Nutcracker* was not necessarily his idea of a good time.

It was two weekends before Christmas, and one of his two precious afternoons off before the glut of holiday drinkers filled the ER where he worked as a trauma nurse. He'd wanted to try to finish up his Christmas shopping which, truth be told, he'd yet to even start, and needed to be back at the hospital to pull an overnight at eleven. Instead, he sat sixteenth row center between his mother and his sister, waiting for his eight year-old niece Amanda to make her debut as a mouse. His sister Jillian's sly assertion that he'd enjoy the matinee because the male dancers would all be wearing tights hadn't endeared her, or the prospect, to him one bit.

"But she's the youngest mouse ever," she had informed him with enormous pride. "You *have* to come," she'd continued when he'd hedged. "She'll be absolutely devastated if you don't."

Jordan thought she probably wouldn't notice if he was there or not. Her mom and dad were there, and her "gremmie" as she called his mother. Her Auntie Mimi and

Uncle Jacob were there, along with her cousins, five year-old twins Collette and Louis. All in all, there were eight people in the row to watch Mandy's much eagerly anticipated debut.

He'd made it through the 'party scene' which opened the ballet, and he couldn't help but notice that several of the male dancers did, in fact, wear their fitted breeches extremely well. But the combination of working a split shift until nearly two a.m. and Tchaikovsky's lyrical music conspired to make his eyelids feel very heavy, so he closed them. Even the change in tempo to the 'battle scene' hadn't roused him; that was accomplished only when his sister elbowed him sharply in the ribs. He straightened in his seat with a blink and tried to pick his diminutive niece out from amongst a gaggle of leggy children, covered from their heads to their pointed little toes in brown fur, including masks that covered their faces. He frowned slightly, narrowing his eyes.

"She's the white one," his mother provided in a whisper. That helped, as there was only one white mouse. She looked so tiny on the big stage, and he smiled as he watched her pull the string attached to a toy canon. It shot a spray of sparks at a row of toy soldiers with bright pink cheeks, and they scattered. The Rat King and the

Nutcracker fought valiantly with chunky wooden swords while his niece and the other mice pantomimed terror on the side of the stage. And when the Rat King fell, and his itty bitty niece curled up on the chest of the adult who had danced the role while he was carried off the stage by six other men costumed as rats, he applauded with the rest of the audience.

"Wasn't she great?" Jillian whispered in delight.

"Yeah, she really was," Jordan answered, smiling.

After that came a bunch of ballerinas dressed as snowflakes, and an enchanted carriage that sailed off into the sky carrying away Clara and her prince. When the lights came up, Jordan figured it was over.

"Oh, no," his sister said. "That's just Act One. There's another whole act."

Jordan stared, his heart sinking, while his brother-in-law Marc smirked at him. "But, is Mandy in the next act?" Jordan asked.

"Well, no," Jillian answered. "But you can't leave. We're all going to Cinderella's for dinner after."

Jordan had turned to his mother, but she'd merely sent him a look over the top of her glasses.

"Shit," he grumbled under his breath.

"Uncle Jordy said a swear!" Louis piped up loudly.

"So I heard," Jillian said primly, giving him the evil eye.

"Oh, don't scold," his mother, Carol, said to her.

"You don't get to nag when someone is being a good sport. And here," she handed Jordan a heavy magazine, "you look at the menu."

"It's not a menu, mother," Jillian said with an expressive eye roll. "It a program."

"I think that depends entirely on one's point of view," Carol murmured to him under her breath, before she pushed to her feet. "Leave your brother alone and buy me a glass of wine," she ordered imperiously, shooing her daughter down the row ahead of her toward the exit with a wave of her manicured hand. She looked down at Jordan as she walked away. "Page fifteen," she muttered, then threw her scarf around her neck with a flourish and followed Jillian toward the door.

Jordan shook his head as he flipped through the thick, glossy pages. When he came to page fifteen, he smirked. He should have known. *Company Members* was printed across the top, and beneath it were several head shots of at least two dozen very attractive young people, about half of them men.

He knew how lucky he was that his mother and his

siblings accepted his orientation; he'd had too many friends whose parents hadn't, and he knew what kind of heartache that led to. There had been no histrionics at his house when he came out at fifteen. In fact, his mother went out the next day and bought him an enormous box of condoms and a bottle of lube. Even while he'd wanted to die of mortification, he'd known how unusual the reaction was. He wondered occasionally if it would have been that easy if his dad hadn't abandoned them when he, Jillian, and Jacob had all been under six, but he didn't dwell on it. His mother had accepted his boyfriends over the years, and when he and Kyle had decided to move in together, she'd accepted Kyle the same way she had Marc and Mimi; as if he'd been a son-in-law. She'd been hurt when Kyle had left him, even though by the time he'd gone there hadn't been much of a relationship to leave.

"Don't you worry about it, darling," Carol had said, patting him on the back even though she'd been the one more in need of consolation. "You're just too damned cute to be single for long."

He hadn't told her he was actually looking forward to it, at least to the peace and quiet. Kyle had been loud in his dislike of Jordan's job and his co-workers and just about everything else; living alone hadn't come as a hardship. He

had a job he loved, and an eclectic rent controlled apartment in a neighborhood he liked; all in all, single wasn't a terrible thing. He was only just now beginning to feel the weight of the silence when he got home, but he'd take that over drama any day.

He glanced down the row of pretty faces on the page. Yes, they were very, very attractive. Bored, and just waiting for something to do, he checked the Act One names of the dancers with specific roles for the matinee, and picked out the Rat King and the Nutcracker Prince. Both were very good looking, particularly the prince, but Jordan smirked. Better than anyone, he knew that stereotypes didn't always apply; ballet dancer did not automatically translate to gay any more than male ER nurse did. He'd graduated with five other guys in his specialty, and as far as he knew, he was the only gay one in the bunch.

He was about to close the program when a face near the bottom caught his eye. This one had a lovely square jaw, full mouth and piercing, light-colored eyes. Jordan couldn't tell what color they were from the black and white photo, but if he had to guess, he'd say they were pale blue. With the sweep of fair hair that fell over his forehead, Jordan thought he looked a whole lot more like a fairy tale prince than the dark-haired guy who was dancing it that

afternoon, but he'd always had a thing for blonds.

Davis Conrad, the name printed next to the face read. There was a short bio relating training and roles danced, but Jordan's eyes went back to the face. It was all planes and angles, his brows arched and slightly darker than his hair. All in all, if Jordan had a 'type,' that was it. But a ballet dancer with a professional touring company was about as obtainable as a movie star. Jordan flipped the program closed and tossed it onto his mother's seat.

Act Two of *The Nutcracker* felt interminable. There were lots of pretty men in tights and lovely women on pointe, and it was all Jordan could do not to yawn every thirty seconds. He could appreciate the skill he was seeing, and the training it had taken to get there, but it just wasn't his thing. He was balancing his checkbook in his head and trying to figure out what to buy the twins for Christmas when a man stalked out onto the stage carrying a woman in a gossamer blue harem-type costume on his broad shoulder, wearing a blue turban and a loin cloth and not much else. He saw his mother's amused glance even as he straightened slightly in his seat, his attention caught for the first time since the mice had scampered off the stage.

The music was slow and sultry, and the movements the dancers made matched. He didn't think he'd ever seen a

person with the kind of fluid flexibility the dark-haired woman showed; she slid around the man's bronzed, toned body like a beautiful, shimmering snake. Even so, Jordan couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the man. Every time he lifted his partner, the oiled muscles in his chest and shoulders bulged. Every time he held her suspended in some unnatural, athletic position, his thighs and abs stood out in bold relief. His chest was smooth and hairless, his handsome face carefully impassive under the shimmering teal turban, even while executing motions and positions that seemed almost impossible. At one point, even with the slow tempo, the man did a leap that had his legs literally split in mid air, and landed it so lightly that he didn't make a sound. Jordan didn't think he breathed for the two plus minutes they were on stage. He was so transfixed that when the *pas de deux* finished and the couple made their bows, he almost didn't notice the way the man stood with his right heel slightly lifted off of the floor, or the way the woman shot him a quick look when he exited the stage gracefully, but well behind her.

"Uh oh," Jordan murmured under his breath.

"What?" His mother whispered, leaning closer. He shook his head quickly, but unless he missed his guess, during the exquisite dance, something had gone wrong with

the man's right leg.

He was preoccupied with the thought all of the way through the rest of the ballet, and when the bows were taken, he searched for the male Arabian dancer, but he wasn't on the stage. After, as he followed his family into the crowded lobby and they waited for Amanda next to the towering, sugar plum decked Christmas tree, he found himself still wondering. He didn't stop until he heard "Uncle Jordy!" squealed and he turned to catch a tiny ballerina in his arms.

CHAPTER TWO

The automated doors slid open and then silently closed behind him as Jordan entered the ER. The warm breeze of the central heating brushed his face and felt good after the chill of the night air. He always parked far enough away that few people parked close to him; the '66 Mustang was his one real indulgence, and he wanted very much to preserve the candy apple red paint job that had set him back two grand. But it was frigid and the lot was icy, and he'd picked his way carefully across, his slip-proof shoes a huge help on the slick surface.

The parking spaces in front of the ER's doors were empty, but even so the deserted waiting room was a surprise. Jordan glanced at the sparsely decorated fake tree in the corner as he passed. 'Décor' hadn't been in the budget; the tree had been in someone's attic, and the glittery garland taped to the desk had been donated by a patient. He stopped by the desk to sign into the hospital computer system, trying to avoid crushing the ugly red tinsel, giving the lopsided snowman who sat in a corner a dubious glance. Still no one appeared, and he wandered toward the staff break room with a bemused expression. Given that there were no patients waiting, it wasn't a big surprise to find two of his co-workers sitting at a long table, having a

cup of coffee.

"Good thing I didn't come in here with an asthma attack," he said with a wry smile. "I'd have choked to death waiting for help."

"Nah," a stout, older woman with salt and pepper sable hair said with a slight smirk. "We'd have swooped in to save the day."

"So you say," Jordan replied. He and Terri had worked together for three years and were good friends. "What did you guys do? Close the ER and not tell me?" Jordan removed his gloves and shoved them into the deep pockets of his heavy jacket, then let it slip from his shoulders. "It's dead out there." He crossed the room to his locker and absently worked the combination on the lock.

"You should have been here three hours ago," another co-worker, Mia, said. She was younger than Terri but had kids Jordan's age. Her dish water blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her blue eyes looked tired. "Three multi-vehicles and a guy who electrocuted himself while hanging his outdoor Christmas lights in the snow."

Jordan chuckled. "How many does that make now? Three, four? Haven't these people ever heard of rubber boots?"

"This one was barefooted," Mia said. Jordan shook

his head as he opened his locker.

"How much alcohol was involved with this decision?" He put his outer wear in his locker and took the lanyard holding his hospital ID off of a hook, looping it over his head. His badge fell to the middle of his chest, shiny white against his bright red scrubs.

"Enough that he was singing Rudolf as they treated his burns."

Terri and Jordan both laughed.

"What's the weather like out there?" Mia asked as Jordan closed his locker and came to the table.

"Cold, but no more snow yet."

She finished her coffee and stood. "I'm going to hit the road before it does, then. Dale won't believe I'm home before midnight. I think the man is convinced that every drunk who hits our doors does it just to inconvenience him." Terri made a sympathetic noise as Mia tossed her cup in the trash. She pulled a coat off of the back of her chair and slipped her arms into the sleeves. "You guys be good," she said with a tired smile. "Don't burn down the hospital while I'm gone."

"You're no fun," Terri quipped, and Mia sent her a small smile before going out through the door. Terri tossed her empty cup as well, and she and Jordan walked back out

onto the ward.

"Weird for it to be this quiet on a Sunday in December, isn't it?" He glanced at all of the empty chairs.

"Hush, you," Terri said sternly. "You'll jinx it, and frankly I could use a quiet night after the last few we've had in here." She went behind the desk and dropped into a swivel chair.

"Yeah, I guess," Jordan said, leaning his elbows on the high counter. "Just feels weird. Who's on tonight?"

Terri made a face. "Bradley and Callahan. The idiot twins: Dickhead and Fuckwit."

Jordan's startled laugh sounded alarmingly loud to his own ears in the deserted waiting room, and he covered his smile with his hand. "I'm guessing they aren't on the floor."

Terri arched a brow at him. "Gee, ya think?" she said dryly. "I don't love this place but for some reason, my kids like to eat. No, they aren't on the floor. Callahan is down in Radiology trying to get into the new tech's panties—"

"The blonde?" Jordan interrupted. "What's her name again? Christi?"

"Something that ends in an 'i'." Terri grimaced, but Jordan chuckled.

"I hate to break it to you," he said. "But your name ends in an 'i'."

She looked up at him from beneath her lashes. "And I have never used a heart for the dot above it in the entirety of my life."

"Point." Jordan grinned. "Okay, that takes care of Dickhead. So Fuckwit would be...?"

"Asleep in the doctor's lounge, with strict instructions that he only be disturbed if someone is actually missing a limb." She smirked. "At least that way he can't kill anyone."

Jordan snorted. "Truer words were never spoken," he agreed. "Maybe it's a good thing that it's so quiet, with those two on."

But almost as if his words opened the floodgates, they had fifteen walk-ins in the next two hours. Most of the cases were minor; a four year-old with an ear infection and a couple of frat boys with a split lip and a black eye, respectively. But there was also a pregnant woman with pre-eclampsia who was admitted and sent upstairs, and an older gentleman with chest pains who was stabilized and then shuffled off to Cardiology. Dr. Callahan had to be paged to return from Radiology and Dr. Bradley, much to his very vocal displeasure, had to be awakened from his

nap. Jordan had gone in to get him, because Terri refused, and stood there as the man questioned his qualifications and his competence while throwing a cup of coffee across the lounge and dragging on his shoes.

"That guy is such an ass," Jordan muttered under his breath to Terri later as he bent to make a notation on a patient's chart in the computer. She didn't need to ask who.

"God complex," she replied out of the side of her mouth. "Too bad he's a shitty deity." The comment made Jordan smirk.

Things began to slow again at about three a.m., and Jordan had just managed to catch his breath when he heard the ER doors slide open behind him. He turned with trepidation, hoping it wasn't something major.

There was a young couple coming through the doors: a beautiful fair-skinned woman with waist length black hair, her arm around the waist of a tall man with a rakish spill of blond over his forehead. She was clearly holding him up, and he had his long arm draped over shoulders that looked delicate even in a heavy coat. He was limping painfully even while a slightly silly smile animated his handsome face.

"You're overreacting," he was saying to her. "You're always overreacting."

"And you're always an idiot," she responded, and looked up to see Jordan watching their awkward progress. "Can I get some help here, please?"

"Oh, sorry," Jordan said quickly, moving forward. He went to the man's other side and slipped his arm around his waist, and even through heavy layers of fabric, he could feel the muscles in his back. The man turned his head, and their eyes met. Jordan stared; the eyes looking into his were a pale clear blue, the color of ice, but there was nothing cold about them. A slow smile pulled at the corners of full lips.

"Hello, there," the man murmured, his voice deep and sinfully smooth, and Jordan felt heat shoot straight down his spine.

"Will you behave yourself?" the woman said, smacking him lightly in the middle of his broad chest. "Christ on a raft, you get a couple of drinks in you, and you're trying to seduce everyone in sight. You're not that bloody charming."

The man's smile widened as he lifted his arm and draped it around Jordan's shoulders. He leaned closer, until his face was just inches away, so close in fact that Jordan could see that his lashes were sable but the tips were blond, and that there were darker blue flecks in the clear blue of

his eyes. "But, I am charming," he said, his eyes searching Jordan's face. "And so, might I add, are you." His eyes dropped to Jordan's mouth, and Jordan licked his lips nervously as he felt heat climb his face. He looked away from the pointed stare nervously.

"I'm so sorry," the woman was saying. "He's not usually this bad. But I think he took some pain pills before he started drinking, and now what little filter he usually has appears to be completely gone."

"Spoil sport," the man muttered, and Jordan could feel the piercing stare on his profile.

Fortunately, Terri arrived at that moment with a wheelchair, and between Jordan and the lithe young woman, they were able to lower him somewhat gracefully to the seat. Jordan crouched at his feet and moved the foot rests into place, lifting his left foot and placing it on the metal support then looking up into the man's face. He found the patient watching him with a heated smile, and again Jordan felt a purely physical rush of pleasure. "It's the right leg, correct?" he asked.

"Knee," the man answered. "And yes, it's the right."

Jordan swallowed heavily before reaching up, bracing the knee from behind with one hand while maneuvering the foot into place with the other. His fingers

closed around a hard tendon and thick, solid muscle, and he realized he knew who these two people were. He looked up to find the blue eyes still studying him avidly.

"You're a dancer," Jordan said, slipping his hand away. One fair brow arched.

"And you're a psychic," Davis Conrad replied. Jordan grinned self-consciously and shook his head, standing.

"No, I saw you dance this afternoon." He looked up at the woman. "Both of you. You were amazing." She angled her head quizzically. "My niece was the white mouse." He shrugged sheepishly.

"Ah." She nodded, pushing at her long hair. "I'm sorry; I really didn't notice her. We do this ballet in eight markets, and there are so many children." She shifted a large bag she had draped over her shoulder and offered her hand. "I'm Ria. Ria Charles." Jordan took her hand and squeezed her fingers before releasing them.

"Her real name is Sangria," Davis said, smirking. "She says it's a family name, but I think her mom was just a wino."

"Honestly, Davis," Ria said without heat. "Shut up."

"Come on, handsome," Terri said, pushing the wheelchair down the corridor to the doors that led to the

ward. "Let's get you out of here before you get yourself in more trouble." She glanced at Jordan. "I'm putting him in eight." Jordan nodded and he and the young woman followed.

Davis looked up at her over his shoulder. "I like you," he said with a smile.

"I like you, too," Terri answered with a grin. "I like all the pretty boys."

Davis waved his arm behind him. "Then you like him, huh? Because he is definitely a very pretty doctor."

Terri laughed even as she wheeled him into a room. "I like him very much," she answered, parking him next to the exam table and setting the chair's brake. "And he's so much better than a doctor." She leaned in close to his ear. "He's a triage nurse, and a damned fine one." She slipped a clipboard off of the back of the chair and handed it to Jordan, winked at Davis, and pulled the curtain around the bed before she left.

Jordan knew his face must be as bright as his scrubs, and he stared at the admitting sheet rather than look into either of the dancers' eyes.

"Full name?" he asked.

"Davis Michael Conrad, The Fourth," Davis answered, sounding bored. "And aren't you glad you

asked?"

Jordan contained his smile. "Permanent address?"

Davis rattled it off, and Jordan wrote it down. "Are you insured?"

"Through the company, yes," Ria answered for him, putting the bag on the narrow cot and digging through it. Her hand emerged with a wallet in it, and she fished out an insurance card and handed it to him.

"Thanks." Jordan glanced at it, and attached it to the clipboard. "Age?"

"Twenty-five," Davis answered, but almost immediately Jordan heard Ria clear her throat pointedly. He looked up to see them exchanging a long look. "Fine, thirty-one," Davis amended, sending his friend a sour look. "Bitch."

She smirked.

"So." Jordan set the clipboard on the bunk. "Did you twist your knee?"

Davis shook his head, looking tired and a bit grey for the first time. "It's a torn meniscus."

"You don't know that," Ria argued, looking drawn as well. "You might have just irritated it..."

"Darling, I irritated it three weeks ago. Today, it tore." He looked up at Jordan. "I felt it go." Ria winced and

reached for his hand, holding it tight between both of hers.

"You sound pretty sure," Jordan said.

"I should be." Davis closed his eyes wearily. "This will be the third time."

Jordan frowned. "On the same knee?" Davis nodded, and Ria bit her lower lip, the last of the color leeching from her face.

"The first time was when I was twenty-five," Davis went on matter-of-factly. "It was minor, and healed on its own. The second time was three years ago." He grimaced weakly. "That one required surgery."

"Miles should have taken the *grand jeté* out," Ria muttered.

Jordan looked up at her quizzically. "Pardon?" he said.

"The *grand jeté*," Ria repeated.

Jordan shook his head. "My niece is forever babbling off these things to me, and I have no idea what she's talking about."

"*Grand jeté*," Davis said, opening his eyes. "Literal translation, roughly, is 'a giant leap'."

Jordan smiled, and their eyes held. "I'll tell her that. She'll be so impressed that I actually know something." Jordan pulled his eyes away from the almost hypnotic gaze.

"Okay. I'll get you a gown, because the doctor is still going to want to take a look at it."

A wicked smile pulled at the corner of Davis's lips.

"Did you just invite me to take off my pants?"

"Honest to God, Davis," Ria protested. "Not everyone appreciates being sexually harassed. He might be married, for all you know."

"I'm not."

"He's not."

They spoke together, and Jordan felt himself blush again as Davis smirked. He looked up at Ria as if to say *told ya*, and she rolled her eyes. "You're such a jackass."

"You love me," he said, jostling her hip with his shoulder. She gave a long-suffering sigh.

"God only knows why," she huffed.

"Uh, I'll step out," Jordan began, walking quickly to a cupboard and taking out a hospital gown, laying it on the exam table. He looked at Davis, who was still watching him avidly. "Can you manage on your own? I'd like to speak to your friend."

"If you ask her out, I'm going to have to send my gaydar in for a diagnostic evaluation."

"Oh, stop!" Ria scolded, batting him on the back of the head. "Put on the damned gown; I'll be right back." She

exhaled in exasperation, turned and followed Jordan through the curtain as Davis pushed himself to his feet and sat on the edge of the cot, reaching for the gown.

Jordan paused just outside of the curtain; he didn't want to go too far. "You said he'd taken something for pain earlier?" He asked softly.

She nodded. "Vicodin," she murmured. "At least two that I saw."

Jordan grimaced. "He knows, of course, that he really shouldn't be consuming alcohol with that." She shrugged helplessly. "How much did he drink?"

She sighed. "He was knocking them back pretty good. I'd have to say four, maybe five scotch and sodas?" Jordan shook his head as he made a notation on the chart. Ria put her hand on his arm, and he looked up into wide brown eyes.

"You have to understand," she whispered. "The doctor who did the surgery on his knee told him that if he hurt it again..." She let the words trail off as if she couldn't bear to say them, but her shudder spoke volumes. Jordan paused, and nodded. "And I hope he hasn't offended you," she went on. "He covers a lot with bravado."

Jordan felt his lips quirk. "I wasn't offended."

Ria's eyes brightened. "Nothing wrong with his

gaydar, then." Jordan merely smiled, and she huffed out a laugh. "All of the cute ones are either gay, or married."

"Or lying." The deep voice came from inside of the room, and she rolled her eyes.

"Honestly, ears like a bat, that one." She looked up at Jordan, and if she noticed his renewed blush, she didn't comment. "I should get back in."

"Tell him the doctor will be around in a few minutes."

She started to turn away and then paused. "Nice outfit, by the way," she said, a teasing light in her eyes. "Very festive."

"The red camouflages the blood the best," he shot back. When she blanched, he laughed. "Kidding, kidding," he said, holding up his hand. She rolled her expressive eyes, before going back into the curtained area.

When Jordan arrived at the nurses' station and handed Terri the chart, she looked up at him with an expectant expression.

"What?" he asked, sure his face was as bright as his scrubs.

"*What*, he says," she teased. "Like you didn't notice Prince Charming in there was flirting like mad."

"Prince Charming'," Jordan said dryly, "has two

Vicodin under his belt and half a dozen scotch and sodas." He shook his head. "He's plowed."

"I know what he'd like to plow," she muttered, and he gave her a quelling look. "What?" she said, all innocence. He narrowed his eyes. "You're such a killjoy," she muttered, taking the chart. "Can you blame me for thinking you'd be very cute together?"

"For God's sakes, Terri," he huffed. "For all I know, the man is involved with someone. Just because he flirts when he's high doesn't mean he hasn't got a boyfriend. And he's a dancer with a touring company whose home base is clear across the country."

"But you have to admit, he's something else to look at," she persisted.

"Yes, he's very attractive," Jordan agreed. "Now find one of the twins, and give it a rest, will you?"

She pursed her lips, but she didn't say anything else.

After that, a harassed young mother came in with a vomiting two year-old, and Jordan was busy for the next forty-five minutes. When he finally went back to the nurses' desk with the new chart, he saw a broad-shouldered man with graying black hair and wearing a leather trench coat walking into Davis Conrad's curtained area. He handed Terri the new chart, gesturing with his head.

"Who's that?"

She shrugged. "No idea. He came in and asked for Davis; that's all I know."

"Has either Bradley or Callahan been in to see him yet?"

She shook her head. "Callahan is stitching a laceration in four, and Bradley took a kid with a broken wrist down to radiology."

"Oh, for Christ's sakes," Jordan muttered. "Didn't they send a tech?"

"Oh, they did," she answered with a sniff. "He told the mother he wanted to make sure they got all of the views he wanted." She looked up at him and batted her lashes.

"She was very grateful."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Jordan clipped his pen to the collar of his scrubs and walked toward the room where the dancer still waited to be seen. He heard voices before he was even outside of the curtained area.

"You need to get back to the hotel and pack, Ria, or you're going to miss the flight," he heard a man saying sternly. "Davis is a big boy; he can manage on his own."

"Miles is right, darling," Davis said, sounding tired. Apparently some of the booze had worn off. "Go on. I'll be all right."

"Do you want me to call your mother?" Ria asked, clearly hesitant to go.

"God, no," Davis answered with a weary chuckle.

"That's all I need. No, I'll be fine. Go on."

Moments later, Ria appeared around the curtain, her hands shoved into her pockets and her lips pinched. She saw Jordan and paused.

"Is there someone I should call for him?" he asked, his voice just above a whisper. "A... boyfriend, or something?"

Ria sighed, as she gestured toward the curtain with her head.

"Is that...?"

She nodded tightly. "And he's a jackass," she murmured. "He may be my boss, but he's a prick. Here." She grabbed Jordan's pen off of his uniform, turned his hand palm up and wrote on his wrist. "This is my cell phone number. He won't call me, but if he needs anything, anything at all, you call me. All right?"

"I will," he promised. She startled him by rising up onto her toes and kissing him quickly on the cheek.

"I'm going to hold you to that." She squeezed his arm then left the ER. Jordan watched her go, but his attention was caught by the voices on the other side of the

drape. He didn't plan to eavesdrop, but he could hear them clearly.

"The company has checked out of the hotel, Davis," he heard Miles saying. "And I'm afraid that we simply can't afford to book you a room for another day. I have your luggage out in my car."

"How thoughtful of you." Davis's tone was subdued, but tinged with irony.

"Of course, your medical bills will be covered by our insurance," the other man went on.

"For which I'm eternally grateful." Mockery had made its way into Davis's tone.

"Careful, dearest," Miles said softly, a warning in his voice. "You've been a bad risk for us for the last three years. There's only one reason we've kept you on, and you simply aren't *that* adorable. Or that young any longer." Silence met the statement. "You're going to have to take care of the flight home yourself. There's no point in you coming on to Winnipeg; we both know you won't be able to dance. I've already called and they're sending Troy Levesque up to join us. He can take your parts through the duration of the tour. We'll look at buying out what's left on your contract when we get home."

"Troy is certainly 'young enough,' isn't he?" Davis

sounded mild, but there was a thread of weary sarcasm in his voice.

"As a matter of fact, he is. And there's no cause to be bitchy, dear. It's not like this has been working, for either of us. Troy is very young, and very... eager," Miles countered slyly. "Something you haven't been in a while. It's better this way."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Davis answered.

"I must be going." Miles sounded as if he was closer to where Jordan was standing. "Our flight is at six, and I have to check with the hotel in Winnipeg and make sure the shuttle is scheduled to meet the company at the airport."

"Yes, I know. You're a very busy man, Miles. Don't let me hold you up."

"Take care of yourself, Davis," Jordan heard the man say. "It was good for a while."

Davis didn't answer, and a moment later Miles came around the curtain. He was physically attractive, but Jordan had never found a man less appealing. He didn't even care that he'd been discovered standing outside of the enclosure.

"Oh, staff, excellent," Miles said on seeing him, clearly oblivious to the fact that if Jordan had been standing there, he must have heard the conversation on the other side

of the curtain. "I have a suitcase that belongs to this gentleman, and I'm leaving town in just under two hours. Is there anywhere that I can put it?"

The temptation to tell him exactly where he could *put it* was strong, but instead, Jordan gestured toward Terri at the desk. "Ask the lady right there," he answered. "I'm sure she'll be happy to help you."

"Thank you." Miles smiled and gave Jordan a casual once over before walking away, and Jordan managed not to sneer at him as he turned and went to the curtain around Davis's cot, pulling it back and walking inside. Davis was lying on his back, his head turned toward the wall and his eyes closed. He'd changed into the hospital gown, and had a light blanket over his long legs. His right leg was bent slightly at the knee, his foot propped on the bunk, and Jordan took in the pale face and the sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

"Vicodin's worn off, hasn't it?" he asked, picking up Davis's wrist and checking his pulse. It was slightly fast, but not enough to be worrying. Davis turned his head and looked up and again Jordan was startled by the brilliance of his eyes, even slightly dimmed with pain. He swallowed and nodded.

"I'm sorry about the delay with the doctor," Jordan

said. "We've had several come in after you who were in worse shape." He hated that what he said was only partly true, hated even more that the two doctors working were something less than efficient. "Do you mind if I take a look?" Jordan gestured toward Davis's knee. The smile that pulled slowly across his full lips was teasing.

"I knew you couldn't resist getting a look at my legs," he quipped.

"Actually, I've seen your legs, remember?" Jordan teased back. "I've seen a good deal more than your legs." Davis's brows rose, his face suddenly alight once again with humor. "That loincloth doesn't cover much."

Davis chuckled. "True. So what did you think?"

"You've got a great body," Jordan answered, removing the blanket from Davis's bent knee. "Something you already knew."

"What, this old thing?" Davis smiled slowly and stacked his hands behind his head, causing the hospital gown to creep up almost to his hip, showing a sliver of white briefs. Jordan smiled and shook his head; the man was persistent, he'd give him that. After Kyle's defection, he hadn't been able to flirt with anyone for at least a month.

"It feels better when it's bent?" Jordan asked, studying the knee. Davis nodded. Jordan saw the

discoloration just below the knee cap and the swelling that had begun on the inside. He also saw the two pale scars that indicated the previous surgery. "It was a medial tear the last time, too?" he asked. Davis nodded again, his smile fading. "On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your pain?"

"If I don't move it? It's just a dull throb, maybe a two. If I do? At least a nine."

"Okay," Jordan said. "Let me go see how much longer it's going to be until we can get a doc in here." He started toward the door then paused. "Can I get you anything? Water? Soda pop?"

Davis smiled wanly. "Got any vodka out there?"

"Not last time I looked," Jordan answered. "I might be able to scare up some orange juice, though. You can close your eyes and pretend it's a screwdriver."

Davis's smile deepened. "You're funny," he said approvingly. "I like that in a man."

Jordan returned his smile. "Lucky me."

When he walked out into the hall, he immediately saw Bradley at the nurses' station signing off on a chart, and he walked up to him.

"Doctor," he said, managing to mask his irritation. "The patient in eight has been here for more than an hour..."

"The dancer with the bad knee?" Bradley said without looking up. "That's not exactly critical, Armstead."

"Doctor, he arrived here before the child with the broken wrist..."

Bradley glanced up at him from beneath his brows. "And you had clearly established during triage that nothing was broken. Or did I misread his chart?"

Jordan bit his tongue. "No, sir," he answered tightly.

"Then the break moves to the front of the queue, Armstead. You know that. And now," he glanced at his wristwatch, "as my shift is over, he's going to have to wait until Callahan is done with those stitches in four. Ah, here is Dr. Callahan now." Jordan turned as the other physician arrived at the desk, sliding a chart across to Terri. "Mike, take a look at eight, will you? It's time for me to go, and Armstead thinks we've been neglecting that patient."

Callahan snorted. "The dancer? How bad could it be? Where's the chart?" Terri handed it to him and he turned toward the door, but glanced back. "Are you coming, Armstead? If this is so *important* to you..." He and Bradley exchanged a smirk, and Jordan ground his teeth but followed. He knew that the staff was aware that he was gay; he could only guess what had been said in the doctor's lounge on more than one occasion.

"He says his pain level is a nine, sir," he informed the doctor instead.

"Yeah, sure it is," Callahan muttered, but when he pulled back the curtain, his professional mask dropped into place. "Mister... Conrad," he said, looking up from the chart. "How are you this evening?"

"I've been better," Davis answered.

"What seems to be the problem?" Callahan set the chart on the cot and pulled over the roll around stool from the corner.

"I've torn the medial meniscus in my right knee," Davis answered flatly. Callahan's brows shot up.

"And you'd know this, how?"

Davis's lips flattened. "I've done it before."

"Well, why don't you let me decide if you've done it again, okay?"

Davis shot Jordan a look, and Jordan returned it with one that clearly said, *yes, he's an ass*. Davis smirked.

Callahan leaned forward and slipped the blanket down, exposing Davis's knee. He angled his head to one side, studying it.

"There's some significant bruising and swelling," he said. "And I see you've some surgical scars."

"Hence my belief that I might actually recognize the

symptoms." Davis crossed his arms over his chest.

Callahan glanced up at him, expressionless, then stood and moved to the foot of the narrow bed. "Can you straighten your leg?" he asked.

Davis stared at him. "Not without discomfort."

Their gazes held, something of a battle of wills taking place. Finally, Davis exhaled and slowly lowered his knee, wincing as he did so.

"That causes pain?"

Davis looked at him incredulously. "You could say that," he answered tautly.

"On a scale of one to ten?"

"Nine," Davis replied through clenched teeth.

Callahan reached out and caught Davis's heel in his right hand, and Jordan took a step forward protectively. When the doctor slowly twisted the foot inward, Davis bolted upright, hissing between his teeth.

"Doctor," Jordan said when he saw pain flash through Davis's eyes.

"And that increases your discomfort?" Callahan asked, ignoring him.

"Yes, you sadistic son of a bitch, it increases the discomfort," Davis snapped. Callahan released the foot quickly, and Davis shuddered. Jordan was appalled. He

would also have been lying if he said he wasn't satisfied by the way Davis had spoken to the arrogant doctor, and the resulting flush that spread up from Callahan's starched white collar.

The doctor straightened, snatching up the clipboard. "I'd say that you've re-injured the medial meniscus, Mr. Conrad," he said curtly. "But the only way to be absolutely certain is an MRI. We'll provide you with a temporary brace and something for pain, and I'd suggest an orthopedic consult within the next few days." With that, he turned and stalked from the enclosure without even glancing back.

"What a prick," Davis snarled. He leaned down to manually bend his leg at the joint, but Jordan's hands were there first, gently cupping behind the knee, lifting cautiously. He saw the pain fade from Davis's features. "Thank you," he said, lifting his eyes to Jordan's. Jordan gave him a small smile, his hand absently smoothing down the hard shin before falling away.

"You're welcome," he murmured. "I'll be right back, okay?"

Davis nodded, sighing deeply as he relaxed back down on the cot. Jordan turned and left the curtained room.

Callahan was standing at the nurse station, writing furiously on the chart, his lips a tight line. Terri glanced at

Jordan, her eyes wide with warning, as he approached.

"That," Callahan muttered when Jordan was standing next to him, "is the single most arrogant asshole it's ever been my misfortune to treat."

"Dr. Callahan," Jordan said softly. "He's a professional dancer, and he's torn his meniscus for the third time. His career is very likely over. I'm sure it wasn't his intention to be rude; he's distressed, and in pain."

"He *is* a pain," Callahan snorted. "And he's a ballet dancer. Who cares?"

Jordan stiffened. "I imagine he does."

Callahan shot him a narrow eyed look. "Are you trying to tell me something, nurse?" he asked archly. Jordan squared his shoulders.

"Only that the man is entitled to our compassion. Sir."

Callahan's lips twisted unpleasantly. "He's entitled to whatever his health insurance provides, Armstead. Nothing more, nothing less. Now fit him with a brace and give him a shot, and get him the hell out of here. Here." He shoved the chart across the counter at Terri. "You do it. I think Armstead is just a wee bit too charmed by the patient to be objective." Jordan stiffened as anger filled his chest. "My shift is over, and I'm going home."

Callahan turned and stomped away. They could hear the door to the doctor's lounge slam behind him moments later.

Terri blinked then looked up at Jordan. "Well, that was fun," she said dryly, and Jordan felt some of the stiffness leave his shoulders. "Whatever did the charming Mr. Conrad do to engender that reaction from Dickhead?"

"I thought he was Fuckwit," he said, exhaling heavily and reaching for the chart. His hand trembled slightly, and he fisted it for a moment.

"Dickhead, Fuckwit, same difference." Terri shrugged, and in spite of himself, Jordan felt his lips twitch. "Are you going to tell me what Davis did?"

Jordan's lips twitched. "He called him a sadistic son of a bitch," he murmured, and Terri didn't even fight to hide her smile.

"I knew that I liked that boy." She beamed. She handed Jordan the chart. "I say whatever he's prescribed for pain, we give him a double, just because."

Jordan chuckled, his irritation fading slightly. He read down the chart, a frown forming between his brows. "Fentanyl," he said. "Yeah, we won't be doubling that." He chewed on his lower lip. "I wonder if that's a good idea, with the booze he was drinking earlier."

"Big guy like that?" Terri shrugged. "It won't hurt him. Worst case scenario, he sleeps it off in his hotel room."

"Except he hasn't got one," Jordan said. "Didn't the man in the trench coat bring in some luggage?"

"Oh, that's right," Terri said, glancing behind her. A slender Louis Vuitton suitcase sat against the wall. "I'd forgotten." She turned back. "Was that his boyfriend? He was gorgeous."

"It was," Jordan said dryly. "And he may be gorgeous, but he's an asshole. He broke up with him about the same time he informed him that his replacement was being sent up, and he could pay for his own air fare to fly home."

Terri's mouth dropped open slightly. "He didn't," she said, scandalized.

"He did." Jordan looked over his shoulder toward the enclosure around Davis's bed.

"Listen," Terri said, dropping her voice conspiratorially, "we're both on until noon. That's a good six hours. We'll move him down to fifteen, and if anyone asks, we'll say that he's waiting on an MRI and an ortho consult. We couldn't get anyone here before noon, anyway. And he doesn't have anyone here to take care of him, does

he?"

"No, the company is leaving town right about now."

Jordan thought about it; fifteen was a private room that was almost never used, connected to the ward. The equipment was older; it had really only been kept viable in case of overflow or contagion, and as quiet as the ER had been, neither appeared particularly likely.

"He could probably use the sleep," he said softly.

"That's settles it, then," Terri said. "Besides, I'm the supervisor on duty tonight, and I say it's fine. You move him down, and I'll get the Fentanyl and some ice. We can at least work on the swelling on that knee for a while."

Jordan nodded and handed her the chart, walking back across the ward. When he opened the curtains around the bed in Davis's enclosure, he looked up at him.

"What's up?" he asked as Jordan raised the railings on each side of the gurney and laid his clothes, which had been folded neatly on a chair, at the foot. Jordan picked up the large bag that Ria had left in a corner and hung it over his own broad shoulder.

"Change of location," Jordan answered, releasing the breaks on the wheels and pushing the bed out into the hall. "We're taking you off of the ward and into a private room."

"Oh—kay," Davis said slowly. "Any particular reason?"

"A couple, actually," Jordan answered, pushing the gurney around a corner. "Number one, the triage beds need to be open in case we get a rush. And number two, once we give you this pain killer, I imagine it's going to interact with the booze you drank earlier, and you're going to want a nap. The main ward can get pretty noisy."

"What pain killer? I had Demerol the last time."

"Fentanyl," Jordan answered, smirking. "If you liked Demerol, you're going to love this."

Davis glanced up at him over his shoulder. "Oh, yeah?"

"Oh, yeah. Works much faster, and takes the pain away almost immediately."

Davis sighed. "Sounds good to me." He started to turn back around then hesitated, his eyes narrowed. "Why is it I think this is not standard operating procedure?"

Jordan looked down at him, keeping his face carefully blank. "The shot, or moving you?"

"Both," Davis answered. "Either."

Jordan shrugged. "No idea. The doctor had to order the pain killer, and as for moving you? We've done it with patients before." Which they had; Jordan just didn't see any

need to tell him that the last time had been for a child with German measles.

Davis turned, settling back with a sigh. "Should I be worried about anything that doctor prescribed? I got the feeling he didn't like me much."

"No. I wouldn't let him give you anything that would hurt you," Jordan said softly. He saw Davis's lips lift slightly.

"Nice to know," he murmured.

Jordan flicked on the lights in the small room, and using the controls hanging off of one side, raised the head of the empty bed. It lifted with a low, grinding sound. Jordan pulled back the stiff bedding pushed the gurney in next to it, locked the wheels, lowered the railing, and offered his arm.

Davis's hand curled around it, his palm wide and warm, and moved gingerly to his feet, keeping most of his weight on his left leg as he lifted himself and shifted from one bed to the other. His hand lingered on Jordan's arm for a moment before he let it slip away. It shouldn't have been significant enough of a touch to make Jordan feel breathless, and yet it did. He covered what he knew was a renewed blush by putting Davis's clothes and bag on a rolling bed tray in the corner and then covering his legs

with the sheets and light blankets. At that moment Terri came in with a hypodermic needle in one hand, and an ice pack in the other.

"We'll have you feeling better in no time," she said with a bright smile, handing Jordan the needle and an alcohol swab before pulling back the covers and looking down at the Davis's knee. "Well, that's certainly coloring up nicely." She carefully covered the swollen, bruised knee with the pack, but even with her care, Davis hissed slightly. "Does that hurt?" she asked, reaching to take it off. He caught her wrist gently in his hand.

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "Just... really cold."

"I'll get a towel to put between it and your skin. Be right back." She gave Jordan a smirk as she passed, unlocking the wheels on the gurney and pushing it in front of her. "Jordan here can give you that painkiller while I'm gone." He gave her a flinty look as she breezed out the door.

"I like her," Davis said as Jordan sighed softly in resignation and approached the side of the bed. He looked up into the blue eyes to find Davis giving him a small smile. The man had dimples, Jordan thought fleetingly. One in his left cheek, and another just next to his mouth on

the right side.

"I do, too," he said. "Even if she can be an enormous pain in my butt." He stared down at the gown covering Davis. "And uh, speaking of pains in the butt..." The moment the words left his mouth, he realized how it sounded, and he cringed. "I'm sorry. That came out completely wrong..." But Davis laughed, a full throated, warm sound that softened some of his embarrassment.

"Sounded okay to me," he said with a teasing smirk. Rolling to his side Davis lifted his gown to reveal snug, white cotton jockeys. He eased them down at the side, and Jordan forced himself not to stare as the firm, round cheek was revealed. Trying to maintain a clinical detachment, he opened the swab and wiped it over the tawny skin, then slipped the needle skillfully into the flesh. He depressed the plunger slowly so as to cause the least amount of discomfort, and pulled it free. Once he'd covered the small spot of blood that welled with a tiny round bandage, he patted Davis's hip.

"All done," he said, slipping the plastic cap back into place over the exposed needle. Davis glanced over his shoulder at him as he pulled the briefs back into place.

"I didn't even feel that," he muttered, looking bemused. He rolled to his back, and Jordan pulled the

blankets up around his waist.

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" he asked, smoothing them in place.

"Yeah," Davis answered. "Just... unusual. You're good."

"Lots of practice," Jordan murmured, and even though he'd heard it before, this time he was inordinately pleased.

At that point, Terri bustled back into the room with a small white towel and a large, very fluffy looking pillow. Jordan arched a brow at her; those weren't ER standard issue, but she sent him a quelling look. He stepped back as she removed the hard, flat pillow from behind Davis's head and replaced it, then lifted the blankets long enough to place the towel over his knee before resituating the ice pack. By the time she was done, Jordan could almost see the narcotic moving through Davis's system. His eyes began to look slightly unfocused, and his shoulders, which had been stiff with pain the entire time he'd been there, eased with a ragged sigh. Jordan took a step closer and lifted his wrist to take his pulse, and Davis smiled up at him sweetly.

"Oh, I like that shot," he said cheerfully. Jordan heard Terri chuckle.

"I'll just bet you do," she muttered, patting his foot as she moved toward the door. "Sleep well."

"Thank you, Nurse Terri," he called out, and her soft laughter floated back to them through the open door.

Davis looked up at Jordan again, his blue eyes a bit unfocused. "I like that shot. It worked really, really fast," he said. "And I like you, too, Nurse Jordan Armstead. Jordan. That's a nice name. Jordan," he repeated, as if trying it out in his mouth. "Jorrrdddaaannn."

Jordan knew his face was almost as red as his scrubs even as he smiled. "My mom's idea," he said, mentally counting. Davis's pulse had slowed slightly, but that could be attributed to the lessening of his of pain. The thrumming beat was still steady beneath his fingers. "There are three of us, and all of our names begin with 'J'. Jacob, Jillian, and Jordan."

"Why 'J'?" Davis asked, clearly making an effort to focus.

"After her mother, Julianne," he answered. "She died before I was born."

Davis let his head loll to one side, even as he kept his eyes on Jordan's face. "I like your 'J' name the best," he murmured, the corner of his lips quirked. "It suits you. Jordan; a gentle name for a gentle man. Gentleman. Gentle

man." He ran one hand over his face. "You know what I mean." He blinked. "Whoa, this shit packs a punch, huh?" His eyes began to roll a bit as he laid his head back. Jordan smiled slightly.

"Yep." He reached for the remote and slowly lowered the head of the bed until it was just slightly inclined. "How's the pain?"

Davis snickered. "What pain?" He moved his leg slightly and grimaced. "Oh, there it is."

"How would you judge your pain level now?" Jordan asked, watching him.

"If I move it... a two," Davis answered, his speech becoming obviously slurred. "If I don't? Zero. Zee-row."

"Excellent." Jordan smoothed blankets that didn't really need to be smoothed over the broad chest, and felt the musculature through the thin gown. Realizing what he was doing, he pulled his hand back, but Davis was surprisingly quick for someone impaired, and caught his wrist. Jordan looked up to find the vivid eyes trained on his face.

"You can touch," he whispered.

"No, I really can't," Jordan said, his heart hammering as he freed himself and took a step back. "And you should go to sleep."

"Not really sleepy," Davis answered, but almost as soon the words left his mouth his eyes rolled closed and his head drifted to one side. Jordan watched him for several seconds, took his pulse again to find it steady, then reached up to turn on the soft light over the bed. Stepping away, fighting the urge to push back the blond bangs that had spilled over the arched brows, he went to the door and turned off the harsh overhead light. In the doorway, he paused to look back, studying the handsome face surrounded by soft light that made almost a halo of the fair hair, thinking again that he couldn't remember a time when he'd seen a man so beautiful.

CHAPTER THREE

Things picked up at about seven a.m. An elderly lady slipped on the ice in a parking lot and fractured her hip and there was a two-car pile-up with minor injuries, also caused by ice. It happened every year during the winter; people forgot how to walk and how to drive. It was nearly ten by the time Jordan found a moment to head back in to check on Davis, and as he was passing the nurses' desk he heard the day physician, Dr. Ian Gregory, asking Terri about "the patient in fifteen". He paused to listen.

"He came in about three this morning," Terri said smoothly. "A professional ballet dancer with the company that came to town to do *The Nutcracker*." She lowered her voice. "Poor man, he's torn his meniscus for the third time, which effectively ends his career. The company even pulled out last night, leaving him behind, so he didn't have anywhere to go." She looked up, her pale blue eyes wide. "Dr. Callahan felt it was the least we could do after administering the Fentanyl to let him sleep for a while. If we needed fifteen, I'd make sure it was available, Doctor. And Callahan didn't figure ortho could get a consult down here much before noon."

Gregory shrugged. "That's probably true; I know they're backed up with all of the slip and falls resulting in

fractures. He'll be lucky if they can see him today at all." He turned and walked away, and Jordan gave her an admiring look.

"Man, you're smooth," he murmured. She blew on her nails and rubbed them on her smock, and Jordan smiled.

"Been in to check on sleeping beauty lately?" she asked.

Jordan shook his head. "On my way now."

"I checked at eight; he was fine."

Jordan nodded and checked his watch; it was straight up ten o'clock, and he'd given him the shot at six. Jordan doubted Davis would even know he was in there.

The door was still open, but the traffic in the hallway had increased, so Jordan lifted the door stop and let it swing silently closed behind him. Davis hadn't even moved; his head was in the same position, his full lips slightly parted as he breathed deeply. Davis checked his pulse, which was still strong, and lifted the edge of the blanket to make sure that Terri had pulled the ice pack. She had, and while the knee was still swollen, it wasn't as bad as it would have been if left untended. He was lowering the blankets back into place when he heard Davis take and release a deep breath. Jordan looked up into sleepy blue

eyes.

"Hi," Davis breathed, blinking.

"Hi." Jordan smoothed the blanket before taking a step closer to the head of the bed. "How are you doing?"

"Hmm?"

Jordan looked into his eyes, and saw that they were still unfocused.

"How are you doing?" he repeated, and Davis frowned slightly.

"Uhm, 'kay," he muttered, looking confused.

"Tired."

"Go back to sleep," Jordan said softly, giving in to the urge to push back the bangs that now fell over the blue eyes, giving Davis the appearance of a sleepy child. "You don't have to go anywhere for a while."

"Kay." He snuggled down deeper under the covers, sighing again deeply. Jordan had started to go when his voice stopped him. "Stay?"

Jordan turned back to find Davis's half open eyes on his face. He took a deep breath and released it slowly, then came back, standing near Davis's head. "'Til you're asleep again," he murmured.

"Thanks." Davis closed his eyes, shifting again. His head had moved until it was almost off of the pillow, and

Jordan leaned over, reaching out to settle it more firmly under his head.

Later, he wouldn't be quite sure what happened; one moment he was adjusting a pillow, and the next a hand had circled his nape and was holding him just inches above Davis's face, his own eyes wide as he stared into sleepy blue ones.

"Davis," he murmured, pulling gently against the hold.

"Jordan," Davis whispered, and Jordan watched his lips form the syllables of his name. He knew that he should force the issue, knew that he should straighten and back away, and yet he couldn't seem to make his body cooperate. Instead, when Davis exerted pressure on the back of his neck and pulled, he allowed himself to be drawn in. And when Davis angled his head and opened his mouth beneath his, Jordan gave in and allowed himself to be kissed.

He didn't think anyone he'd ever kissed tasted quite like Davis did; even hours later there was a hint of scotch, but mostly it was just a sweet, earthy flavor unique to him. For the first few moments, his lips merely caressed Jordan's gently, almost sweetly. It wasn't until Jordan opened his mouth to the gentle probing of his tongue that Davis took the kiss someplace deeper, needier. His fingers spread up

into Jordan's short, dark hair, caressing his scalp, closing around the silky strands. Heat filled Jordan, going straight from his lips to his groin, and he let his mouth soften, open further. Davis's tongue slid along his, a sleek glide of strong muscle that was dizzying. It wasn't until Davis reached up with his other hand and cupped Jordan's jaw, turning his head, then pulling back for a moment for a breath that the spell was broken. Davis lifted his face to resume the kiss, but alarmed by what he'd allowed to happen, Jordan put a staying hand on his chest, pulling against the hold at his nape.

"I can't," he whispered against the open lips, closing his eyes. "I can't do this here."

He heard Davis sigh, felt the hold on him loosen, and he straightened away. He opened his eyes to find the blue ones studying him, looking faintly confused.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I just thought..." He shrugged. "You're a nice man, Jordan Armstead," he breathed, closing his eyes. "I just thought I might see what it was like to kiss a nice man." His lips quirked. "It was something more than nice." His breathing settled into a slow, steady rhythm as he quietly fell back to sleep.

Jordan took an unsteady step back, lifting his hand and pressing it over his heart. It was pounding beneath his

palm, and he closed his eyes, shaking his head. God, he was so screwed.

* * * *

Terri and Jordan coordinated their efforts as they arrived at the end of their shifts at noon. Terri went in at eleven forty-five and woke Davis, laying out his clothes and lingering to make sure he was steady enough on his feet to change into them. Jordan, still feeling a bit shell shocked by the kiss they'd shared and delaying the inevitable, took a new prescription for pain killers down to the in-house pharmacy and had it filled, then detoured past ortho to pick up a knee brace and crutches. Without going back into fifteen, he handed everything off to Terri, quickly put on his coat and gloves, and went to pull his car up to the exit.

They hadn't gotten any further than that in their planning; they knew Davis would probably want to fly out and do the ortho consult nearer his home, but they hadn't called to check on the flight scheduling and had no idea if he could even get out that day. Their town had a small, municipal airport; undoubtedly Davis would have to fly to a larger airport for a connection, and Jordan just wasn't sure

he was up to making a flight transfer in a large airport on that leg. He could invite Davis to stay, but... and that was where his mind went blank.

He could invite him to stay— where? On his ratty sofa? Kyle had owned the decent furniture, and he'd taken that with him when he'd gone. Jordan had inherited his mother's basement hand-me-downs, and still hadn't bothered to go and buy anything of his own. It hadn't bothered him; he was easy to please. As long as he could sit on it, and put his feet up on the battered coffee table, he was fine. But actually inflicting that lumpy menace on someone else? Especially someone with a bad knee to begin with? Of course, he thought as he set the brake and got out of his car, inhaling instinctively as the icy air hit his face, Davis could take the bed and he could take the couch. Jordan had fought for the queen sized bed he'd paid for, even though Kyle had cursed him loudly for it. They'd actually fought harder over the bed than they had any of the myriad 'issues' Kyle had come up with as an excuse for leaving him.

He was still thinking about Kyle, and scowling a bit, when the automatic doors slid open and Terri appeared, pushing Davis in a wheelchair, an orderly behind carrying his suitcase and bag. Davis looked up at him, frowning, as

he hurried to open the passenger side door. He still looked half asleep, but the weak sunlight caught in the waves of his fair hair, and the cold wind lifted strands to blow around his face. Jordan glanced at the braced leg, wanting nothing more than to get him out of the cold; he knew what the icy temps would feel like on the stiffened muscles in his leg. Terri rolled the chair closer and Jordan offered his arm.

"Jordan, if this is putting you out in any way," he began. Jordan shook his head.

"It isn't," he said, but Davis didn't move to take his arm. "Davis," he said, looking into the pale eyes fully for the first time since they'd shared that mind melting kiss, "it isn't. At all. Really."

Davis closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. He reached out with his hand, allowing Jordan to maneuver him to his feet, his arm around his lean waist as he turned him and gently lowered him into the passenger seat. Getting his stiff leg into the car took a moment, and Jordan had to pause half way through to reach for the switch that moved the seat back electrically. It took a minute for the seat to slowly slide into place, and his face was near Davis's arm the entire time. He smelled really good, and even as his blood heated Jordan wondered if the fragrance was on his coat, or if he'd taken the time to put on more.

Jordan was finally able to leverage the leg safely into the car, and he glanced up into Davis's face to find him studying him pensively.

"I feel like I'm really inconveniencing you," he murmured. Jordan gave him a small smile.

"I meant it when I said you weren't. You're just going to have to believe me on this."

Davis sighed heavily, but nodded, and Jordan stood and closed the door.

"Don't forget his luggage," Terri said. "Call if you need anything."

"Thanks, Terri," he said, picking the suitcase up from where the orderly had left it on the curb. She knocked on the window lightly and waved when Davis looked, and he gave her an anemic smile.

"He's starting to hurt again," she said with a meaningful look. "He wouldn't take any of the oral meds; said he was still too doped up." Jordan nodded, vowing to deal with that as soon as possible. "Call me and let me know what he decides to do, okay? And don't do anything I wouldn't do." She smirked when he rolled his eyes.

"I think that leaves pretty much anything, doesn't it?" he quipped. Her grin was wide, and unrepentant. He shook his head and crossed behind the car.

"Call me," she repeated. He nodded and waved her back inside before putting the luggage in the back seat. When he settled in behind the wheel, he glanced over at Davis, not sure exactly what they were doing. The other man was staring out through the windshield, and Jordan noticed how tired he looked, and wan. He made up his mind quickly.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, and Davis turned to him, blinking.

"Uh, yeah," he said after a moment. "I guess I am."

"I thought you might be, and I'm starving. How about some breakfast?"

For the first time since he'd appeared on the sidewalk, Davis managed to give Jordan weak smile. "I'd like that," he said softly.

"Great. I know the perfect place."

He put the car into gear, and pulled out of the circular drive in front of the ER doors.

* * * *

Frank's Diner had once been a dining car on the Transcontinental Railroad. Sometime around 1960 it had made it as far as the local rail yard, and been left on an

unused spur to rust. Nearly two decades later, a local entrepreneur had purchased the moldering, collapsing old car and turned it into a restaurant, and it had become one of the most popular places to eat in town. With a menu that tended toward comfort food, and a cooking staff who never met a stick of butter they didn't like, Frank's was a favorite among bowling leagues, baseball teams, and the staff at Holy Family Hospital just up the road. They served breakfast all day, and even though it was nearly twelve thirty by the time Jordan pulled the Mustang into one of the spaces near the doors, he could do with a ham and cheddar omelet. Belatedly he found himself hoping that Davis wasn't one of those dancers who would rather die than face down a plate of eggs mixed with cream and stuffed with cheese and pork, accompanied by crispy fried hash browns.

He opened his door as Davis did the same on the other side.

"Wait, don't get out until I get there," Jordan said, jumping out of the car and hurrying around the hood. It had begun to snow lightly, and the flakes looked fat and lacey against the red paint before they melted away. He reached for Davis's hands and helped him to his feet before reaching behind the seat for the crutches.

"Such a gentleman," Davis teased sardonically,

propping the padded crutches under his arms. Jordan shrugged as he locked the doors, stung by the tone, his face flaming. When he turned back, Davis caught his eyes. "I like it," he murmured, pale eyes softened. "I'm just tired and cranky, and a notoriously bad patient. Forgive me."

"It's okay," Jordan said, shrugging. "I tend to hover. Or so I've been accused. And the lot is icy; I'd hate for you to add broken tailbone to the list of aches and pains you're going to have to sit through a flight with."

Davis shuddered theatrically. "I'd hate to add a broken tail bone to the list, period. Totally aside from flying, think of all of the lovely things it could keep one from enjoying." Jordan glanced over at him quickly, brow raised, wondering if he was inferring what he thought that he was, and seeing by the wry smirk on the handsome face he hadn't gotten it wrong. Jordan laughed, his hand near Davis's elbow as they started slowly up the walk.

The inside of the restaurant was warm and fragrant, and Davis inhaled deeply. "Does anything else smell as good as bacon frying?" he asked.

"Maybe a rib eye steak on the grill," Jordan answered, taking off his gloves and shoving them in his coat pockets. "Or a chocolate cake in the oven. Or cinnamon rolls cooling on the counter."

Davis sighed appreciatively. "Ah, a man after my own heart; suicide by fat content. Damn the cholesterol, full speed ahead."

Jordan grinned, gesturing him ahead down the narrow aisle when the hostess came to seat them. It took Davis a moment to situate the crutches in the booth and make sure his leg was fully under the table. As Jordan slid into the seat opposite, Davis took an offered menu.

"Coffee, gentlemen?" the hostess asked brightly.

"Please," they said in unison. Sending each other an amused look, they laughed.

"So, I'm guessing that everything on the menu is fabulous," Davis said as she walked away, studying it avidly.

"It is," Jordan agreed.

"And probably so high in fat and calories I could live off of it, in theory, for a week."

"Yep."

Davis eyed the items listed appreciatively.

"Excellent. I'm in the mood to listen to my arteries hardening."

"Then we came to the right place," Jordan said, shrugging out of his coat.

Their waitress arrived with ceramic cups and a

small pot of coffee, which she placed on the speckled linoleum table top, and took their orders. Jordan ordered his usual, the ham and cheddar omelet, and Davis ordered steak and eggs, steak medium rare, eggs over easy, and a side of pancakes.

"I haven't eaten since about noon yesterday," he said a bit sheepishly. Jordan merely shrugged.

"How many shows did you dance yesterday? Two?" Davis nodded. "I'm guessing you burned off that and more."

Davis's mouth turned down at the corners. "I'm going to have to start watching that now, though. Unless I want to be as broad as I am tall."

Jordan studied the movie star handsome face in the soft light shining through the window, and saw the lines of strain and fatigue around the blue eyes and mobile mouth. "You don't know that," he said quietly. "It might not be as bad as you think."

"It is," Davis said mildly, picking up the pot to pour himself a cup of coffee, "and I'd just as soon not talk about it." He gestured toward Jordan's empty cup, brows raised in question, and Jordan nodded. "I'd rather talk about you."

Jordan blinked, startled. "Me?" he laughed self-consciously. "I'm not all that interesting."

Davis sent him a look as he filled his cup. Immediately, the scent of coffee filled the booth, and Jordan gratefully lifted the cup to take a sip.

"You think being a ballet dancer is more interesting than being a nurse?" Davis asked.

"Uh, yeah," Jordan answered. "You travel, the parts you dance are varied, and you get to throw around pretty girls..."

"Oh, whoo hee," Davis drawled. "We all know how much appeal that part holds for most male ballet dancers."

"You get to ogle each other's asses in tights," Jordan went on as if he hadn't been interrupted. Davis smirked as he saluted him with his coffee cup.

"There is that."

"Not a small thing, from what I saw yesterday," Jordan quipped, wiggling his brows. Davis's grin was lopsided.

"Actually disappointingly small in most cases," he said dryly. "But nothing a roll of socks won't fix."

Jordan had just taken a sip of his coffee, and he sputtered, his hand coming to cover his mouth. Davis's grin ripened.

"But honestly," Davis went on. "Why nursing?"

"You mean, instead of doctoring?" It was a question

he was used to.

"No," Davis said, his eyes direct. "I meant, why nursing?"

Jordan thought about it for a moment, sipping his coffee. Finally, he set the cup on the table. "Because I guess I've always been more of a nurturer," he said a bit self-consciously, not accustomed to talking about himself. "When we were kids, my brother Jake was the star pitcher on the baseball team and my sister Jillian was the prima donna in the school musical; I was taking care of every injured animal in the neighborhood, or of my grandmother when she was sick, or my mother after she and dad got divorced." He shrugged uncomfortably. "I guess it's just who I am. Doctors have a different approach to patients; they see them as something to be fixed, not necessarily as people. And I think, for what they do, the distancing can be a good thing; it removes the sentiment from it."

"Like the doctor who saw me this morning," Davis said wryly. "Not mired in sentiment, that one."

"No, that one is an asshole," Jordan replied, grimacing. "I meant the good ones, actually. I think to be a really good orthopedist, you have to see the bone first. Or to be a good oncologist, you have to attack the disease. For me, when I look at a patient, all I see is a person who is

usually frightened, and more often than not hurting, and I just want to try to make them feel better." He shrugged again. "I think when the medical system works the best is when the nurse is able to help the patient feel at ease so the doctor can do what he's trained to do. We facilitate. It's our job."

"I don't think I've ever heard it put quite that way before," Davis said thoughtfully. Jordan grinned.

"How many nurses have you chatted up before?"

"Not many," Davis admitted. His eyes grew warm as he studied Jordan's face. "But then, not many of them have been as attractive as you are, either."

Jordan knew he was blushing, but he was saved from comment by the waitress's timely arrival with their meals.

Aside from Davis making assorted appreciative noises about the food that were almost sexual in nature, and very limited small talk, the next few minutes were dedicated to demolishing as much of their breakfasts as they could manage. Jordan had just pushed his plate away when a high-pitched voice caught his attention.

"Uncle Jordy!"

He looked up in time to see a head with blonde ringlets bounding in his direction. He turned in his seat and

caught the little girl up in his arms.

"Mandy-Pandy," he said, hugging her and pulling her up onto his knee. "Why aren't you in school?"

She rolled her wide brown eyes lavishly.

"Christmas vacation, Uncle Jordy," she answered, as if just refraining from saying *duh*.

"Yeah, Uncle Jordy." He looked up as his sister, Jillian, arrived at the table. "You remember Christmas vacation, right? You're not that ancient."

"You're older than me," he said out of the side of his mouth. He turned his attention back to Amanda. "So what are you girls up to today?"

"Christmas shopping with Grammie," Amanda answered. "We just had breakfast."

"Is Grammie with you?"

"Oh, yes," Jillian answered, her eyes finally drifting to Davis. "She stopped at the ladies room. If you make a run for it, I'll cover your exit." She offered her hand to Davis, who looked at it in surprise but took it gamely. "I'm Jillian, by the way. Jordan's sister, since he's too rude to introduce us."

"I'm Davis," he answered, squeezing her hand.

"Momma, that's the Arab man," Amanda said brightly. Jillian colored, obviously embarrassed.

"Amanda!" she scolded. "I seriously doubt he's Arabian, and it's very rude to comment on someone's nationality."

"Huh?" Amanda said, confused. Davis laughed.

"She means I danced the role in the Arabian *pas de deux* in *Nutcracker*," he clarified. He turned back to Amanda. "And you, I believe, were the white mouse. Am I right?" She nodded, her brown eyes so wide that a thin rim of white appeared all around them. He offered his hand solemnly. "I'm Davis," he said. "Nice to finally meet you officially." She gripped his index finger, shook it shyly and then released it. Jillian was still staring at him, startled.

"You danced in *Nutcracker*?" she repeated. "I thought the company left town this morning."

"Jillian," Jordan said, sending her a quelling look.

"Most of them did," Davis answered, by all appearances supremely undisturbed. "I, however, spent the night in the ER. Your brother was kind enough to offer to bring me for breakfast."

She frowned. "You spent the night in the ER? Then, you're injured?"

"Afraid so," Davis said lightly.

"Mandy," Jordan said, trying to turn his sister's attention away from Davis and what he knew were going to

be even more prying questions about his injury. The little girl turned her wide eyes to him. "Jordan hurt his knee doing a *grand jeté*. Know what that is? 'A giant leap'."

"Uncle Jordy!" the child cried, her eyes wide. "You said ballet words!"

Davis grinned in delight when Jordan's mother walked up to the table, all assessing looks and thinly veiled curiosity, and Jillian performed the introductions.

"This is Davis," Jillian said, sending her a meaningful look. "Remember the Arabian dancer yesterday?"

Carol Armstead's brows lifted. "It would be difficult to forget," she said, offering her hand. "I'm Carol. So pleased to meet you."

Once again the explanation about his injury was gone through, and as the narrow aisle in the restaurant was starting to get busier, their presence blocking it was becoming more of a hindrance.

"You girls are going shopping, I hear," Jordan said finally when a disgruntled patron had squeezed past them for the third time. "Don't let us keep you."

"Nice way of saying 'bug off'," Carol said to Davis. "He's never been terribly subtle."

"Thanks, Mom," he muttered, but Davis smiled.

"We really do need to get going, though," she said, checking her watch. "The Macy's sale waits for no man. Don't forget, Jordan. Tonight is the birthday dinner for the twins."

Jordan frowned. "That's tonight?"

"Yes," Carol said with an air of long suffering patience. "They've had the same birthday for five years, dear." She turned back to Davis. "If you're still here, Davis, you should come to dinner. Homemade lasagna, birthday cake for the children, and my famous Irish coffee for the adults."

"Yeah, I'm sure it's your idea of a good time," Jordan said with a wry grimace, but Davis surprised him.

"Actually, I love lasagna, and I'd much rather eat a home cooked meal than one alone in a restaurant. Thank you, Carol. If I'm still in town, I'd love to come."

"Excellent!" She gave him a bright smile. "Just come with Jordan. Come on, girls. The mall's calling." They left with a flurry of goodbyes and bright smiles, and Jordan watched them go before turning back with a sheepish smile.

"That was very nice of you," he said. "But you don't really have to go."

"No, I meant it," Davis said. "I'm an only child. I've

always enjoyed big families. If there's no flight, and it's not an inconvenience to you, I'd like to go."

"Okay," Jordan answered. "But we're talking three kids under the age of seven, and several adults who are not even remotely shy. If you come with me, they're going to assume something is going on, and they're going to embarrass the hell out of me."

Davis grinned brightly. "Sounds more like your problem than mine," he quipped. "I'm just looking forward to the lasagna." He winked, and Jordan shook his head as he collected his coat.

"I know someone who runs a travel agency not far from here," he said. "Shall we go and see if we can make some travel arrangements for you?"

"That would be good," Davis said, snatching up the check when Jordan reached for it.

"I invited you to breakfast, remember?" he said.

"I'm not paying for it," Davis said with a sly smile. "Miles is. I have his American Express."

Jordan laughed. "I wish you'd told me sooner; we could have ordered lunch to go." Davis grinned as he reached for his crutches.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I should check into a hotel," Davis was saying as they left Jordan's friend's agency. The next flight out with the needed connection wasn't until the next day. Jordan was having a difficult time hiding how pleased he was about it.

"You could," he said as they made their way slowly back to the Mustang. "Or," he paused as he unlocked the car and opened the passenger door. He turned back to find Davis standing not far from him, his eyes on his face. "You could always stay with me," Jordan offered softly. "Then you wouldn't have to pay for a hotel room."

"I have..." Davis began.

"Miles's card, I know," Jordan finished for him. "And you don't think he'd come after you to pay the charges? I heard him say you had to foot the bill for the flight yourself, and you already charged that on the card."

"I'm not exactly destitute," Davis drawled. "I can afford to pay for a hotel myself."

"It's up to you," Jordan said. "But why should you, if it isn't necessary?"

They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment. "You're sure it's not an inconvenience?"

"Not at all," Jordan promised. "And this way, I don't have to come pick you up on the way to my mother's."

Davis smiled, by all appearances delighted. "That's right! I get to have lasagna!"

Jordan shook his head, stepping back as Davis lowered himself into the passenger seat. "And deal with nosy adults and noisy children. I think you're out of your mind."

"I like kids," Davis said, lifting his leg into the car. He looked up at Jordan, frowning slightly. "Should I get presents for the twins?"

Jordan gaped. "No, you should not," he said firmly, closing the car door. He jogged around the trunk and hopped in behind the steering wheel.

"At least let me buy a bottle of wine for your mother," he said the moment Jordan's door was closed. "Red with Italian, I think. Does she like red?"

Jordan looked over at him, incredulous. "Davis, you don't have to bring anything, honestly."

"But it's rude," Davis insisted. "Unless she doesn't like wine?"

Jordan smirked. "Oh, no, she likes wine just fine." He started the car, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "And she'll be so thrilled she'll probably offer to adopt you."

Davis grinned. "I think I'd let her. My mother is a

bitch."

Jordan pulled out into traffic then glanced over at him. "Care to elaborate?"

Davis rolled his shoulder. "Not much to tell, honestly. I'm an only child. Mother and Dad divorced when I was two, and although she paid for all of the ballet lessons and did everything but shove me on the stage, when I told her I was gay she informed me that until I 'outgrew it', she didn't want to hear from me. I was fifteen. Apparently having a son who is a ballet dancer is one thing; having a son who's a gay ballet dancer is another all together. We exchange the obligatory birthday card, and completely impersonal Christmas gifts via messenger, but I haven't seen her in sixteen years." He didn't sound bitter, but Jordan saw the hardness around his mouth.

His eyes going back to the road, Jordan frowned slightly, thinking of his own family. They were nosy, and pushy, and infinitely more involved with his personal life than he would like, but he loved them, all of them. He adored his mother, and his nieces and nephew, and though they occasionally irritated the crap out of him, he adored his brother and sister too. The idea of not seeing his mother for sixteen years was unthinkable to him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, reaching across the stick

shift to squeeze Davis's leg. He looked over, pale eyes wide.

"Why?" he said. "I'm not. She's a horrid woman."

"What about your father?"

Davis's eyes went back to the windshield. "I have no contact with him."

Jordan glanced over at him. "I don't see my dad much, either." Davis turned to look at him. "He's the one with the issue with my orientation, and it's easier to just not see him." Davis nodded in complete understanding.

When they passed the strip mall near his duplex, he pulled into the lot, parking in front of the liquor store. He watched as Davis seemed to take great delight in picking out an exorbitantly expensive bottle of Merlot and a fancy gift bag to hold it, and merely shook his head when he went into the grocery store next door to buy crayons and coloring books for the twins. He elicited Jordan's input about their favorite cartoon characters, and Jordan smirked as he put all of it on Miles's American Express. Carrying the bags when they went back to the car, Jordan moved slowly at his side across a lot now made slick with falling snow. He helped him into the Mustang, thinking it was a shame a man who clearly took such pleasure in buying gifts for others didn't really seem to have anyone to buy them for.

* * * *

It wasn't until they were making their way up the walk to the front door of his apartment that Jordan took a moment to question his decision to invite Davis to stay with him. The building itself was fine; in fact, he thought it was beautiful. It had been built as a spacious home at the turn of the century, and the rooms had high ceilings, elegant crown moldings, and hardwood floors. He lived on the main floor, and so he had the pocket doors, and the butler's pantry in the kitchen, and gas fireplaces in both the living room and bedroom. The bath had a pedestal sink and claw foot tub, and the floor was still in the original white octagonal tile. All in all, it was an elegant unit; the kitchen was somewhat dated, but he liked it, and the hot water was temperamental, but he figured that was the price you paid for living in a building with history and character. But as he unlocked the front door, he found himself wishing he'd done more with the place.

The chintz print on the sofa didn't look very masculine, and the old recliner that he sat in to watch TV was threadbare in places. He'd added some throws and some accent pillows, but decorating wasn't really his strong

suit. Mostly he had the throws around because in winter it was cold and the pillows had been an afterthought, an effort to hide the lumpier parts of the sofa cushions. He stepped aside and let Davis enter in front of him then went back to get his luggage out of the car. When he came back in, Davis was standing in the middle of his living room, eyeing the small Christmas tree that sat on a card table in the bay window.

"That was Mandy's idea," he said self-consciously. "She didn't like my not having a tree." He crossed and plugged in the lights, and the little tree came to life with color. "Better with the lights on, I guess."

"I was just trying to remember the last time I had a tree," Davis said, glancing over at him with a slight smile. "I can't. I'm always on tour until the weekend before, and Miles..." He shrugged. "Let's just say Miles found the idea of a tree too much bother, and he could never find one that would compliment his color scheme."

"His color scheme?" Jordan asked.

"Black and... well, black." He laughed. "He's such a pretentious asshole, honestly. I think the only reason I stayed with him as long as I did was because it was easier than moving. Suppose I'll have to, now."

His eyes looked far away, and Jordan stepped

closer. "So you live together?"

Davis blinked. "Well, we did. I imagine when I get home I'll take steps to rectify it."

Jordan touched his arm. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Davis straightened, shaking his head. "Don't be. It had run its course long before this. And you should never stay with someone out of an abundance of laziness." He looked around the room. "This is a beautiful old building. I'm guessing it was a house, once?"

"Yes," Jordan said, glad for the change of subject. "All of the buildings on this street, near the hospital, were single family homes, owned by some of the men who founded the city. This one belonged to a railroad tycoon."

Davis crossed over to examine one of the built in book cases next to the fireplace, his hand reaching out to touch the polished cherry wood.

"They just don't do detailing like this anymore," he murmured. "I always think it's sad when they divide these old houses up into apartments, but they seem to have done a good job with this one."

"They added a kitchen and made the old entryway part of the upstairs unit. I was glad I found this one when it became available. I love old houses."

"So do I," Davis said, examining the marble

fireplace. "And this one is a gem."

"Thanks. Uhm," Jordan picked up the suitcase, "you'll be sleeping through here."

He led the way through the dining room with its simple table and chairs into a small hallway that led to the one large bedroom. He turned on the light, grateful again that he'd fought for the bed. It was the one thing of true beauty he owned. It was a black wrought iron four poster, simple, almost Spartan of design. The bedding, a gift he'd bought for himself when Kyle left, was in shades of dark red and in a moment of uncharacteristic romanticism, he'd hung gauzy curtains at each of the four corners. His dresser was utilitarian maple, the top devoid of knick knacks, and there was a burgundy antique chair in the corner he'd found at a yard sale. The worn oriental carpet had been in his mother's attic, and the light on the bedside table had a stained glass shade in tones of ruby and hunter green. All in all, the furnishings fit the Old World feeling of the house, and this was the one room he was actually proud of.

"This is beautiful," Davis said appreciatively.

"Thanks," Jordan answered, setting the case near the closet door. "The bathroom is right through here." He turned and reached through a doorway, flicking a switch, and the room blazed with light reflected off of the white

porcelain and tile.

Davis glanced through. "Where are you sleeping?" he asked, looking at Jordan. "Do you have another bedroom?"

"No, I'll take the couch," Jordan said dismissively.

Davis frowned. "You will not," he argued.

"It's fine, honestly. I've been sleeping out there most of the time, anyway..."

When Davis turned to him with a frown, Jordan bit his lip. He hadn't meant to say it.

"Why would you sleep on the couch when there's a perfectly beautiful bed in here?"

Jordan felt heat climb his face. "My last boyfriend and I... well," he shrugged awkwardly. "The bed just feels huge. The couch is more comfortable."

Davis's eyes softened. "How long?"

"About six months," Jordan said, picking up the suitcase and lifting it onto the dresser, settling the large dance bag in the chair in the corner, moving briskly, anything to not see the pity in the light eyes. He turned back, rubbing his hands over the fabric covering his thighs. "Anyway, there's some time if you'd like to rest before we go, and you're probably about due for another pain pill, so..."

"He's a fool."

Davis's voice cut off his rambling, soft but surprising, and Jordan's eyes flew to his, startled. "Pardon?"

Davis held his gaze unflinchingly. "I said, he's a fool. Whoever left you. He's a bloody fool."

Jordan felt himself coloring again. "Well," he paused, licking his lips as his eyes skirted away. "So is Miles." He opened the dance bag and dug out the bottle of prescription pain killers, aware of Davis's eyes on him the entire time. "I'll just get you something to drink so you can take one of these."

Davis's soft voice, thanking him, followed him as he left the room.

* * * *

Jordan drove through the quiet streets, the tires of his Mustang silent on the newly fallen snow, lacy flakes dipping dizzily in and out of the beams of the headlights. He'd had a better time at his mother's than he thought possible given the circumstances, and was very aware that the reason could be attributed to the man who sat silently staring through the windshield at the falling snow.

"You were a very good sport," Jordan said softly.

He glanced over and saw Davis's lips quirk in a small smile.

"Your family is charming."

Jordan couldn't help it; he burst out laughing. "My family is an enormous pain in the ass," he said, still chuckling. "But you were very gracious."

Davis merely continued to smile.

From the moment they'd walked in the door at his mother's, Jordan had been aware of the pointed looks and whispered conversations going on around them. The kids, bless them, had been completely oblivious; the twins were just thrilled to have two more presents and Mandy was delighted to have the 'Arab man' all to herself.

"Andrea is going to be so jealous," she whispered, not particularly quietly, to Jordan. "She thought he was the very cutest."

"Which, he is," Jillian said, her eyes sparkling. "The very most cutest. Asked him to model his costume for you yet, brother of mine?"

Jordan sent her a warning look, but Davis merely laughed. "I'm afraid the costumes went with the company," he said mildly, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

"Although, I'm quite certain I've a thong in my luggage, which should be about the same amount of coverage."

Laughing in surprise, she looked over at Jordan.
"Oh, I like this one."

Jordan just shook his head, but he liked him, too.
And as the evening wore on, he liked him more and more.

Davis complimented his mother's Christmas tree, which really was beautiful, and her lasagna, which Jordan knew for a fact had come out of a box with *Stouffer's* written on the top, but which she had transferred to a ceramic casserole dish and shamelessly taken the credit for. The conversation around the table had been lively and amusing, the wine well received, the children surprisingly well behaved. When the group had demolished the lasagna, salad, and garlic bread, the twins had opened their gifts to much squealing and general delight. A huge chocolate and vanilla ice cream cake had been cut and served, and after it was half gone, Jordan found himself in the kitchen with his mother cleaning up after the huge meal. He was rinsing dishes but kept glancing toward the door, wondering if Davis had managed to evade his nosy sister, and certain he'd die of mortification if he hadn't.

"He's such a nice young man," Carol was saying as she scraped melted ice cream congealed with chocolate cake into the trash. She handed the dessert plates to Jordan.

"He is," he agreed, rinsing the plate and stacking it

in the dishwasher.

"And his injury? How bad is it?"

"It's impossible to tell without an MRI, Mom. And he won't get one of those until he gets home."

"You've been an ER nurse for five years, Jordy," Carol said, lowering her voice. "How bad is it?"

Jordan shrugged, closing up the dishwasher and wiping down the counter. "If it were the first, or even the second time he'd done it, not necessarily too bad. But this is the third time, on the same leg. So..." he looked over at her. "Bad. Probably career ending."

Carol sighed and shook her head. "That's so sad," she murmured. "He's a beautiful dancer."

"Yes, he is."

"Maybe he'll want to teach."

Jordan hung the dish towel over the edge of the sink. "He hasn't said."

Carol poured the last of the Merlot into her glass, studying it carefully rather than looking into his face. "He seems to like you," she said carefully.

"Mother, he's going home tomorrow," Jordan said. "A four hour flight, to the other side of the country."

"His family is there, then?" she asked, sipping her wine.

"I really couldn't say, Mom." She looked up into his face. "He's a very nice guy, and he's funny, and he's great looking, and," he put his hands on her shoulders, "he's going home tomorrow. He isn't interested in me."

She pursed her lips. "He may be going home tomorrow, Jordan," she said a bit archly. "But give me a little bit of credit, here. He may be getting on a plane, but he's interested. It's just up to you whether or not he gets what he's interested *in*."

"Oh, for God's sake," Jordan said, exasperated.

"All I'm saying," his mother went on, undaunted, "is that you aren't a monk, and you should stop living like one. Your heart doesn't need to be engaged every time, darling."

With that, she'd breezed out of the kitchen, leaving him staring after her, incredulous. Having his family's acceptance was one thing, having his mother suggesting he engage in the occasional one night stand was another entirely.

When he'd come out of the kitchen, the women were sitting around the dining table starting on a bottle of white wine and his brother and brother-in-law were watching football on the television in the family room. The twins were coloring on the floor, but Davis and Amanda were nowhere to be found. Jordan had wandered through

the family room and down the hall when he heard a high-pitched voice coming from the living room. He stepped up to the doorway and paused.

"Turn out is hard," Amanda was saying. She was standing in front of the sofa, her hand on the arm, her heels together. Davis was seated on the edge of the couch. "My teacher tells me mine isn't very good, but it makes my knees hurt."

"That's because you're turning out from the wrong place, Mandy," Davis said kindly. "Here, let me show you." He pushed himself up to his feet, placing his hand on the top of his crutches, facing her. "If you turn out from here," he placed his hand just inside of his hip bone and turned his leg to the side, clearly swiveling it out from his hip, "then you won't put any pressure on your knees. And trust me, you don't want to do that. Here, get down on the floor." He sat, pushing the coffee table back, and had her lie on the floor near his feet. "On your side. Now, bring your leg straight up, and bend it at the knee."

"Like this?" Amanda said, straightening her chubby little leg then bending it at the knee.

"Exactly like that," Davis said, approvingly. "Now, lift your leg, still bent at the knee, all the way up to the side. No, don't arch your back. Here." He laid one hand on

her lower back and rotated her knee up to the side with the other. "There, feel the muscle in your bum, here?" He poked her, and she giggled, but nodded quickly. "That's what you want to feel when you do turn out. Not at your knee, but there. Understand?"

"So, I should feel it in my bottom?" the little girl said, her brow furrowed.

"If you're doing it right, yes."

She worried her bottom lip, her brow creased in concentration. "Okay, I think I get it."

"Show me," Davis said, encouraging, and she scrambled to her feet, carefully turning her feet until her heels were together. This time, her knees were clearly facing out without any strain showing on her face.

"Oh!" Amanda said, her face splitting into a brilliant smile. "Like that?"

"Just like that." Davis smiled.

"Oh, thank you!" She threw her arms around Davis's neck, and he looked startled, but patted her gingerly on her back.

"You're welcome," he said.

Jordan watched him, saw the pleasure wash over the handsome face, saw him give Mandy a tentative squeeze before he released her, and thought about what his mother

had said. His heart might not have to be engaged every time, but he was very much afraid it already was *this* time.

"You were good with Mandy," Jordan said as he pulled the Mustang to the curb in front of his building. Davis glanced at him, frowning slightly. "Showing her how to turn out."

"Oh." Davis's brow cleared and he shook his head. "I'm always amazed by what ballet teachers just assume that a child will understand. For some kids, turn out is a problem because their muscles are tight. In Mandy's case, it was because the teacher didn't know how to word it. She's very flexible, has pretty feet. It's too soon to tell, but she has some nice natural gifts."

"God, don't tell my sister that," Jordan said, putting the car into park and turning off the ignition. "She'll be taking out ads in the paper and selling tickets to her premiere at Lincoln Center."

Davis laughed. "A ballet mom, huh?"

"On steroids." He opened his door. Pausing, Jordan said, "Let me come around and help you."

"Yes, sir," Davis said with a slight smile. Jordan hopped out and made the trip around the hood, then opened Davis's door. He smiled up at him as he offered his hands, and Jordan felt something tighten in his throat as he caught

them and lifted him to his feet. They were facing one another, inches apart, and their eyes met and held. "Thank you," Davis said softly. "For this evening; for sharing your family with me."

"Would you like them as a Christmas present? I'll keep the kids, but I'm sure Jillian and Marc won't give you too much trouble."

Davis's eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. "They're really pretty wonderful, you know," he said softly. "You're lucky."

Jordan nodded, sobering. "I know. I've never had to deal with my family not accepting me. I can't imagine what that's like." He bent and retrieved the crutches from behind the seats.

Davis took them stoically. "Cuts down on the Christmas shopping," he muttered dryly, slipping the crutches beneath his arms, and moving onto the sidewalk. Jordan shut the door and locked the car. Walking to Davis, who had begun to make his way laboriously up the snowy walk, Jordan took his elbow in his hand. Davis looked over at him, one brow raised.

"Do we really have to repeat the conversation about the hazards to your tailbone?" Jordan asked, intentionally lightening his tone. Davis rolled his eyes, but didn't protest

the support under his arm.

They got as far as the front door without incident. It was when Jordan had unlocked the door and pushed it open, and Davis swung the crutches up onto the step that he encountered a slick patch of ice. One crutch slipped and Davis cursed under his breath as the support slid sideways and his body over-balanced in the opposite direction. He was headed for a nasty fall when Jordan jumped forward, caught him around the waist and pulled him back against his body. The crutch clattered to the front walk, and Davis's grip transferred to the arm around his waist, holding on hard. They teetered for a moment on the slippery step before Jordan was able to move inside of the door, setting Davis's feet on the hard wood floor. Jordan held him as they stood for a moment, catching their breath, then he turned Davis and leaned him against the wall.

"Are you all right?" he said, taking in the widened eyes and the parted lips. Davis swallowed heavily. As he nodded his fair bangs falling over his brows. Jordan turned and went to get the fallen crutch. He came back and carefully placed it under Davis's right arm, closing the heavy front door behind him, sending the entryway into darkness. When he turned back, all he could make out clearly was the swatch of blond hair and wide, ice blue eyes

in a pale face. "You're sure you're okay?" he asked. His voice sounded loud in the silence of his apartment, and he could hear Davis's rapid breathing. He took a step closer, examining the almost unnaturally widened eyes.

"I'm fine." Davis's voice sounded ragged.

"You're sure," Jordan said, frowning. "You didn't wrench anything in your good leg, or your back?" He reached out instinctively and placed his hand on Davis's side.

Davis shook his head quickly. "I'm fine, Jordan," he repeated. "You caught me before any more damage could be done." He smiled weakly. "Nice reflexes, by the way."

Jordan exhaled a breath he hadn't known he was holding, and realized with a start just how close he was standing to Davis. He was crowding him against the wall; one more step and they'd be pressed together from chest to toes. He blinked, muttering an apology, and started to take a step away when Davis's hand came up and curled in the front of his jacket, halting him. He looked down at the white knuckled grip, then up into Davis's eyes.

"Davis," he murmured.

"Jordan." Davis's eyes dropped to Jordan's mouth. Jordan licked his lips, his heart suddenly beating rapidly at the base of his throat. Davis angled his head, pulling

against the front of Jordan's jacket and Jordan stiffened, but his fingers curled into Davis's coat.

"Davis," he repeated, his body easing forward even as he searched the face coming inexorably closer. He studied the long lashes casting shadows on the high cheekbones, the nostrils of the straight, sculpted nose flaring slightly.

"Jordan," Davis whispered, so close now that Jordan could feel his breath against his lips. "Are you going to make me force the issue again? Stop thinking and kiss me."

Jordan paused for just a moment longer, his stomach swooping as if he were standing atop a high cliff, afraid to jump, but the pull of the face, the gentle want in the eyes lifted to his, eased him over the edge and he leaned in, covering Davis's mouth with his own.

This was like the kiss they'd shared in the ER, and yet as unlike it as day is to night. This one began as a soft, slow caress, lips parted, moving gently. Jordan lifted his hand to Davis's face, cupping his chin, feeling the softness of his hair against his fingertips, his thumb tracing the hard line of his jaw. Davis needed a shave, and though his hair was fair enough that it barely showed, Jordan could feel it. The rough drag against his nail filled his chest with

warmth, as if he'd finally come home to exactly where he should be.

In college, he'd had sex with one woman as a form of experimentation, and everything about it had felt wrong. If he hadn't already been convinced of his homosexuality, that would have done it: the feeling of wrongness. He craved the feel of a man, the hard body, the stubble, the way the hair on their legs felt sliding against his, the way a hard cock felt in his hand, and his mouth. When Davis slipped his arm up around Jordan's neck and pulled him even closer, and Jordan let his body press him into the wall, arousal shot through him like wildfire. Even through the heavy layers of cloth he could feel the hard planes and angles of Davis's body, and he felt his cock twitch as the flow of blood surged south. This was what worked for him. This was what he needed, what filled his ache, what spoke to his soul; the hard body, the strong arms, the hungry kisses.

Davis exhaled into Jordan's mouth, and he tasted the Merlot and chocolate and the alluring flavor that he'd caught a trace of earlier, the individual taste that was Davis's alone. It lured him in, seduced him with its deep, musky sweetness, and he sent his tongue in search of more of it, sliding into Davis's mouth. Davis made a sound in his

throat and his fingers slid into the hair above Jordan's collar, caressing his nape.

Jordan loved to kiss; if he had his way, and his partner knew what he was doing, Jordan thought he could kiss for hours. He loved the feeling of firm lips under his own, of the slow dance of angled heads and sliding tongues. Davis definitely knew how to kiss, and Jordan felt he could luxuriate in the ebb and flow of it forever. But then Davis slipped his tongue around Jordan's in an unmistakably sexual caress, pulled it into his mouth and began sucking on it, and Jordan's groin, totally independently of his head, pressed forward. Davis pulled back slightly, his lips sliding along Jordan's jaw.

"Want you," he whispered. Jordan felt a hand slip through the open front of his coat at his waist, felt it slide down and find him unerringly, palming the hard bulge through his jeans. He grunted and pressed forward into the touch, his head dropping forward to press against Davis's shoulder. "Want you, Jordan," he repeated into the thick dark hair above Jordan's ear. Fingers molded the shape of him, moving sinuously up and down. He heard a crutch fall to the floor, but ignored it when Davis's other hand found his and guided it to the front of his wool trousers, pressing it against the tenting behind his fly. Jordan opened his hand

and cupped the hardness through the fabric, felt the vibrant heat of him against his palm, and squeezed.

"Christ," Davis gasped, his hand slipping lower to find and caress the softness of Jordan's balls. Jordan moaned in his throat, beginning to move his hips into the touch in a slow, rolling rhythm. "Tell me you want this," Davis breathed into his hair. "Tell me you want this as much as I do."

"Oh, yeah," Jordan finally managed, need beginning to gather at the base of his spine. "I want it. I've wanted it since I first saw you."

Davis made a strangled sound and gripped Jordan's thick hair, pulling his head back and taking his lips in an open mouthed kiss that was almost violent in its intensity. Jordan kissed him back, wrapping his arms around him inside the heavy coat and dropping his hands to his hard ass, gripping it, pulling him in to grind their groins together. Davis groaned, his head falling back.

"Bed," he said breathlessly. "I can't... my leg..."

"Bed, yeah, right." Jordan muttered, but instead of stepping back he lifted, and the other crutch dropped away to clatter atop the first. Davis was tall and muscular but Jordan was strong, and he urged Davis's good leg up over his hip and moved quickly toward his darkened bedroom,

careful not to bang his bad leg into the walls.

"Caveman," Davis muttered as he peppered kisses along Jordan's jaw.

"Sorry, it's just... quicker." He turned sideways to get them through the bedroom door.

"Does it sound as if I'm complaining?" Davis asked wryly, an amused chuckle threaded through his voice. He slipped his tongue into Jordan's ear, and Jordan gasped, heat slipping down his spine, making his cock throb. He saw the shadow of his bed, and eased Davis onto the edge of it, trying to be gentle. But Davis wanted no part of gentle; his hands were yanking at Jordan's jacket, pushing it off his shoulders as his mouth latched onto his throat just above the collar of his shirt.

"Fuck," Jordan groaned, his hands going to tear off his coat, letting it fall to the floor. Their fingers tangled at the buttons of his shirt as he leaned over Davis on the bed, his mouth falling open as he felt Davis suck hard on his neck, each pulse sending a shot of raw, aching need to his groin. He didn't think he'd wanted anyone this much, been this hard, in years. He gave up on his own shirt and yanked Davis's coat from his shoulders, pushing it down his arms to pool on the bed behind him. Davis was wearing a sweater, so they separated long enough for Jordan to yank

it off over his head and throw it aside before their hands were back, clutching, stroking. Jordan ran his palms over the smooth skin of Davis's back, feeling the muscles there flex and bulge, Davis gave up on removing Jordan's shirt and just tore it open to get at the skin beneath.

The hands that went to rip at the openings of trousers were even less efficient than they had been getting rid of the clothes from the waist up. Jordan managed to get Davis's trousers open and past his hips, but lost his train of thought when he felt Davis's fingers push down his jeans. They pooled around his knees, and he hopped in place so they would drop to his feet. Davis chuckled as Jordan kicked them aside, only to gasp when Jordan yanked roughly at his trousers.

"Brace," he said, clutching at Jordan's arm.

"Sorry, sorry," Jordan muttered, slowing, helping Davis lift his good leg free of his pants, leaving the other bunched above the cumbersome brace. "Did I hurt you?" he asked against Davis's mouth.

"No," he answered. "Come here."

Davis lay back against the bed, pulling Jordan with him, and Jordan eased himself between the legs Davis spread over the edge of the bed, settling down onto his chest.

"Oh, God, yes," Davis sighed when their bare chests pressed together. He ran his hands over Jordan's shoulders, and up his back beneath the open shirt. "Too dark," he said against his throat. "I want to see you."

Jordan lifted enough to reach over and turn on the bedside lamp, blinking as light flooded the room. When he looked back down at Davis, he could see the perfect wonder of his body; the smooth expanse of skin, the broad shoulders, the dips and hollows of his muscular chest.

"Christ, look at you," he breathed, stroking his hand over the slope of Davis's shoulder. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

Davis reached up and bracketed Jordan's face with his hands. "So are you," he murmured, pulling him down. "Beautiful," he said against his lips. "So beautiful." Their lips came together again, open, tongues mingling, and Jordan lowered his hips until their groins pressed together, only two thin layers of fabric separating the hardness of their cocks. Davis sighed when Jordan began to move against him, his hands spreading on his back, fingers gripping the hard jut of his shoulder blades. "Oh, God," he moaned, his head dropping back. "More. More of that." Jordan thrust forward hard once, and Davis opened his mouth on a low moan.

Wanting to touch, to taste, Jordan lifted enough to put his hands beneath Davis's arms and ease him fully onto the bed, then climbed over him, his mouth moving, open, over the muscular chest. He licked a small, tight nipple, sucking it into his mouth. Davis sighed, his hands sinking into Jordan's hair. When he licked down the middle of Davis's hard stomach, tongue sliding between rows of abdominal muscles, Davis's back arched. When he bit the jutting edge of a sharp hipbone, Davis gasped, his hips lifting up off of the bed in invitation.

The hard line of his erection filled the front of his thin cotton shorts from low between his muscular thighs almost to the waistband, and Jordan made an appreciative noise as he stroked his palm over it. There was dampness where the mushroom head was tightly encased in the snug fabric, and Jordan covered it with his mouth, sucking hard, tasting the slightly bitter tang of pre-come as his teeth teased the material.

"Fuck," Davis panted, pushing against Jordan's mouth. Jordan's fingers slid beneath the waistband of the white briefs.

"Lift," he muttered against Davis's stomach. Davis arched up again, and Jordan slid the briefs down to the middle of his thighs, freeing the hard jut of his cock and the

soft, full sac of his balls beneath. He kissed down Davis's stomach as he gripped the swollen prick gently in his hand, then mouthed his balls before licking up the underside of the straining length. When he took the full, purplish head in his mouth, Davis gasped and came up onto his elbows to watch.

Jordan looked up at him as he worked the fullness of Davis's cock with his mouth, his tongue, his hand. He sucked at just the head, his tongue teasing the slit as his fingers moved up and down the shaft, then he moved his hand down to caress his balls as he slowly took him into his throat. Davis shifted restlessly, his hand moving over Jordan's shoulder, his neck, sliding to the back of his head, holding him as he thrust up in short, shallow movements that brushed the back of Jordan's throat. Jordan put his hand on his hip, holding him down, and moved his mouth up and down the length of him, tasting the bitter beginnings of Davis's release on his tongue, feeling the strong body beneath him grow taut with tension. Jordan let the hard cock leave his mouth to slap against the flat belly with a wet pop, then moved down to suck his balls, one at a time, his eyes never leaving Davis's face. Abruptly, Davis's hand fisted in Jordan's hair, pulling him back.

"Stop," he said, his voice raw. "Come here."

He leaned against the pillows stacked in front of the headboard, his hands divesting Jordan of his briefs, then urging him to his knees. "Straddle me," he murmured, his fingers stroking up Jordan's thighs. Jordan lifted his leg over his ribcage, then Davis slid his hands around to grip Jordan's ass, pulling him forward until his knees rested beneath Davis's arms. When he nuzzled Jordan's cock with his face, then licked him from base to tip, Jordan shuddered, his hands shooting out to grip the headboard, his knuckles white. When Davis took him into his mouth, Jordan felt a guttural moan work its way up to his throat.

He tried not to thrust into Davis's mouth. He tried to hold still, but when Davis began to urge him forward and back in a fast, driving rhythm, his thumbs pressing into the flesh above his hip bones as he gripped his hips, sucking him hard from base to tip, it was almost impossible not to. Davis released him from his mouth for a moment, moving his fist up and down Jordan's length, and Jordan's hands clutched convulsively on the headboard, his head dropping back. Then Davis's mouth was back, a slow suction as he swallowed him down. Jordan felt a hand slide between his legs, felt a slick, wet finger press against him and then inside of him, and he gasped, his hips snapping forward hard. When that finger pressed fully into him, curling up

and forward, stroking, heat exploded through his pelvis and he came with a startled cry, his hand fisting in Davis's hair as he spilled down his throat.

Jordan folded limply onto the bed at Davis's side, his chest rising and falling in tortured gasps and his heart pounding. He didn't think he'd ever come so hard in his life. The world had actually gone black for a moment, and he didn't believe it had ever happened to him before.

"Holy shit," he gasped, his voice a rough croak. He felt a hand stroke gently down his arm, and rolled his head to look up into Davis's face. "That was amazing. You're amazing."

Davis smiled faintly, trailing his fingers across Jordan's hip then moving them to his groin to grip his own cock, which was still hard, jutting through his fist, an angry looking dark red. He began to stroke himself in quick, hard jerks, and Jordan watched him, watched the sweat that began to leave a sheen across his upper lip, watched the veins and tendons that stood out in bold relief down his forearm. It was one of the most erotic things he'd ever witnessed, and when Davis began to gasp, his body tightening as he moved into his fist in short, erratic thrusts, Jordan rolled up onto his elbow, leaned over and took him into his mouth, then his throat, swallowing around him. He

felt Davis stiffen, heard his ragged cry as he came. Tasting the first salty drops on his tongue, Jordan pulled back and stroked him through his climax, felt the spill of his release splash on his face, his neck, his chest. When he went limp, Jordan turned his head and laid his face on his thigh, looking up into Davis's face.

After a long moment, Davis opened his eyes and smiled.

"You're a mess," he said fondly, using the tail of Jordan's shirt to wipe the come from his face.

"Your fault," Jordan replied, smiling lazily, his face lying once again on Davis's solid thigh.

Silence settled around them as Davis began to stroke his fingers fondly through Jordan's damp hair. "By the way," he said after a few minutes, "you're amazing yourself. That was pretty spectacular."

"Yes, it was," Jordan agreed. "And I now know one thing with absolute certainty."

"And what is that?" Davis asked, his fingers curling around Jordan's ear.

Jordan nuzzled into his touch then smiled up into the handsome face. "You, sir, are in absolutely no need of a roll of socks for your tights."

Davis threw back his head and laughed, then

scooted down the bed and pulled Jordan into his arms, kissing him.

* * * *

"Can I ask you something that's absolutely none of my business?"

They'd showered, Jordan holding Davis up as they giggled their way through the process, then had a snack (frozen pizza topped with Canadian bacon and pineapple), and were now back on the bed in their underwear, Jordan wearing plaid boxer shorts and Davis in a pair of snug black jockeys. Jordan had just gone to get Davis a pain pill, and was putting the brace back on his knee. The swelling had increased slightly, and the bruising down the inside of his knee cap was turning an interesting shade of purple.

"Shoot." Davis popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed it with a drink of the can of diet cola he held in his hand.

Jordan looked up and met the light blue eyes. "Did you love him?"

"Who? Miles?"

Jordan felt himself color, but nodded.

Davis looked thoughtful for a moment. "No, I don't

think so," he answered finally. "Oh, I liked him. And I'll give him this; he's good in bed. Or, at least he was in the beginning."

Jordan frowned. "I don't understand."

"That's because you aren't a jackass," Davis said with a smirk. He put the soda on the nightstand and rolled onto his side, his head propped on his hand. Jordan sat near his knees. "Miles tops, and he's not remotely flexible about that. Now, don't get me wrong; I like it as much as the next guy. It helps that he's not huge, if you get my drift." Jordan grinned. "And in the beginning, he still topped, but at least he was considerate. I mean, he always took care of me, you know?" Jordan nodded. "Recently... well, it's been more along the lines of 'wake up and roll over, Davis,' and that's not terribly romantic. Actually, we haven't had sex in weeks. I started saying no, but was pretty sure he had already moved on to someone else anyway."

"Was it what's-his-name, the one they brought up to dance your parts?"

"Troy Levesque. That's the one."

"Did he know that you and Miles lived together?"

"Everyone in the company knew that Miles and I lived together."

Jordan scowled. "What a prick."

"Who? Troy?" Jordan nodded, and Davis surprised him when he shook his head. "Troy is a kid, and he's flattered. Hell, I was flattered; Miles is the Artistic Director of a Ballet Company and we're dancers. My ego certainly loved the attention." He shrugged his shoulder. "It's only as you get older that you realize that just because a guy wants to fuck you doesn't necessarily mean he's going to offer you a contract." The look in his eyes was that of someone who had learned things the hard way. "You'd be surprised how long it takes for some people to figure that out."

"Is Troy a good dancer?"

Davis smirked. "He's adequate."

"Then not as good as you."

A slow smile spread across the handsome face. "Oh, no." Jordan smiled in response. "He's also not particularly bright, which means he'll give Miles a whole lot less trouble."

"So," Jordan said thoughtfully, his hand reaching to gently stroke Davis's hard thigh, "he's just an okay dancer and pretty stupid." Davis's eyes began to shine and he nodded. "Like I said before, Miles is a fool."

"Miles is pragmatic," Davis countered mildly. "I'm expensive for the company, I'm a pain in the ass, and I'm thirty one years old, which in dancer years is fifty. Troy is

nineteen, he's still under a corps de ballet contract, and he's malleable." He shook his head. "No, I don't blame Miles for Troy. I blame him for being an asshole—" Jordan snorted out a laugh, "—but Troy I understand." His eyes on Jordan were still amused, but now they were also searching. "And now that we've dissected this all but to death, care to share?"

Jordan frowned. "Share what?"

Davis patted the thick mattress meaningfully. When he spoke, his voice was kind. "Care to tell me about the man who left such a gaping hole that you sleep on the couch rather than in this bed?"

Jordan felt his face fill with heat, and he looked down at the burgundy sheets. "Not much to tell, really. We'd been together for two years. He worked as a waiter—" his tone turned wry, "—and I use the term loosely. We were fine in the beginning; young love, you know."

"Oh, yeah," Davis murmured, and Jordan looked up to find him smiling faintly. "The honeymoon period, where you can overlook things that are eventually going to drive you insane."

"Exactly." Jordan leaned back on his hands. "Let's see; he hated my job because I worked such long hours. He hated my co-workers..."

"Nurse Terri?" Davis sounded incredulous.

"Especially Nurse Terri."

"How could anyone hate Nurse Terri?"

"He did." Jordan's lips twitched. "Of course, to be fair, she hated him, too. He tolerated my family, but the kids drove him crazy. He hated this place, wanted to move somewhere closer to downtown, some trendy, gay condo district."

Davis made a sound of disgust. "I've lived in just that place. Trust me; you don't want to live there. It's all very sleek and modern, and you can get blown any evening in the laundry room."

Jordan laughed. "Maybe if a person looks like you."

Davis's head cocked to one side. "Jordan, there is absolutely nothing wrong with the way you look." His eyes moved from the top of Jordan's dark head, down his body to his feet and back up again. "Where in the world did you get the idea that you aren't attractive?"

Jordan felt himself blush again; this time, even his chest turned pink. "I know I'm not ugly," he said, hating that he sounded a bit defensive. "It's just, well... Kyle was the handsome one."

"Kyle sounds like a self-absorbed prick to me."
Davis frowned.

"That, too." Jordan shrugged. "We started fighting about almost everything, and then one day he told me I was boring, and that was pretty much that. I don't miss him, not really."

Davis's blue eyes were level. "I won't even reference the utter stupidity of someone finding you boring. But why are you sleeping on the couch instead of in this bed?"

That was a hard one to answer, and Jordan thought about it before speaking. "I think because, even though the relationship wasn't perfect, there used to be someone in the bed besides me. Someone warm, someone who, at one point, would hold me and let me hold him. That's kind of a big thing, you know? Having someone trust you enough to let you hold them while they're sleeping?" He looked away. "That's what I miss. And now, the bed just seems... huge. Like I'm lost in it. I guess that sounds dumb."

"No." He looked back to find Davis watching him, his eyes level, the expression in them solemn. "It doesn't sound dumb at all. I understand completely. A person can feel lost in a bed, even if they aren't in it alone." They stared at each other for several seconds then Davis held out his hand. "Come here."

Jordan turned and moved up the bed, taking Davis's

hand as he did. Tugging gently, Davis pulled him onto his chest, angling his head. Their faces were only inches apart, so close that Jordan could see each individual lash and the flecks of darker cobalt in his blue eyes, so close he could feel Davis's breath against his lips. Davis lifted his free hand and cupped Jordan's cheek, and Jordan leaned into the touch. He felt Davis's thumb brush his lower lip, and his mouth fell open when he caught his breath.

"I cannot imagine," Davis murmured, his eyes moving over each of Jordan's features, "how you could not know how desirable you are." His hand slid from Jordan's face to the back of his neck, and he gently pulled him in to a soft, searching kiss.

Jordan sighed into Davis's mouth, his body malleable, his lips parting further to allow Davis's tongue into his mouth. Davis didn't plunder; he didn't have to. The slow caress of his lips, the gentle sweeping curl of his tongue around Jordan's, was infinitely more effective than a frontal assault. Jordan felt his cock stretch and fill, hardening, the tip pressing into the front of his boxers. When Davis leaned forward, Jordan rolled to his back under the subtle pressure, his hand lifting to Davis's neck, his fingers spreading as he slipped them up into the soft weight of his blond hair. It felt cool between his fingers.

Davis kissed him for a long time. The hand holding Jordan's finally slipped away to slide down his side to his hip, the other remained curled around his nape. Davis took the lead as their tongues moved together, their mouths open, heads angling first one way, then the other, and Jordan was happy to let him. When Davis's mouth finally slipped away to slide across his jaw, then down to his throat, Jordan sighed and arched into it. Davis's lips opened over a sensitive place on the side of his neck and Jordan felt his teeth graze his skin. His mouth moved further, over a sharp collar bone, along the curve of Jordan's pectoral muscle before arriving at his nipple. Davis swirled his tongue around the responsive flesh, the center contracting into a tight nub, and then nipped it with his teeth. Jordan gasped, his hips shifting restlessly.

"Like that?" Davis murmured into his skin, looking up Jordan's body.

"Oh, yeah," Jordan breathed. "A lot." Davis smiled.

"Good to know." With that he moved to the other nipple, and took it between his lips, sucking hard, and Jordan arched his back with a soft moan. Davis's hand slid from Jordan's hip to the front of his boxers, finding and squeezing his erection, and he made a sound of satisfaction in his throat. "You really do like this," Davis teased, licking

Jordan's nipple.

"I told you I did," he said, his voice breathy.

"I seem to remember you liking something else, too."

He gave Jordan a teasing smile, then dragged his tongue down the center of his stomach, pausing to slip it into Jordan's navel, then sliding down to the waist band of his boxers. Davis hooked his fingers in the elastic and pulled them down, freeing him, and he took Jordan's cock unhesitatingly into his mouth.

Jordan's toes curled and he fisted his fingers in Davis's hair. Davis's mouth was a miracle around his swollen flesh, hot and wet, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked. Jordan looked down into Davis's face, the full lips pulled tight around his prick, the blond hair spilling over his forehead. His eyes were shining as he looked up at him and simultaneously pushed Jordan's boxers down to his feet. Jordan kicked them away and spread his legs when Davis urged him to with a soft press of his hand.

The next few minutes were a blur of sensation for Jordan. He desperately wanted to watch as Davis moved his mouth up and down his length, now shining with his saliva, his long fingers alternately stroking his cock and carefully fondling his balls, but it was hard for him to keep his eyes

open. Jordan's breath had grown short, and the hand not on Davis's head was fisted in the sheets, pulling against them, his knuckles white.

Davis lifted his head, allowing Jordan's stiff cock to slip from his mouth and slap wetly against his lower belly, his hand still cupping and squeezing his balls.

"You have lube and condoms?" he asked. Jordan blinked. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten condoms: it was unlike him to be careless, but he'd been so aroused before, so desperate... he threw his arm out toward the nightstand. His knuckles connected painfully with the wood, and he hissed even as he scrabbled to get the drawer open, finally curling his fingers around the slender blue bottle and a small foil packet. He shoved the bottle toward Davis, who took it with a smile in his eyes. Jordan went up onto his elbows as Davis uncapped the bottle and poured some of the lube in his hand, and watched in fascination as he slicked his fingers and reached behind himself. He watched Davis's eyes flutter closed and his elbow begin to move, and he caught his breath and his cock throbbed when he realized that he was preparing himself.

"Davis." His voice sounded raw, but Davis heard him and looked up, blue eyes wide. "How do you think you're going to manage that? You can't bend your knee."

Davis smiled slowly. "I can lay on my stomach, Jordan. Won't have to bend my knee for that."

"That won't be much fun for you."

Davis laughed breathlessly. "Oh, you'd be surprised." He shifted up Jordan's body, his slick hand curling around Jordan's cock, his chest pressing against his. He kissed Jordan slowly, shifting his face to whisper next to his ear. "We'll put a pillow under my hips," he said, his tongue touching Jordan's lobe. "With your cock up my ass, fucking me into the pillow? Trust me. To me, that's the very definition of fun."

Davis reached for a pillow, but Jordan caught his wrist in his hand. Davis looked into his face.

"I want to be able to see you," Jordan said, his thumb skating over Davis's pulse point. "I want to look into your eyes."

Davis frowned slightly, glancing down at the brace. "But, I can't..."

"No," Jordan agreed. "But I *can*. Lay down on your back."

Davis stared at him for another moment, rolling slowly onto his back, his expression watchful. Jordan kissed him, running his hand down the muscular body, and hooking his thumb under the waistband of the tight black

briefs. Pulling them down and maneuvering them over the brace, he tossed them away. Sitting up, Jordan straddled Davis's thighs and searched the bedding for the condom he'd dropped. When he found it, he tore the packet open and, his eyes lifting to catch and hold Davis', he rolled the tight latex down his swollen prick then reached for the bottle of lube.

He uncapped it with a sharp click and poured some into his hand, the clear gel cool in his palm. The first handful he used to reach down and coat Davis's hard cock in several long, slow strokes, the second he used to slick his own fingers. He rose up onto his knees, and bracing himself with one hand in the center of Davis's chest, he reached behind himself and smoothed the slick gel over his puckered opening. Davis watched him, his eyes wide, as Jordan pressed his index finger into his body, his eyes drifting closed and his mouth falling open as he moved it in and out of the clinging heat.

"Christ, Jordan," he heard Davis mutter, and he opened his eyes and looked down as he pulled out his finger, then pushed back in with two. He caught his lower lip between his teeth and grimaced a bit as it burned. "Do you have any idea how hot you look?" Davis went on, reaching down to lazily fist his own cock. "Your face all

flushed and sweaty, with your arm moving like that? I know your fingers are up your ass, I can see it in your eyes. Does it feel good?"

Jordan nodded, pushing in a third finger and wincing reflexively.

"You don't do this very often, do you?" Davis asked. Jordan shook his head. "Then why now? Why me? I'd have been happy to..."

"Because," Jordan said, pulling his fingers free of his ass's tight grip and moving forward, reaching behind to take Davis's cock from his hand and holding it upright. "I want," he placed the blunt head against his opening and tried to relax, "to see," he took a deep breath, "your face as I do *this*." Bearing down, Jordan began to lower himself onto the thickness of Davis's hard cock.

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't quick. Jordan took in the plump head, had to pause and catch his breath then lowered himself slowly down each successive hard inch. He had to stop several times, just to breathe and try to relax, but the look on Davis's face as he felt Jordan's tight heat closing around him was worth it. His blue eyes were wide with wonder, an expression of pained pleasure washing over his perfect features. Jordan gripped the base of his own cock in the tight grip of his index finger and

thumb, refusing to allow himself to come too soon, the pain of the stretching helping to hold his orgasm at bay. His thighs were burning and shaking as they held his weight.

"Oh, God," Davis groaned. "You're so fucking tight. You feel like a virgin."

"Not a virgin," Jordan managed. "But it... has been a while."

Finally, finally, Davis's cock was all of the way inside, and Jordan was able to sit on him and take the weight off of his thighs. His ass still throbbed, but more now with a feeling of impossible fullness than pain. He closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths.

"Jesus," Davis said tightly, his hands moving up and down Jordan's thighs. "Are you okay?"

Jordan looked down into his face, the pain fading, his body beginning to accept the thick hardness inside of it, and nodded. He tightened his muscles experimentally, and Davis gasped, his eyes rolling closed.

"Don't do that. Christ, if you do that, this'll be over before it starts."

Jordan smiled slowly, lifting himself partially onto his knees. "What if I do this?" He let gravity bring him back down, the movement pulling a groan from deep in Davis's chest.

"God, you feel good."

Jordan did it again, rolling his hips slightly forward at the same time, and it was his turn to groan as Davis's cock dragged over his prostate and his vision filled with white light. "Oh, fuck," he murmured, doing it again. His cock bobbed red and engorged against his belly, a pearly drop of pre-come glistening at the tip.

"Found the spot?" Davis asked breathlessly, and Jordan nodded as he began to move in a halting rhythm. He arched his back, his eyes closing as he lifted himself further and further up the stiff prick, rolling his hips forward as he allowed himself to slide back down. The pain in his ass faded completely, replaced with pleasure that flared through his pelvis and up his spine. He heard Davis's breath escape him in a guttural groan, and he jerked and shuddered when he felt strong fingers curl around his cock. Almost instantly, his balls began to draw up.

"I won't last if you do *that*." Jordan's vision was already starting to cloud and his head was full of noise. Dimly he could hear himself gasping and making harsh, low sounds of need, but he couldn't stop. His body had taken control and was now moving against Davis in a driving rhythm with only one destination. It was emotionally overwhelming; along with the sensual pleasure

there was a startling fear, fear of allowing himself to be this vulnerable, fear of what that thick, hard cock inside of him was making him feel. His prostate was throbbing, and he began to gasp loudly even as he moved onto Davis's cock with more and more intensity.

"Jordan!"

It took an effort for Jordan to pull out of his own head, but he forced his eyes open and looked down into Davis's face. He was fisting Jordan's cock hard, his knuckles white, his face red and his mouth slightly open. Davis reached out with his free hand, and Jordan caught it, linking their fingers and hanging on tight. He began to move faster, snapping his hips forward and back, intentionally tightening his muscles around the thick invasion inside of him. Davis's grip was so tight it was painful, and Jordan watched as he threw his head back, his body straining up, a red flush spreading down his neck and onto his sweat slicked, muscular chest. His mouth fell open on a startled cry, and he shook violently between Jordan's thighs before shuddering, the hand in Jordan's and the one around his cock squeezing so hard that Jordan cried out as well, more startled than hurt. Jordan went still, clamping down on his muscles as tremors moved through Davis's long body. He reached down and pushed Davis's suddenly

limp hand from his cock, wrapping his own fingers around the straining flesh and pulling on it hard, two, three times before heat streaked down his spine and he was coming between his fingers, crying out and painting Davis's muscular torso in long stripes of gleaming white. He hung there as his balls emptied and ached and his ass clenched around the still rigid invasion inside of it. Then every bit of tension flowed out of his body and he collapsed onto Davis, shuddering in aftershocks almost as intense as his orgasm, utterly spent. He buried his face against Davis's throat, his breath sawing out hard against the long line of his neck.

After what seemed a very long time but probably wasn't, he felt hands slide up his heaving sides, arms reaching up to curl around him. He felt a kiss pressed to his forehead, then Davis shifted beneath him and Jordan grimaced as he felt his cock slip free. Davis's hands slid down his spine.

"That was..." Davis began. He stopped, as if he were at a loss.

"Yes, it was." Jordan murmured, enough feeling returning to his hands that he could run them down Davis's sides.

"No, look at me," Davis said, his voice firm. Jordan lifted his head, which was harder than it should have been,

and looked down into the blue eyes. Davis reached up and cupped his face in his hand. "That was... I can't even tell you..." he stopped, blinking quickly. "Jordan."

Jordan didn't think he'd ever heard someone say his name quite like that, as if it were poetry, or a prayer. He was stunned by the wealth of meaning he heard in just his name, and stared into Davis's eyes. When Davis slipped his hand around Jordan's neck and pulled him down into a kiss that was both the most sensual and tender he'd ever shared, Jordan's heart swelled.

CHAPTER FIVE

The ride to the airport was passing far too quickly, and Jordan's mind was in turmoil. There was so much he wanted to say, and yet he was afraid to say any of it.

For twenty-four hours, he'd felt as if he'd stepped into someone else's life. Nothing stupendous ever happened in his; he considered the life he'd led up until three o'clock the morning before to be very ordinary. Okay, sure, he was gay. But his family loved him anyway, and in his acquaintance, his had been the 'coming out' least fraught with drama. He'd grown up in a single parent home, but his dad was such a jerk they'd all been glad he hadn't come around much. And his mother had such a big personality; she'd filled any void the man had left behind. His brother and sister were irritating but loveable, and the town in which he lived not exactly accepting, but no one had ever thrown him out of anywhere or burned him in effigy, either. School had been a trial, but then, school had been a trial for the straight kids, too. No, he'd lived a fairly stress free, but very boring, life. Then Davis Conrad the Fourth had limped through the doors of ER, and everything had changed. Everything. He had no idea what to do with it.

Jordan knew better than to give his heart to someone he'd just met. It was a recipe for disaster. But

then, he hadn't had much luck with giving his heart to men he'd taken the time to get to know first, either. He'd dated Eric, his first serious boyfriend, for six months before they'd moved in together, and then Eric had cheated on him. Repeatedly. He'd taken his time with Kyle, only the second serious relationship he'd ever had, and one morning after five years Kyle had simply decided he was boring, and by the next day Jordan had been sleeping on the lumpy sofa and his rent had doubled. He supposed he had to accept he was either simply clueless about how relationships worked, or he was bad at them, or both. But the idea of Davis getting on a plane and flying out of his life? It made his heart hurt to even think about it.

The night they'd shared had been the closest thing to magical Jordan had ever experienced. They'd slept for a while, then awakened and laid in bed just kissing for the longest time. Finally they had gotten up and shared a long, hot shower. There had been more laughter as they'd gotten clean, then dirty, then clean again until the temperamental water heater had given up the ghost and they'd ended up squealing in an incredibly undignified, not even remotely masculine way as cold water poured down on them. After, they'd had to warm up in front of the fire, with hot chocolate laced with cognac and pillows piled on the floor,

and more lingering, romantic kisses that had made Jordan's toes curl. When they'd finally fallen into bed, too exhausted to stay awake for another moment, it had been nearly four in the morning, and Davis had commented on it as he'd relaxed back against the soft pillows.

"You know, I met you almost exactly twenty-four hours ago," he said, reaching over and letting his fingers drift down Jordan's face, "and yet I feel like I already know you better than any man I've ever been with."

Jordan smiled faintly. "I hope it's a good thing."

"Oh, it is," Davis murmured. "It's a very good thing. You're a lovely man, Jordan Armstead, and I'm so glad to have met you."

"I'm glad to have met you, too," he'd answered. Davis opened his arms then, and Jordan had gone into them, relaxing against his side with his arm around his slender waist and his face pressed into the hollow of Davis's throat. He felt Davis's fingers card through his hair.

"Jordan," Davis said softly, and Jordan felt his chest vibrate beneath his face. "Do you trust me enough to let me hold you while you sleep?"

Jordan had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could speak. "Yes," he finally managed, the sound little more than a whisper. Davis reached over for the duvet and

pulled it over both of them, cradling Jordan in a cocoon of warmth, his breath soft against Jordan's hair. Jordan knew the exact moment that Davis fell asleep; his hands went still and his breathing softened.

It was a lot longer before Jordan allowed himself to drift off; he wanted to enjoy the moment for as long as he could. He lay with his head over Davis's heart, listening to the reassuring beat, staunchly refusing to allow himself to dwell on how empty the bed would be again when he was gone.

And now, they were two minutes from the airport, and his heart was lodged in his throat. They'd overslept, and had had to dash to make it in time for Davis to catch his flight, and Jordan could actually feel the minutes until he was gone ticking away.

He pulled into the drive in front of the main concourse, his hands beginning to tremble slightly on the steering wheel.

"American, right?" He asked. Davis glanced over at him, and nodded, then looked back out through the window. He seemed to be physically withdrawing, even before he was gone, and Jordan felt a slow, creeping heaviness fill his chest. He pulled up to the curb marked 'loading and unloading', and put the car in park, leaving it

idling. He wasn't going to park in the lot and walk in if it was just going to get awkward now.

Davis waited for him to help him out of the car, leaned against it as Jordan pulled the crutches from behind the seat and handed them to him, then removed his luggage from the trunk. When he had placed it on the curb, a skycap approached.

"American Airlines, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Davis said, as if taken by surprise.

"Flight 784."

The man smiled. "You're cutting it close, but we'll get you there. Do you need wheelchair assistance?"

"No."

"Yes."

Jordan and Davis spoke at the same time, and Davis gave him a wry look.

"I do not need a wheelchair," he said dryly.

"He does," Jordan countered, speaking to the skycap. "Here, and at his connection." He took Davis's ticket and ten dollars out of his own breast pocket, and handed both to the man, who nodded before taking the bags and making his way to a podium, where he picked up a white telephone.

"Well, you're pushy."

Jordan looked back at Davis, only to find him smiling at him fondly. Jordan felt his face heat but the ache in his chest eased.

"I think you've done enough damage to that leg while you've been on this trip, don't you?"

Davis rolled his eyes, but his smile lingered. He stared into Jordan's face. "I'd like very much to kiss you goodbye," he murmured, "but something tells me it might shock the polyester clad lady and her dumpy husband waiting by the door."

Jordan glanced over, and sure enough, there was a middle aged woman wearing a bright green polyester pantsuit and her harried looking husband, clearly waiting to get the skycap's attention. Jordan swallowed a smile.

"It might almost be worth it," he quipped. Davis's eyes began to shine.

"I'm game if you are," he dared.

"How about a hug?" Jordan said. "That's probably harmless enough."

Davis arched one brow. "It depends entirely on the hug," he murmured, but when he opened his arms, Jordan walked into them and pulled the slender body against his chest. "It's been a pleasure," Davis whispered against Jordan's ear, and the heat and moistness of it sent a thrill

down his spine.

"Yes, it certainly has," Jordan answered, kicking himself because there was so much more he wanted to say, and yet he had no idea how to say it. So he said the only thing he could think of. "Because of you, I now speak ballet." He felt the chuckle that moved through Davis's chest, and he held on, his hands tightening in Davis's coat.

A politely cleared throat nearby alerted them that the wheelchair had arrived, but still they stood embracing for a moment longer, and Jordan felt Davis's lips brush his cheek as he finally pulled back.

"I'd park and come in..." Jordan began to say, but Davis shook his head.

"There isn't time; this poor man is going to have to sprint to make it to the gate in time as it is."

The young man pushing the chair smiled gamely. "We can make it," he said. Davis gave him a smile as he handed Jordan the crutches and sank into the seat.

"No, take these with you," Jordan said, laying them over the arms. "You'll need them."

"But, they belong to the hospital," Davis replied, frowning.

"Trust me, your insurance will pay for them. If I could figure out a way to charge them to Miles's American

Express, I would."

Davis laughed. The man pushing the wheelchair turned toward the doors, and Jordan felt his heart lurch.

"Call me when you get home," he called, "to let me know that you got there safely." Davis nodded.

"I will," he promised.

Their eyes held as the sliding doors opened, then he was being pushed through and away, and Jordan lost sight of him in the crowd.

Jordan stood where he was for a moment longer, staring at the place where he'd disappeared, when a car horn made him jump. He turned, and saw someone waiting impatiently for his place at the curb. Waving to let the man know he'd heard him, Jordan jogged around the car and got in, pulling away and into the flow of traffic. But his heart he left on the curb, and he had to blink quickly in order to see where he was going.

CHAPTER SIX

Davis was as good as his word. He called from his connection, and he called again when he got home, but to Jordan, the further away he got physically, the further he seemed to be emotionally, as well. He kept telling himself he was imagining it, that Davis was just tired, but he couldn't fight the nagging feeling that once the wheels of the plane had lifted off of the runway, Jordan had become merely a pleasant blip, something to remember fondly of what had otherwise been a miserable stop.

And how did you have a relationship when one party was on the west coast and the other on the east? He thought about it wearily as he made himself a frozen dinner and stared at the television, ignoring what was on. Everything he'd ever heard told him it was all but impossible. Besides, it wasn't as if they were in a *relationship*; they'd spent a day and a half together. There had been no long term plans, no promises exchanged. The fact that Jordan found himself wanting the 'happily ever after' with a man he scarcely knew certainly wasn't Davis's fault. Perhaps what he needed was to try to adopt his mother's attitude about it. What was it she'd said? That his heart didn't need to be engaged every time? She was probably right. But late that night, as he wearily ignored his

pillow for the one that still smelled of Davis's cologne and took a blanket from the cupboard because now the bed not only felt too big but the idea of sleeping there was simply out of the question, he realized he couldn't do it. If he cared enough to get naked with a man, he cared enough to want to be with him for more than just the sex. Old-fashioned it might be, but it was the way he was wired. Which was probably why he was alone. He went to sleep feeling as if there were a boulder on his chest.

He woke the next morning feeling better about the whole thing, telling himself resolutely that Davis had merely been tired, and everything was fine. Davis had called and made an appointment for that afternoon with the orthopedic surgeon who'd done his first surgery, and he'd promised to let Jordan know the outcome. Jordan had relived the hug they'd exchanged on the curb a dozen times, smiling faintly as he made himself a pot of coffee. A man who had no feelings for you didn't cling like that, he told himself. He was just being paranoid. Davis would call.

Sitting at his dining room table, he made a serious list for Christmas shopping. He'd put it off long enough, and he needed to try to fit some in around his shifts. His next four twelves started that night at eleven, and there were only twelve days left before Christmas. When you had

two nieces and a nephew under the age of ten, you couldn't scrimp on the presents. And frankly, the kids would be easier to deal with than Jillian if he didn't get her something, so he grabbed his cell phone and his list, and made for the mall.

He'd made good progress by late in the afternoon. He wasn't big on shopping, so he'd parked strategically, between the toy store where he bought everything for the kids, and the jewelry store where he ended up buying earrings for his mother and a bracelet for Jillian. He was passing the food court when he looked at his watch and realized Davis's appointment had been two hours before. Frowning slightly, he sat at one of the tables, piling his bags in front of him, and punched in his number. It rang twice before he heard the click of connection.

"I'm sorry," a tinny voice said in his ear. "The number you dialed has been disconnected, and there is no new number."

Jordan blinked, looked at the print out on his phone. It was Davis's number. He hung up, and dialed it again. Again, the canned recording sounded in his ear. This time when he hung up, he stared at the screen, his heart sinking. Other than the phone number, he had no idea how to get in touch with Davis. He knew his name, and his number. That

was it. He could get the address he'd written on the form at the hospital, but that was to the condo Davis shared with Miles and he was pretty sure he'd had no intention of going back there. He had no e-mail address, he didn't know if he was on any social network. Basically, he had nothing. He got up from the table slowly, dropping his phone into his pocket and collecting his bag, his mind a continent away.

First, he was worried. What if something had happened and the phone had been damaged somehow? But it didn't make any sense. He'd laundered his phone accidentally once with his scrubs, and when he'd gotten a new one, he was able to get the same number and it worked just fine. He thought briefly that maybe Davis had simply forgotten to pay his bill, and yet he discarded it almost as soon as it crossed his mind. Davis had struck him as being extremely organized, and not at all the type to forget to pay his phone bill. But on the heels of the thought came the realization he didn't really know Davis well enough to make any assumptions about him at all.

As the day wore on, and he called the number six more times only to receive the same message, another thought began to worm its way into his mind. What if he'd had the phone disconnected on purpose? It would certainly be the most effective way to end the connection between

them. Cell phones were extremely easy to get, new numbers even more so. If Davis had decided it had been fun, but merely a lark, one way to get rid of Jordan would certainly be to have the number changed. The more he thought about it, the more plausible this seemed, and by the time he got home, he was convinced of it. He half-heartedly did a search on his laptop, but the only thing Davis Michael Conrad the Fourth brought up was his photo and bio at the ballet company web site. Just the sight of the handsome face and bright blue eyes made Jordan swallow heavily and close the computer with a decisive snap. By the time he glumly got ready for work that night, he'd decided to put the whole thing out of his mind.

It was easier said than done.

Everything about the ER reminded Jordan of Davis. The front desk, the exam room, particularly every time he passed fifteen; his mind would go back forty-eight hours and he'd see it all over again. He relived their first kiss a dozen times. He kept pushing it away, but Davis's presence seemed almost tangible, and it haunted him. He was growing irritated with his inability to just let it go, and he knew he was quiet and surly, but he couldn't help it.

Terri had looked up brightly when she'd first seen him, but apparently his expression had been forbidding

enough that she hadn't asked about Davis at all. He was grateful for her perception. He did his job briskly and efficiently but his usual easy camaraderie with the rest of the staff was absent. When he went to get his coat at eleven the next morning, Terri followed him into the staff break room and closed the door.

"Jordy," she began softly. He didn't even look at her; just held up his hand, his eyes closed. He heard her sigh, heard the door open and close behind her as she left the room. He leaned his forehead against his locker for a moment, then straightened and left the hospital.

For the next four days, he followed the same routine; he went to work, went home to eat frozen dinners or fast food, fell asleep on the couch, repeat. He spoke briefly to his mother, cut Jillian off when she called and tried to ask him about Davis, and was grateful when both of them seemed to let it drop. He even managed to get to a sporting goods store to buy a new nine iron for his brother. He finished his Christmas shopping, but wrapping it all was beyond him. For the first time ever, he bought gift bags and tissue paper because he didn't have the energy to bother with boxes and bows.

He knew he was being ridiculously melodramatic over a relationship which had never really been one to

begin with. He even tried to give himself a stern talking to about reality and told himself to *just remember it for what it was and move on*. It didn't work, and he was losing patience with his own melancholy when Terri cautiously approached him one night the weekend before Christmas, asking about fixing him up with another friend of hers. At first he said no, but when he saw her crestfallen expression, he changed his mind.

"Sure, why not?" he amended, and her smile almost made it worth it. Almost.

It wasn't a disaster, but it wasn't great, either. He was a nice guy: Brad something or other. He was a lab tech at a nearby clinic, so at least they could talk shop. And he was nice looking enough, but all through dinner Jordan kept thinking that his eyes were the wrong color, and his light hair not light enough. It had begun to snow heavily by the time they made it back to Jordan's building, and even though the other man gave all of the signs of wanting to come in, the very idea of it made Jordan feel tired.

"You'd better go on," he said as they sat idling at the curb in the man's Audi. "The snow is piling up."

He hadn't even given Brad with the forgettable last name a chance to respond, he'd been out of the car and sprinting up the walk before he opened his mouth. He'd

sped away with an angry screech of tires, and Jordan knew he wouldn't be calling again. He couldn't bring himself to care, and decided then and there he was done dating for a while. At least until the sting of Davis's disappearance faded, and it didn't seem in any hurry to go.

The day before Christmas Eve was bright and cheerful, and Jordan stood at his kitchen window, drinking a cup of coffee as he looked at the beautiful view. The afternoon sun had turned the snow a soft pink, and in the park across the street there were a bunch of kids having a snowball fight. When one of them went down in a hail of pelted snow, laughing loudly, Jordan smiled. It felt foreign on his face, and he knew then he'd been feeling sorry for himself long enough. Nine days had passed, no one had died, and he'd had a wonderful night with a terrific man. Sure, he'd wanted more, but he wasn't going to get it. It was time to stop wallowing in self-pity and get over it.

The staff Christmas pot luck was that night, and he baked a batch of mint brownies and topped them with thick chocolate frosting and crushed candy canes. He left for work early, stopping by a liquor store to buy Terri her favorite Bailey's Irish Cream as a Christmas gift. When he showed up with the cheery Christmas tin full of brownies and the Bailey's in a fancy fabric gift bag, Terri looked up

at him hopefully.

"Have a nice time with Brad?" She asked hesitantly, and he regretted making her feel as if she couldn't talk to him.

"Not particularly," he answered with a laugh. "But it's okay."

"It's okay?" she asked, studying him.

"Yeah." He gave her a one armed hug. "I'm okay."

He'd felt the relieved sigh that moved through her sturdy body, and squeezed her again for good measure.

When he left the ER the next morning, it was to calls of "Merry Christmas," and "have a nice holiday." He drove home through the snowy streets, feeling not exactly at peace, but not as if the bottom had fallen out of his life, either. He parked the Mustang at the curb, and gathered up the gifts from his friends and the plates of cookies they'd pressed on him. He was carrying them all in his arms, trying to figure out a way to get his keys out of his pocket, when he paused and looked down at his front door mat, his brow furrowing.

There, lying in the snow that had fallen overnight, was a single, long-stemmed red rose.

He stared at it for at least a minute. It had obviously been there for a while, because there was fresh snow on the

velvety petals, but not so long that it was buried. Someone, he supposed his neighbor, had shoveled the walkway of fresh footprints, so it looked like the rose had simply appeared there, as if by magic. He finally stirred himself enough to dig out his keys and open the front door, deposit what he was carrying inside, and then come back to pick up the flower. He looked at it, bemused. There was no note, no indication of who had left it, and every thorn had been carefully removed. Twirling it in his fingers, he walked into the apartment and closed the door, then went in search of the bud vase he knew he had stowed away somewhere in the cupboards above his refrigerator.

He filled the vase with water and carefully slipped the rose into it. It was a beautiful thing, perfectly formed, and for a moment it reminded him of the enchanted flower in Mandy's *Beauty and the Beast* video. When she'd been five and had the chicken pox, she'd made him sit on the couch and watch it with her, over and over again. The lovely animated rose in the film had slowly lost its petals, each fallen velvety disc a reminder that *The Beast* was one step closer to a lifetime of loneliness. It was like a ticking clock, each petal another second lost as his time ran out... Shaking his head at his fancifulness, he carried the vase in and set it in the middle of his dining room table. He

touched the glossy green leaves, trying to think who could have left it for him. The only answer he could come up with was Brad the lab tech, and he figured he hadn't made as bad an impression as he feared. Maybe, after Christmas, he'd give him a call and see if they couldn't try it again. But even as he thought it, he discarded it. The rose was nice, but there had been absolutely no chemistry with the guy at all. He turned away and went to get ready for Christmas Eve dinner at his mother's.

When Jordan arrived at the house, he was greeted by the excited twins who took his load of presents "to put them under the tree" He kept one eye on the kids to make sure they didn't go foraging through the bags while he hugged his mother and his brother's wife, and shook his brother's hand, then his brothers-in-law's. It became apparent to him fairly quickly that his sister and niece were missing.

"Where are Jillian and Mandy?" he asked Marc. His brother-in-law shrugged casually.

"They had a stop to make on the way, and I had to get here with the wine."

"Damn straight, he did," Carol said brightly.

"Darling, will you go and open the bottle of red that's on the counter in the kitchen, please? The prime rib won't be

ready for at least another half hour, but I'm ready for the wine *now*."

He laughed even as he went into Carol's homey kitchen to open the huge bottle of wine. The room smelled of roasting meat, scalloped potatoes, and warm bread, and he inhaled with pleasure. There were several crystal goblets sitting on the granite counter, and Jordan's brows rose. His mother had brought out great grandmother Armstead's crystal. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen those glasses in his life. His Mom hadn't been fond of 'the old bat,' but the nearly century old Waterford crystal goblets were something she treasured. He carefully extricated the cork from the bottle and filled one of the gleaming glasses just to the halfway point, then detoured through the dining room. There was a gorgeous centerpiece of cedar and pine, pine cones frosted with glitter, and bright red holly berries, the perfect accompaniment to the long red tapers on each side of it. Great Aunt Martha's Spode dinnerware, the cheerful Christmas tree motif carried through even to the salt and pepper shakers, sat atop large, metallic red chargers. He counted quickly, and ten places were set at the large table. He carried the wine out to his mother in the family room, a bemused frown on his face.

"Great granny's glasses, huh," he murmured as he

handed her the wine. "And Auntie's Spode. Who are you trying to impress?" He was surprised when she blushed.

"Oh, hush." She took the wine and smacked him lightly on the shoulder. "It's a special occasion."

"It must be. There's an extra place set, too. Someone coming I don't know about?"

The four adults looked at him with almost identical expressions of careful blankness, and he frowned slightly.

"Oh, God," he said after a minute. "It's not Dad, is it?"

"No, Jordan," his mom said reproachfully. "Your father isn't coming for dinner."

He exhaled heavily. "Well, thank God for that, at least. But then who..."

He was distracted by the sound of the front door opening, and the approach of running feet.

"Uncle Jordy!" Mandy cried, running to wrap her arms around his thighs.

"Mandy-Pandy," he said, ruffling her curls. "Where have you been?"

Her eyes were shining brightly. "Picking up a Christmas present," she said, smiling widely.

"For me, I hope," he said, teasing. She giggled merrily.

"I'm not supposed to tell," she answered. She

continued to stare up at him, eyes full of mischief. Jillian passed him on her way to the kitchen with another bottle of wine in her hand, brushing her lips on his cheek as she went by.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me what's going on, either," he said. She sent him a smile over her shoulder but didn't stop walking. He looked back down at Mandy.

"Okay," he said, pretending deep thought. "If I guess, will you tell me?"

"Maybe," she said, grinning irrepressibly. He couldn't help but smile down at her.

"All right. Assuming it's for me—" She continued to smile, giving away nothing, "is it animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"Animal, I suppose."

The soft male voice spoke from behind him, and Jordan stiffened before he turned. Standing in the doorway was Davis Michael Conrad the Fourth, complete with hospital issue crutches and knee brace. And Jordan stared.

"Merry Christmas," Davis said softly, a tentative smile on his face. "I guess I'm the surprise." He studied Jordan's face, his smile wavering a bit. "I hope it's a good one."

"Okay, chickens, everyone into the kitchen," Carol

Armstead called gaily. "Time for spiced cider and appetizers." She caught Mandy's hand and pulled her with her, herding the twins in front of her, and the rest of his family trooped into the kitchen, letting the butler door swing shut behind them.

Davis and Jordan stared at one another for several seconds.

"What..."

"I..."

They began talking at the same time, then both fell silent again. Davis's smile had faded completely.

"You don't look very happy to see me," he said softly.

"No," Jordan said quickly. "I mean, I am. Just confused." He shook his head. "You disappeared. Your phone..."

"Miles shut it off," Davis said quickly. "I didn't even realize it for the first twelve hours. Not until I went to call you after my appointment with the doctor, and the phone didn't work. I thought something was wrong with it, and I don't have a land line. I went in the next morning, and found out my plan had been canceled. I got a new phone, but..."

"It didn't have my number in it," Jordan concluded

softly.

"No. Miles wouldn't even let me keep the same number when I got a new phone. He cancelled the plan completely. And when I tried to call information to get your number..."

"I'm unlisted," Jordan said, taking a step closer to Davis.

"I know," he said wryly. "I think I tried every Armstead in a three state area. It's how I finally got in touch with your Mother."

"Mom?" Jordan asked. "When?"

"Day before yesterday," Davis answered.

"But, that was a week after you left. Didn't it occur to you that I might be worried?"

"It occurred to me every day," Davis said, taking a step closer as well. "Every minute of every day."

"You could have called the hospital," Jordan reproached.

"I did," Davis countered. "Wednesday. I sat on hold for twenty minutes before I hung up."

Jordan thought back to Wednesday night, and closed his eyes, shaking his head. He didn't remember being paged, but he didn't doubt it. There had been car accident after car accident Wednesday night; they'd all

been exhausted when the shift had ended.

"I'm sorry," Davis said softly. "If you'd rather I left..."

"No!" Jordan opened his eyes, only to find Davis studying him, hesitation in his blue eyes. "No, I don't want you to go. I'm just..." He paused then dampened his lips with his tongue. "I'm not sure why you're here."

Davis blinked. "I'm here because I thought..." It was his turn to pause, and he stared at Jordan longingly. "Because I'd hoped we had something, something kind of wonderful, for the two days I was here."

Jordan's heart, which had all but stopped on sight of him, began to thrum rapidly at the base of his throat. "So did I," he murmured.

Hope flickered in the light eyes. "Does the use of past tense mean you don't anymore?"

Jordan went very still. Slowly, he shook his head. "No, I still hoped. I had just talked myself out of it because... it seemed impossible."

Davis paused, took an awkward, hesitant step forward. "Is there any way I can talk you back into it?" he ventured. "You see, I had the doctor at home refer me to an orthopedic specialist here, and I know after the surgery, I won't be able to move around much for the first few days. I

thought having a nurse around might be a good idea." He began to smile slightly. Jordan shook his head, but he felt a corresponding smile begin to tug at his lips.

"You came back so I could take care of you after your surgery?" he asked, his tone wry.

"I came back," Davis countered, coming to him with labored steps, "because I have very fond memories of your bedside manner." He was standing directly in front of Jordan now, and he angled his head, studying Jordan's face until they both began to smile faintly. "God, I missed you," he whispered. "I had no idea I could miss someone so much after knowing them for such a short time."

"I know," Jordan replied, closing the distance between them until they were mere inches apart. "I missed you, too." He searched the handsome face, a thought occurring to him. "The rose," he said. "It was you, wasn't it?" Davis hesitated, and nodded.

"Jillian told me you were still at the hospital, but I was anxious, and I wanted to do something. I saw the florist in the hotel lobby, and the rose was..." He shrugged one shoulder. "Very you, somehow."

"It seemed almost like magic, finding it there," Jordan admitted softly. "It's almost like magic, having you here now. I still don't quite believe it." Jordan's heart was

now pounding as Davis's eyes moved over his face, feature by feature.

"I should tell you, while I'm not exactly broke; I came out here with pretty much what you see. I don't have a job, or even the prospect of one." His eyes softened, and he bit his lower lip nervously before he went on. "I moved out of the apartment where I was living, and put what little I have into storage." His eyes searched Jordan's. "*Grande jeté*, Jordan," he whispered. "No net."

For a moment, Jordan felt his throat threaten to close. He swallowed. "You don't need one." Davis's eyes began to shine.

"I checked into a hotel when I got here, but..."

"You're not staying in a hotel," Jordan said softly. "Not on Christmas Eve."

Davis continued to hold his gaze, almost as if daring him to look away. "And after Christmas Eve?"

Jordan's reached up and cupped Davis's cheek in his hand. "Not then, either." His eyes fell to Davis's mouth, slightly open in anticipation, and he leaned forward and covered his lips in a soft kiss.

The taste of him filled Jordan's mouth, the perfect flavor of chocolate and wine and *Davis*, and the scent of his cologne filled his head, and Jordan moaned softly, his body

overtaken with sense memories so intense they made him tremble. He encircled Davis's waist with his arm, and he heard one of the crutches clatter to the hardwood floor as he pulled him in. The sound reminded him of another time they'd sent crutches crashing to the floor, and he smiled against Davis's mouth. He felt the corresponding, comprehending smile curl the full lips pressed to his, and Jordan pulled back only to immediately lean in and kiss him again. And again, until they were both breathless and holding one another tightly, as if fearful to let go.

"They're kissing!"

Jordan heard the whisper over the joyous pounding of his own heart.

"Mandy, close the door!" That was Jillian.

"But you wanted to see if everything was okay. And everything is okay, see?"

"Apparently," this was Jordan's mother, and Davis sputtered against his mouth before turning his face into his neck.

"Welcome to my world," Jordan laughed against his ear. "This is why I have a deadbolt on my front door."

"Thank God for that," Davis replied.

Jordan pulled back and leaned down to pick up the fallen crutch, propping it under Davis's arm. When he

looked into his eyes, they were shining.

"Merry Christmas, Jordan," Davis murmured, curling his fingers around the hand that lingered on the crutch and holding on. Jordan turned his hand and linked their fingers, squeezing.

"Merry Christmas, Davis," he replied. And even knowing his entire family was watching through the open butler door, Jordan took Davis's chin in his other hand, and kissed him again.

EPILOGUE

Four years later...

Snow was falling steadily, and Jordan shook it from the shoulders of his black wool overcoat as he stepped through the door. It was warm inside after the bitter chill of the wind, and he shivered as he made his way through the lobby. He could hear the sound of the music for *The Nutcracker*, Act One, coming from the main studio, accompanied by the excited whispers of little dancers seated around the open doors. The more subdued conversations of their mothers, sitting in a row of plastic chairs along the wall under posters of *Giselle*, *The Fire Bird*, and *Swan Lake*, made a quiet hum in the background. The large room smelled of microwave popcorn and Tiger Balm, mingled scents he'd become quite familiar with. He'd rarely stepped into the studio before he and Davis had begun living together, but once Davis had become the ballet school's director, if Jordan wanted to see him, this was often where he had to come. He didn't resent the hours put in at the school; since he'd been moved up in seniority after Terri's promotion to Director of Emergency Nursing, his own schedule was almost as daunting. But he had the next two weeks off, and he was anxious to see his partner.

Particularly today.

"Well, don't you look handsome!" He turned and found Jillian approaching, her smile wide as she took in her brother's tailored black suit, white silk shirt and black tie under the ankle length, black wool coat. She saw the long stemmed rose in his gloved hand, and arched a brow. "For opening night?" she asked.

"It's our anniversary," Jordan reminded her. "He limped into my ER four years ago today."

"That's so romantic," she said, bumping his shoulder with hers. "Too bad you have to spend it at the Opera House."

He sent her a wry look. "As if I'd miss it." He took a step to the side and looked through the open doors. "How is she doing?"

Jillian turned her back to the crowd of women along the wall, and allowed herself a smile. "She's brilliant," she whispered. Jordan glanced over his shoulder, seeing some of the disgruntled looks sent their way.

"Any of them try to shank you today?" he muttered under his breath.

Jillian smothered a giggle with her hand. "They're too afraid of Davis to try it."

"Good. Besides, Mandy got the part on her own

merits; he had nothing to do with it."

Jillian shrugged. "They'll never believe it." She lowered her voice. "And I feel somewhat disingenuous protesting when I know how many hours he spent coaching her in your living room."

Jordan grinned. "She still had to walk into that audition all on her own, Jills. She earned the part of Clara; never doubt it." He slipped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Besides, she's good, she works hard, and he wants to help her get there."

He glanced over in time to see his sister's eyes begin to shine suspiciously. "He's been wonderful. We've all been very lucky to have him here." She elbowed him fondly. "Especially you."

"Oh, I know," he answered. He squeezed her again then stepped over in front of the open doors, looking inside.

The professional company had arrived the night before, and this was the second rehearsal where the kids had been integrated into the lavish party scene. The music played, and the children waited in their places to one side while the adults executed a complex series of partnered dance moves. He found Mandy's blonde head, her hair already tortured into the sponge curlers that would give her the required ringlets that were 'party girl' hair, her face

animated as she acted her part. Jordan smiled. He saw his partner standing at the front of the room, watching the rehearsal carefully, and his heart lifted.

It always did when he saw Davis; he was so handsome, his blond hair neatly combed off of his face, his eyes moving over the dancers clinically. He was wearing dark trousers which hugged his slender frame, and a fitted pale blue polo tucked in at the waist, the collar turned up around his jaw line. His arms were crossed and he was leaning against the wall with every appearance of ease, and yet even standing perfectly still, there was a sense of motion about him. His damaged knee had been repaired enough for him to teach, even demonstrate, and he'd retained the toned, lean frame of a dancer. Jordan never tired of looking at him, and his smile widened. Until he saw the dark-haired man at Davis's side, who leaned in to speak to him, and Davis angled his head to listen, nodding impassively at whatever was being said.

Jordan felt his sister close to his side once again, and glanced over at her. She was looking through the open door, as well.

"That's the ex, isn't it?" she murmured. Jordan swallowed his annoyance, fighting to keep his face impassive, and nodded. "I thought so. He's been doing

everything in his power to get Davis's attention all afternoon." She turned and gave him a pointed look.

"Emphasis on *trying*, Jordy."

He shrugged. "It was inevitable they be in the same place. He's the company Artistic Director, Davis runs the school."

"And is completely and utterly in love with you," Jillian said emphatically. "Don't let it get to you."

Jordan nodded, but his eyes didn't waver as Miles said something else to Davis and gave him a slow, assessing smile.

This was the first year Davis had run the ballet school. The older woman who still owned it had grown tired of the daily grind, and had offered Davis the position in August. In the previous three Decembers when his former company had come to town, he hadn't had much to do with *The Nutcracker*, other than the occasional staging rehearsal with the children. And of course attending to watch Mandy dance. When the company had been there each year, they'd seen Ria and some of the other dancers socially, but Miles hadn't been invited. Davis knew how Jordan felt about him, and he hadn't seemed particularly anxious to be in the same room with him, himself. This year, they had both known that it be unavoidable. And even

though Jordan would deny it if asked, it was very much a part of the reason he was standing there now in his best suit, holding a rose in his hand. Not to remind Davis of their anniversary, but to remind Miles that Davis had moved on.

The music stopped and Davis stepped forward, raising his hands when the inevitable babble began.

"Your attention, please," he announced, his voice silencing the chatter. "Company, you have until five p.m. Company class begins at five thirty, children, save for Clara and Fritz, need to be backstage at the Opera House by seven for an eight p.m. curtain. Clara and Fritz will take company class. I believe that's everything. I'll see you at the Opera House. You're dismissed."

A wall of noise flowed out from the rehearsal hall into the lobby as children bounded to their parents and the adult dancers began to pull on their outerwear and try to decide where to go for dinner. The bodies swarmed around him, and still Jordan stood in the doorway, waiting. He saw Miles catch Davis's arm, and Jordan stiffened.

"Jordan!"

Ria saw him as she left the room and squealed loudly, launching herself at him. Jordan caught her with a laugh.

"Hello to you, too," he said, returning her embrace. She stepped back and looked at him.

"Aren't you gorgeous," she said, smiling slyly. "Big date?"

He grinned. "Just holding his coat tonight, love," he replied. She spotted the rose.

"That's very sweet," she said. "Special occasion? Besides my being in town, of course."

"It's our anniversary." Jordan felt his cheeks heat. Her mouth fell open on a gasp.

"Oh, my God," she said breathlessly. "It is, isn't it? Where is he?" She turned and looked over her shoulder, and her eyes hardened. "Oh, that smarmy bastard," she muttered. "He's been sniffing around all afternoon like a Pomeranian in heat."

"A Pomeranian?" Jordan choked on a laugh.

"Well, look at him," she said tightly, watching as Miles spoke quickly to Davis, and Davis stood listening expressionlessly. "Although I suppose skunk is actually more appropriate. I'll take care of this." She walked resolutely toward the two men. "Miles," she called loudly, "sorry to interrupt, but I've a question about the schedule for the rest of the week." Miles was distracted, and Davis pulled away, heading toward the door. When he saw Jordan

waiting for him, his stony expression softened and he smiled.

"Hello," he said as he walked into the lobby. He paused and looked Jordan up and down in a manner that brought heat to Jordan's chest, and lower. Davis's smile ripened. "Look at you."

"Hey, I have to keep up," Jordan said, pleased by the reaction. "You always look great. I'm just tap dancing as fast as I can."

Davis shook his head. "I imagine I just look exhausted," he said with a sigh. "I hope I can stay awake through it tonight." He eyed the rose in Jordan's hand. "Is that for me?"

Jordan smiled. "It is," he answered, then lowered his voice. "But I'd rather give it to you someplace where we aren't under a microscope."

Davis glanced around and saw many of the parents, and their dancers, watching the two of them a bit too avidly. He caught Jordan's arm and pulled him toward the back of the studio. "Come with me to the dressing room," he murmured. "I need to change, anyway."

They walked into the men's dressing room, Davis greeting some of the male dancers as they grabbed their bags and left. When it was just the two of them, he closed

the door and leaned against it, his blue eyes bright.

"Now, you were saying?" He gestured to the rose.

"This," Jordan said, pacing toward him, "is for our anniversary. Four years ago today..."

"I limped into your heart," Davis finished, taking the rose from his hand and holding it to his nose.

"Yes, you did." Jordan placed his hand on the door next to Davis's head, leaning into him. "And you've held it in your hand ever since."

Davis smiled. "You're such a romantic, Mr. Armstead." He fluttered his long lashes extravagantly. "You do make a girl's heart race."

"If you were a girl, I wouldn't be here."

"Good thing my gaydar was functional that night, isn't it?" Davis's eyes were shining as he teased him.

Jordan rolled his eyes, but leaned in closer. "You're impossible," he murmured fondly and kissed him. Davis slipped his hand around Jordan's neck, his fingers sliding into the hair at his nape, opening his mouth to the press of his tongue. Jordan had just moved to slide his hand around Davis's waist when the door bumped against his back, jostling them. Davis gave Jordan an apologetic look, but stepped back, allowing the door to open.

"So sorry," Miles said as the door opened, looking

between the two of them with an oily smile. "I hope I didn't interrupt something."

"You did, actually," Jordan said between clenched teeth. Davis squeezed his arm.

"Did you need something?" he asked Davis pointedly.

"I was wondering what you were doing for dinner?" Miles said, his eyes now fixed on Davis. "I understand that there's a spectacular Italian restaurant just opposite the Opera House, and I was wondering if we couldn't talk..."

"I'm sorry, Miles," Jordan interrupted, stepping easily in front of Davis. "But I have plans for Davis for the next three hours. You see, it's our anniversary."

"Anniversary?" Miles said, looking down his nose at Jordan, sounding bored. "Really."

"Really," Jordan said. Davis slipped his arm around Jordan's waist, a gesture not lost on Miles, and Jordan smiled. "Four years ago today, he was brought to the emergency room where I work."

"And abandoned there," Davis added, his tone flat as he rested his chin on Jordan's shoulder. "I'm sure you remember." Miles had the grace to blush.

"It was providential, really," Jordan went on, leaning back into his lover's embrace. "If he hadn't been

stranded here in town, we might never have gotten together." He glanced to the side at Davis's profile. "I never did thank him for that, did I?"

"No, you didn't," Davis answered mildly. "Perhaps you should."

"Thank you, Miles," Jordan said, trying to affect a somber expression, but it was difficult. "I would have sent a note, but I was never quite sure how to word it. *Your loss is my gain* seemed... unsportsmanlike."

Jordan heard Davis bite back a laugh. Miles's face had been darkening with anger. "Oh, you two are adorable," he said, his voice tight.

"My mother certainly thinks so," Jordan said brightly.

"Why don't you ask Troy Levesque to dinner, Miles," Davis added blithely. "Oh, wait, he seems to be rather taken with the handsome dark-haired fellow dancing the Rat King this evening. Never mind; I'm sure there's someone in the corps who's *young and eager* that you can invite in my place."

Miles stared at him, his face hardening. "Fuck you, Davis," he growled. Jordan stiffened protectively, but Davis squeezed his waist in reassurance.

"Been there, done that, Miles. Trust me, I've no

need to go slumming now."

Miles glared at him, then cursed under his breath and left, letting the door swing shut behind him. Jordan reached out and locked it with an emphatic twist of his wrist, and the click seemed loud in the silence.

Jordan waited a moment, then turned and encircled Davis with his arms, pulling him against his chest. "Are you all right?" he murmured against his ear, holding him tight.

"I'm wonderful," Davis answered, lifting his arms to curl around Jordan's neck. "My hero," he said fondly. "You have no idea how many times I've run that scenario in my head, and it never went as well." He leaned back and grinned unrepentantly. "Actually, I enjoyed the hell out of it."

Jordan smiled. "So did I. It was almost as satisfying as punching him in the nose."

"And infinitely less likely to get you landed with a lawsuit."

They exchanged a smile.

Outside in the lobby, the chatter had faded, and a soft knock sounded on the door.

"Yes?" Davis called with thinly veiled impatience.

"I'll ask you about what you did to Miles later," Ria

said through the thick door. "You should know, however, that he just stormed out of here like the wrath of God. For now, take your time. Everyone else has gone. We'll save you seats at the table, if you should feel so inclined."

"Thanks, darling," Davis said. "But don't hold your breath."

Her musical laughter came to them. "Happy Anniversary, love," she said, "I'm so happy, for both of you." They heard her walk away, and then the studio was quiet. Davis had turned back to look at Jordan, his eyes beginning to smolder, when the sound of music seemed to slip under the door.

Jordan recognized the song, and smiled.

"I'll be home for Christmas," a smooth baritone sang.

"Good heavens," Davis whispered. "Someone is an even bigger hopeless romantic than you are."

"Apparently," Jordan agreed, locking his fingers at the small of Davis's back, his eyes on the blue ones that still made his heart race and always would. "I love you," he murmured.

"I love you, too," Davis whispered back. Jordan kissed his lips gently.

"Dance with me?" he asked when he leaned back.

Davis's smile bloomed slowly. "Always." He put his head on Jordan's shoulder, and they began to sway in the deserted dressing room, accompanied by the muffled sound of the Christmas song.

"So, how am I doing?" Jordan murmured after a few moments.

"You'll do," Davis answered, leaning back to grin into his face. "Just don't quit your day job."

Jordan laughed and kissed the smile from his face.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I began writing at the age of 13, when I shamelessly ripped off elements of Jane Eyre, fused it to Dark Shadows, (complete with brooding anti-hero Quentin Collins; yum) and turned it in as a creative writing assignment. My English teacher gave me an A, I'm quite sure as a gift to the 'poor child who thinks over-wrought gothic horror equals writing', and I've never looked back.

After banging away on my keyboard for several years in my basement, and being rejected by several publishers, I discovered Fanfiction and was lucky enough to be accepted into a community of the most generous people I've ever met. They encouraged me to give writing original fiction another try.

This has been something of an Incredible Journey. I love writing in general, but have given my creative heart to m/m romance. Not only is it sexy, (and it is; admit it! Or you wouldn't be here! *g*), to me it's very important that, in today's sometimes repressive political climate, we remind people that love, in any form, is the greatest gift there is. Whether it's a man and a woman, or a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, the gender doesn't matter. What matters is the heart, and where it takes us.

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