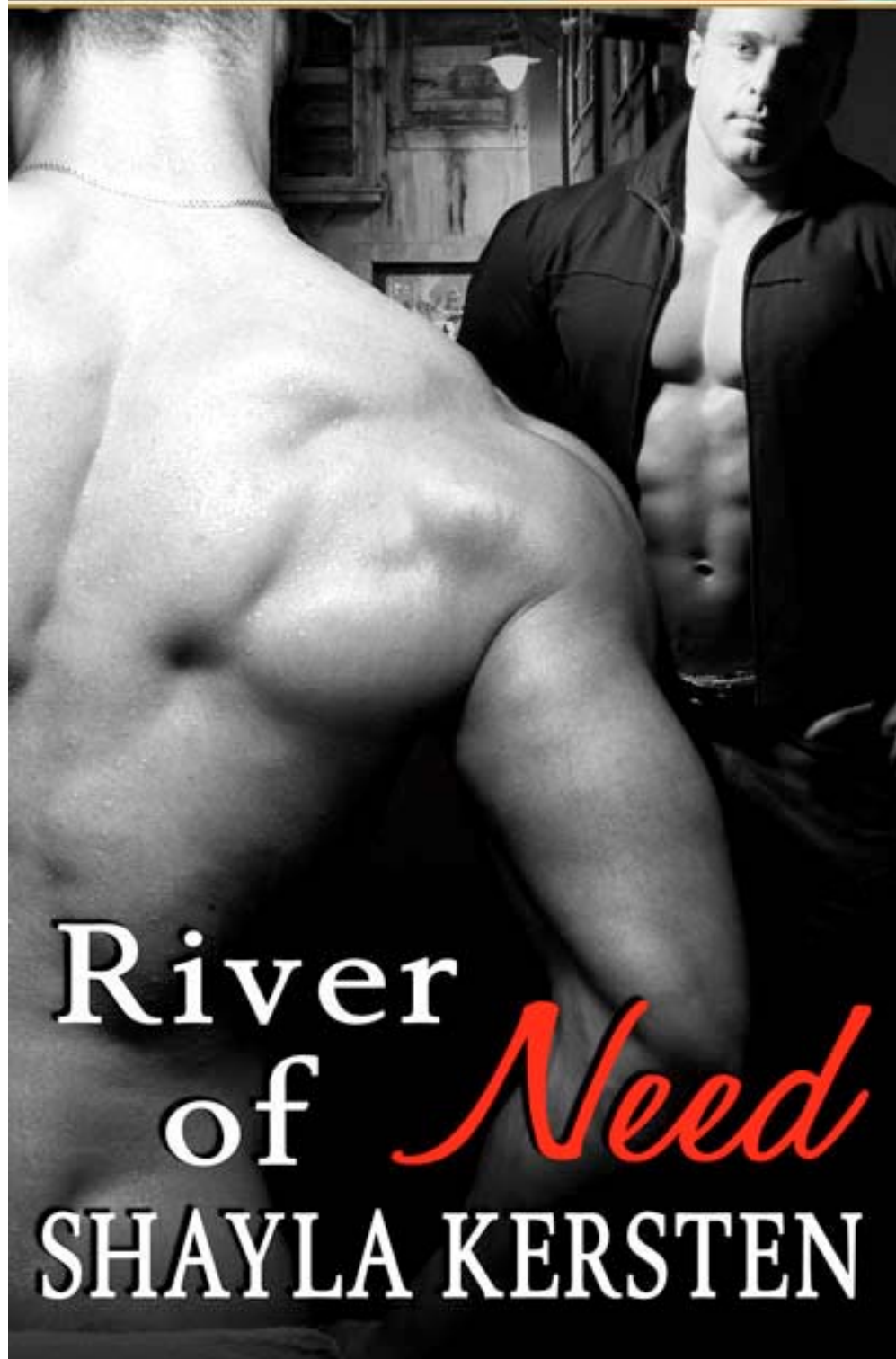


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



River of Need

Shayla Kersten

Two years after their breakup, Detective Kyle Shelton didn't expect to see his lying, cheating, closeted ex. Especially not behind bars for prostitution. Bailing him out is one of the stupidest things Kyle has done in a while. Although letting his ex back in his bed probably ranks higher on the dumbass scale.

Dustin Eldridge's lies about his sexual preferences have left him with nothing. Literally. He's lost his home, his family, his job and, worse, he's lost Kyle. On the streets, with no one to turn to, he's resorted to selling his body to survive. Then Kyle—of all people—comes to his rescue. Dustin can't fix the past but maybe there's hope for a future.

Unless Kyle really believes Dustin added serial killer to his resume, along with hooker.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

River of Need

ISBN 9781419931291

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Edited by Mary Moran

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication October 2010

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RIVER OF NEED

Shayla Kersten

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Brandi Evans for her critique and input on this story.

Much gratitude to my awesome editor Mary Moran!

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Chapter One

"Kyle!"

Bleary-eyed from too little sleep and too many case files read, Detective Kyle Shelton looked for the source of the familiar voice. "Ryan." He waved a hand in acknowledgement as Ryan Nilsson moved across the squad room.

Maybe the vice squad had picked up some information on the string of murders haunting the city. The humid heat of Memphis made the murder rate rise in the summer. Some people called it the killing season. The homicide division certainly stayed busy.

Ryan stopped near Kyle's desk. "Tony said you'd probably still be here." Homicide detective Tony Costa was Ryan's lover and he was leading the Cross-Eyed Killer investigation.

Stupid name for a serial killer, but the press had a field day when a witness had spilled the beans on the killer's signature—crosses painted in blood over the victim's eyelids. Kind of like absolution or last rites.

Kyle glanced down at the files spread out over his desk. "Yeah. I keep thinking I've missed something. There has to be a connection somewhere between victims. They appear random, but something has to set off the killer."

Two men, one twenty-two and one fifty; a woman in her thirties and an eighteen-year-old boy. No evidence of anything sexual, none of the victims apparently knew each other.

Not the same religion even though the killer's signature appeared to have religious connotations. Only common factor was the location—near Union and Vance and from Third to the river—and the killer's signature. They couldn't rule out copycat killers either.

Kyle looked up. "Got something for me?"

"Not about the murders." Ryan's frown and the furtive way his gaze darted around the room made Kyle think this conversation needed a little privacy. "Got a minute?"

"Sure. Come on." Kyle pushed away from his desk. Leading the way, he headed toward an empty interrogation room. He ducked into the observation side so no one could eavesdrop. With the door closed behind them, he leaned against the wall. "What's up?"

"Dustin Eldridge."

Kyle's breath caught in his throat but he forced air into his lungs as he faked nonchalance. His breakup with Dustin had been wrought with agony and repercussions. He hadn't talked to him or even heard his name in nearly two years.

"What about him?" An ache started in the pit of his stomach. *Please don't let him be dead...* As bad as the relationship ended, Kyle still had feelings for the asshole.

"He's been arrested."

Not dead. Shock mixed with relief. "For what?"

"Prostitution."

Kyle opened his mouth but nothing came out. His mouth snapped shut. After taking a deep breath, he tried again. Finally, the only thing he could think of popped out. "Are you sure it's the same Dustin Eldridge?"

"Yes. Remember Tony and I hung out with you two a few times."

"Right." Of course he remembered, but his brain couldn't conceive of his debonair, urbane lover being accused of hooking. "Any basis to the charges?"

Ryan grimaced as he half shrugged. "He propositioned an undercover. Got him on tape."

"Fuck." With rubbery knees, Kyle moved to the nearest chair. Dustin always did have that effect on him. Too bad he was... "Wait. Man or woman?"

"What?"

"He propositioned a man or woman?"

"Man." Ryan's brow crinkled in a half frown. "Why?"

Kyle had never told anyone the main reason for their breakup. "He was married. We broke up because he was married. Something he forgot to tell me." And Dustin's wife had caught them.

"Oh." Ryan shook his head. "I would have never..."

"Yeah. Me either." Kyle took a deep breath. "Well, thanks for telling me."

"No problem. I didn't want the name to surprise you on tomorrow's blotter report."

"I suppose his wife'll have him out by tomorrow."

"I don't think so." Ryan's hesitant tone made Kyle look up at his friend. "I'm guessing they aren't together anymore. He listed his address as none and he looks like he's been living on the streets."

A sudden swell of emotion nearly brought Kyle to his feet, but he forced his body to stay put. He didn't want Ryan to notice how his words affected him.

In his dreams, Kyle wanted Dustin free of his wife, even wanted him back. But being with someone closeted and on the down low was not something Kyle could live with. Ever.

"When's his bail hearing?"

"First offense—no hearing. He'll be released as soon as he can cough up the standard bail. But if you get him out, I doubt you'll ever see him again. Or the bail money." Guess Ryan wasn't fooled.

Ryan was probably right, but Kyle couldn't leave Dustin in jail. His mind rushed through a million scenarios—from happy reconciliation to Dustin skipping town—but he forced his thoughts to focus on the task of getting his ex-lover out of jail.

"Thanks for letting me know." Kyle took a deep breath. He didn't know what to expect or how he'd react to seeing Dustin again, but he was about to find out.

* * * * *

Kyle didn't show anything official when he arrived at the jail. Bailing out a male prostitute wouldn't look great on his record. Like other gay officers in Memphis, Kyle didn't advertise his sexuality. He didn't hide it either, but life was easier if he didn't flaunt it.

He had stopped at an ATM and withdrawn three hundred dollars. For first-time prostitution, the bond wasn't usually more than a couple hundred. Thankfully, Dustin hadn't managed to rack up any other charges such as resisting arrest or possession of drugs.

The waiting room contained a number of people on the same mission. The eclectic group ranged from a guy in an expensive suit—probably a lawyer—to a woman with three little children in tow.

As the door from the holding area opened, Kyle held his breath. Then exhaled hard. Not Dustin.

The suit strode toward a young man with a snarl on his lip and an air of privilege.

Kyle paced back and forth a couple of times then the door opened again.

Dustin had lost weight and much of the muscle tone he'd been so proud to flaunt. His normally clean-shaven face sported a short, dark beard splashed with bits of gray. Not a distinguished salt-and-pepper kind of thing but more like paint splattered across his face. At thirty-five, gray hair shouldn't be an issue. Guess living on the street could age a man.

His clothes were ragged and stained—a ripped t-shirt, holey jeans. Shoulder-length hair was unruly and could use a good washing. So different from the short, stylish cut he'd worn the last time Kyle had seen him. Scuffed and torn sneakers covered his feet except for a hole above his big toe on his left foot.

His gaze focused on the floor, Dustin hadn't noticed Kyle yet. With a slight limp, he shuffled toward the wide counter. Stopping next to it, he finally looked up then glanced around at his surroundings.

Eyes blank, almost appearing drugged, he slowly surveyed the room. A flicker of recognition showed when his gaze met Kyle's then he turned away, ducking his head like a whipped dog.

Kyle's heart ached at the pitiful picture of his once proud lover. A small measure of satisfaction pushed away some of the pain. Then shame flooded him, warmth rising on his face. Dustin may have broken Kyle's heart but he didn't deserve to fall so far.

The duty officer handed Dustin a thin envelope of personal belongings then pushed a paper in front of him to sign.

"Dustin?"

Dustin's gaze wandered toward him and again met Kyle's. This time his eyes widened. "Kyle? I...I thought I was dreaming again."

Again? "I couldn't leave you in jail." Then Kyle's woefully short-sighted plan hit him like a bucket of cold water.

What was he going to do with Dustin now?

Chapter Two

Dustin stared out the window as the moon peeked out from the clouds brewing to the west over the Mississippi River. The worst weather always came out of Arkansas. Kind of like him.

His family lived on the other side of the river, down in southern Arkansas. No one had heard from him in over a year, but they hadn't come looking either. Susan had told them the whole sordid truth. His father had disowned him.

His stomach ached with hunger and an added dollop of fear. He couldn't look at the person driving. If he did, reality would probably swoop down on him and he'd be back in lockup with two guys fighting over who'd fuck him first.

A shiver of terror raced through his body followed by a surge of trembling warmth.

Kyle had come to his rescue.

Of all people, Dustin had never expected to see his ex-lover standing in the waiting room. The cop who'd fetched him from lockup said someone posted his bond, but Dustin thought it had been a mistake. No one cared if he lived or died, or whether he did it in jail or on the streets.

"I really should take you to the emergency room. You don't look so good."

Dustin shook his head as he had the last two times Kyle suggested the hospital. "I'll be fine." His stomach twisted and growled with more than hunger. He could live with skipping a few meals, but he didn't want to deal with Kyle's questions.

"When was the last time you ate anything?" Kyle's voice penetrated Dustin's thoughts.

"A little at the jail." His stomach ached more from Kyle's nearness, from the memories of what he'd thrown away. And the fear of what Kyle would think if he found out the truth.

"I'll fix you something when we get hom...to my house."

Home... Kyle had almost said home. To Dustin, home was a mouse-infested room with a cold-water bathroom in the hall. Not that he was complaining. Better than the streets where he'd lived for four months...before he figured out how to make a little money.

"You don't have to take me in. I promise I'll show up for my court date." As if his promises would mean anything after the lies he'd once told.

"I'm not doing it to keep an eye on you."

Dustin finally turned to look at his former lover. "Then why?"

"I don't know." Kyle blew a long breath. "I just can't dump you back on the street."

"Drop me at a shelter." He should scare Kyle away by inviting him home.

"I'd... Humor me."

Dustin almost smiled for the first time in ages. He'd like to do more than humor him.

"How..." Kyle shook his head. "Never mind."

"How'd I sink so low?" *How indeed...* "Things got out of control after Susan found out about...us." About him being gay. Dustin took a deep breath and returned his gaze to the passing scenery. "About me being gay."

He might as well say it aloud. Life could have been so different if he'd had the courage to admit the truth a long time ago.

Kyle pulled the car into his driveway.

The old house was small but neat, with a well-kept lawn and trimmed hedges. Same as it looked before. Some of Dustin's happiest times had been spent here.

Memories of long nights in Kyle's bed had sustained him through the last year. His imagination kept him sane while he did the things he needed to do to stay alive.

Dustin jumped as his door opened.

"Come on." Kyle motioned for him to get out.

Lost in the past, he hadn't realized Kyle was already out of the car.

Living on the streets had been a revelation for Dustin. Never knew when someone might try to cave his skull in for the little food and money he had hidden in his ratty clothes. Or they wanted something else from him.

Other bums thought they should get something from the fag. If not money or food, they'd take what they could. Shelters weren't really the safe havens people thought. He'd been attacked more than once inside. A hidden spot in an alley was sometimes safer.

The idea of being around Kyle made his heart race and left him weak in the knees. As he slid the short drop from Kyle's pickup, his legs betrayed him. A strong arm caught him before he pitched forward into the yard.

"Easy." Kyle's breath teased Dustin's cheek.

"I'm okay." Pulling away, Dustin flushed with embarrassment. Grime and stench from the streets—and more—covered his clothes. He hadn't washed his clothes in a couple of days. Not that it helped that much. Hard to keep anything clean when hand washing in cold water, but he'd worn worse.

Kyle hovered to the right and just behind him. Close enough Dustin could see Kyle's hands reaching for him then pulling back.

Temptation was too close. Dustin wanted to let Kyle's strong arms catch him—hold him for a little while. Regret lanced through his chest, stealing his breath. If he hadn't been such an idiot, he might have still had Kyle. And so much more.

The carport door led to a mudroom off the kitchen. The small room contained neatly hung shelves with everything from camping equipment to laundry detergent. A

washer and dryer stood to one side of the door. Through another doorway, the spotless kitchen gleamed in sharp contrast to Dustin's state.

"Man, I'll just stay in here. I'm too dirty—" Just an excuse, but he needed to get out of there. Memories kept coming faster, compounding his regrets, intensifying his need to hide what he'd become.

"That's what showers are for." Kyle urged him forward with a gentle push.

Shit! Hot water. A real shower instead of a cold bath. "Oh yes. A shower would be heaven." The idea of being clean—really clean—was almost orgasmic. His body shuddered at the idea of hot water streaming over his skin. "But I don't want to track through your house like this. Bad enough you need to fumigate your truck."

"Don't worry about the pickup. If you want, you can strip in here. We can dump your clothes in the washer now. I'll turn it on after you shower."

"Strip?" His modesty came from knowing what he looked like under his clothes. Without regular decent food, he was too thin. The hard muscles Kyle would remember had softened. Not to mention the rising erection he'd prefer to hide. Plus the scars. Some things Kyle didn't need to know. Ever.

"I'll get you a robe to put on. Until you get to the shower."

Relief rushed through him as Kyle walked away. Still not good. Between being close to Kyle and the idea of a hot shower, his dick was primed in no time flat. A fast escape would be best.

Leaning against the washer, he caught his breath. He could wait until Kyle was asleep then leave. As long as he showed up for his court date, Kyle wouldn't need to know anything else.

He pulled his t-shirt over his head, holding it in front of him. The faded University of Tennessee emblem mocked him. His degree in business administration hadn't done him much good lately. Not since his ex-wife's father saw fit to blackball him with half the companies in the Memphis area. The economy did the rest.

His hands shook as he clutched his shirt against his chest. Logic said Kyle wouldn't steal his things, but experience reminded him of the times he'd trusted someone on the street.

In the beginning, he'd lost what little he had left to thieves. Most of them didn't need what they stole. Just jerks who saw the homeless as an easy target.

Everything was gone now. Even the watch Kyle had given him for his birthday. Dustin had held on to it as long as possible. Irrational fear added to Dustin's roller-coaster emotions. How could he tell Kyle he'd lost the watch?

His mind wouldn't hold on to any thought for long. He realized what was happening but couldn't stop it. Panic had a way of scrambling his brain.

Kyle came back across the kitchen holding an old terrycloth robe. Kyle's favorite robe. Tattered and torn, Kyle had said he kept it because he couldn't find another like it.

"Why aren't you undressed? Do you need some help?" Kyle slung the robe over the dryer.

"No! I'm fine." His breath caught from the force of his words. Dustin clutched his clothing tighter. God. The last thing he needed was Kyle helping him out of his clothes.

A flash of memory, of them stripping each other almost before the door closed. They hadn't seen each other in almost two weeks. Dustin had claimed to be out of town on business when he was actually on vacation with his wife.

Kyle had bent him over the washer. Dustin's pants had pooled around his ankles while Kyle fucked him hard.

They'd been a perfect match. Kyle liked to play rough, and Dustin loved taking it. But the past was past.

Dustin took a deep breath. His memory was dangerous. Had to get it under control.

"Okay." Backing into the kitchen, Kyle held his hands open and to the side. "I'll just go in here and make you something to eat."

Dustin hadn't meant to yell. He took a couple of steps forward, stopping at the kitchen door as if it were a threshold he couldn't breach. "I'm sorry. I just...I'm not used to people..."

"It's okay." Kyle's voice was calm and low, as if he were dealing with a child, or worse, a mad dog. "Just get undressed. By the time you finish your shower, I'll have something for you to eat then you can sleep."

The thought of a shower helped Dustin push his fears down. Hot water pouring over his body, his head... Dustin closed his eyes and let the safer memory take him.

Pots and pans clattered in the kitchen. Cabinet doors opened and closed. Kyle killing time until Dustin finished undressing.

The few bucks he'd earned before his arrest were crumpled in his pocket. He stuffed the money behind a plastic storage box on a high shelf.

After he stripped, he shoved his clothes into the washer. Really clean clothes would be great too. He'd saved money by hand washing his in the bathroom sink – sometimes with soap, sometimes not. Splurging at a laundry mat was an event few and far between.

He wrapped the robe around him, holding it loosely closed and away from his dirty skin as much as possible. "I'm ready."

Looking up from a can of something, Kyle smiled. A wide, beautiful smile showing perfect teeth. A smile Dustin had missed every day since he'd last seen it.

"You know where the bathroom is." Kyle motioned toward the hallway then went back to reading the can.

"Thank you." With slow steps across the cool vinyl, Dustin made his way through the kitchen then down the narrow hallway. His gaze on the polished wooden floor, he counted the doors until the bathroom.

The guest room. They'd had sex in there once. After sweating up the sheets in Kyle's room so bad. A half-chuckle bubbled up through Dustin. They'd grabbed a

shower then headed to the guest room. A lot of laughing and a lot of sex... Not much sleeping had happened that night.

The next room was Kyle's. The open door revealed the queen-sized bed with the wrought iron headboard and dark wood furnishings. He shuffled a little faster. The memories of all the things they'd done in Kyle's bed would make an interesting porn movie. The clank of handcuffs against metal could make Dustin horny in seconds flat. And the way Kyle made Dustin feel...

Damn! His cock definitely enjoyed the trot down memory lane. *Get it under control...*

The bathroom door was across the hall and a few steps past Kyle's room. Ducking inside, Dustin pushed the door closed then rested against it. His heart raced as his body responded to his memories. Pushing dead hopes and dreams out of his mind, he stripped off the robe.

An unused razor and a can of shaving cream were on the edge of the sink. A toothbrush, still in the package, was next to it. Kyle was too much of a neat freak to leave them out for no reason.

Dustin scratched his beard with cracked and broken fingernails. "Not a bad idea, Kyle." His mind raced with all kinds of improper ways to thank his ex.

Chapter Three

When the bathroom door clicked closed, Kyle set the can of soup down then gripped the edge of the counter with both hands. How had he managed to get himself in this mess? “Oh yeah. I’m a fucking idiot.” *And still in love with the asshole.* “There’s that too.” And now he was talking to himself.

Kyle ducked into the laundry room. Dustin’s clothes were already in the washer. A trashcan stood next to the machine. Temptation almost got the better of him. Throwing everything away would be easier than trying to wash them.

Then what would he do with a naked Dustin?

His pain-in-the-ass mind flashed back to all kinds of things he’d done with Dustin. To Dustin. His body responded with a surge of desire. His dick roused with interest and hardened.

“No.” He hadn’t brought Dustin here to renew their relationship. Or even for revenge sex or to gloat, although the idea raised its ugly head. He really wanted to help him out. Give him a chance to get back on his feet. Which wouldn’t happen with a single shower and one night in a clean bed.

How long was he planning to host his ex? Pushing his thoughts to the back of his mind, he concentrated on what to do right now and let the future wait until at least tomorrow. Feeding him was a good place to start.

Back in the kitchen, he couldn’t decide what would be best to feed a half-starved man. Something bland, light. The soups in his cupboard were too spicy. Leftovers from last night was fried chicken from a local restaurant. Too heavy.

Eggs. Scrambled eggs with no seasoning and dry toast. His mother used to give him that when he was recovering from the flu.

"I can do that." But it needed to wait until Dustin was out of the shower or the eggs would be cold. Not that it'd matter to someone in Dustin's situation.

Kyle closed his eyes as he shook his head. How had Dustin fallen so low? If anything, Kyle wanted the answer to that question. Other information could wait.

Restless, he paced down the hall as quietly as the old wooden floor would allow. The water in the bathroom sink ran but no shower yet. He'd laid out a toothbrush and razor in case Dustin wanted one. Hopefully, he was using them.

He couldn't stand there until Dustin finished. Might be awhile. Hopefully.

Retreating to his bedroom, Kyle sat on the foot of the bed. The last few weeks had been hell at work and now this. He'd much rather face a rampaging serial killer than his ex. Unfortunately, the killer was better at eluding the police.

Too many long days, half nights and callouts in the middle of the night kept pulling his eyelids shut.

Maybe just for a few minutes...

Flopping back on the bed, feet still on the floor, Kyle gave in to exhaustion and closed his eyes.

A loud crash and a shout jolted Kyle from a perfectly good dream. His body was primed for sex, cock full and aching, from the fading vision of Dustin in his bed. Instead, he reached for a gun that wasn't there as his mind searched for the commotion.

"Fuck!" The curse floated down the hallway.

Dustin!

Kyle rushed to the bathroom. The doorknob gave way on the first try. Steam billowed into the hallway.

The shower curtain hung from half the rings. The other half was ragged, ripped free from the holders. The shower spray splattered over Dustin's hunched-over body as he

knelt in the bathtub. Water bounced off bruised and scarred flesh then splattered onto the bathroom floor.

"Dustin!" Kyle grabbed a towel from the rack then tossed it onto the wet floor. Stepping on the towel, he scooted across the floor, mopping up some of the worst of the water. He shut off the tap before leaning over his former lover. "Dustin. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

Soap still coated parts of his body, although his hair appeared clean. Red, shiny scars marred his back as if he'd been whipped.

Kyle's throat closed with emotion as he ran his hand over Dustin's back. "Oh Dustin, what happened to you?"

"I'm fine. Just slipped." Dustin straightened.

Kyle grabbed another towel off the rack and the bathrobe. Tucking both around Dustin, he sat on the edge of the tub. "You sure?"

Kyle wanted to help him but he couldn't keep him safe forever. Could he?

No.

Dustin had closed that door when he failed to mention his wife. But until he could get on his feet... Maybe find a job.

A weather-roughened hand grabbed Kyle's jeans. "I'm so...sorry." A big gulp of air shook Dustin's shoulders. "I never meant..."

"I know." As many times as Kyle swore he'd never forgive Dustin, he couldn't hold a grudge. Forgiveness was still a long ways away, but life had dished out enough punishment. "It'll be okay now. Something to eat and a good night's sleep will make things look better."

His shaggy wet head turned toward Kyle. "Why would you..." His blue eyes peeked through strands of dripping hair.

"Because we once were friends." *And I still love you...* "Are you hurt?"

"Just bruised." Dustin took a deep breath. "Nothing new. I think I got carried away with the soap." A half-smile curved his mouth. His face now clean-shaven, he looked more like the man Kyle had fallen for. Thinner but still Dustin.

"At this point, you can't possibly use too much." With a smile and a wink, Kyle stood. "Do you need help?"

"No. I need to finish rinsing." Dustin pulled the robe tighter around him. "Sorry about the shower curtain."

"Don't worry about it." Kyle escaped the bathroom as fast as his dignity and the wet floor would allow. The last thing he needed in his life was a lying, cheating ex-lover.

* * * * *

Dustin stared at the ceiling of Kyle's guest room. The brewing storm had missed Memphis. For now anyway. The clouds had parted to reveal a brilliant full moon. Moonlight and streetlight streamed through the window, illuminating the room enough to trace the spackling on the ceiling. His stomach churned from a combination of nerves and too much food.

Too long without regular meals, his body couldn't handle anything too rich or too much at one sitting. The scrambled eggs should have been okay, but Kyle's presence distracted him. He overdid it a little bit.

His body craved sleep, but between his roiling stomach and the unfamiliar comfort of a clean bed, it wasn't happening. At least he wasn't stewing in his own sweat in the windowless hellhole of his room. And no one came around looking for a quick blowjob or expecting to fuck him without a condom.

His landlord liked to claim a little personal tax from his tenants. Mostly whores and crackheads. He wasn't picky about where he stuck his dick either. Male, female, as long as a hole was available.

As desperate as he'd been, Dustin had *always* refused extra money for bareback sex. Dying of AIDS on the street wasn't something he was willing to risk. Even as careful as he was, paranoia made him a regular at the free clinic for HIV tests.

Now in a clean bed with a scrubbed body and fresh-smelling hair, Dustin wanted to pretend the past year was a nightmare from which he'd finally awakened. Even the texture of the borrowed shorts and t-shirt were a distracting comfort to his tired body.

The soft tread of footsteps creaking in the hall caught his attention. Time on the street kept him alert to the tiniest noises, but he didn't hear Kyle pass. He must have stopped outside the door.

Holding his breath, Dustin waited as the door opened with a tiny click of the doorknob and the slight squeak of hinges. With his eyelids not quite closed, he watched Kyle.

Dressed in only a pair of baggy shorts, his ex stood in the doorway for an eternity. A couple of times he seemed to lean forward as if he meant to step inside.

Kyle hadn't changed much. Still a hard body with a tantalizing six-pack. Maybe a little more muscle in the upper arms and shoulders. His hair was longer than his usual almost buzz cut. Unruly waves of curls stood up on the middle of his head, as if he'd been turning from side to side on his pillow. Much as Dustin had.

God, he'd missed him. Tears stung his eyes.

With a deep sigh, Kyle started to turn.

"Kyle?" *Fuck.* Dustin hadn't meant to speak aloud but it was too late.

Kyle came across the room, stopping at the edge of the bed. "Are you feeling okay? Can I do anything?"

"Yes." Dustin took a deep breath. "Forgive me?"

Kyle's eyes closed then he lowered his head. "It'd be a lot easier to get you something to drink."

"Yeah." Shrugging, Dustin laughed. "Worth a try."

"Why?"

He knew what Kyle wanted but he wasn't ready to answer. "Why forgive me?"

"No. Why'd you lie to me?"

"I lied to everyone. Myself included."

"I loved you."

Dustin's eyes stung at the past tense of his words. "I know. Now. And I guess I knew then. But I wasn't... I couldn't admit I was gay. Not to you or to Susan, and especially not to me."

"And now?"

"After Susan caught us, I tried to tell her it was a one-time thing. She wasn't that stupid. Her father had hired someone to follow me. Her finding us together wasn't an accident." Dustin didn't really want to go over the details of his stupidity, but he owed Kyle that much.

"So she kicked you out?"

"Yeah. And so did her daddy. Fired me. I couldn't exactly fight his action. I'd have to admit the real reason behind the sudden dissatisfaction with my job performance." He shook his head. "No, my wonderful father-in-law knew I wouldn't fight him. I couldn't even collect unemployment. Try explaining you believe the firing was unfair because you were caught having a gay affair."

"So you ended up on the streets."

"Not at first. I found a small apartment on the south side, but Susan froze our accounts when she filed for divorce. And she filed the day she showed up at your house. I didn't have time to get any money. And my father-in-law blacklisted me to half the companies in Memphis."

"That would make finding work difficult."

Dustin shrugged. "I finally found a job at half my pay, but I was already behind in my rent. Then the company downsized because of the economy. Nearly a year ago, I

was evicted, my car repossessed. Everything pretty much went to shit from there. Hard to get a job when you can't show up showered, shaved and in clean clothes. Or on time because the bus is late."

"Bad luck."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. I deserved everything I got. I shouldn't have lied."

Kyle shook his head. "No one deserves to be homeless and destitute."

Dustin's heart raced as Kyle sat on the edge of the bed. He ached to reach out and touch Kyle, pull him close, feel the heat of his skin against him. Instead, he took a quick breath.

"My fault too. Pride kept me from doing work I thought beneath me until I'd already lost everything. After that...well, I guess my choices were as much punishment as a means to survive."

"Dustin..." Kyle moved his hand toward Dustin then pulled it back.

The sting of yet another rejection added to the sudden swell of emotion. "I hurt you. Susan. My family." Dustin closed his eyes against a well of tears. He thought he'd gotten past tears a long time ago. "They won't even speak to me." Drawing a deep breath, he controlled the urge to sob like a baby. Barely. "If only I could have admitted I was gay—from the beginning—maybe I wouldn't have lost everything. Or hurt so many people." Longing so thick it clogged his throat almost choked him.

"I...you..." Kyle leaned forward.

Dustin closed his eyes as strong arms embraced him. A sense of safety surrounded him, but he didn't deserve it. He'd done too many things to too many people, but he couldn't pull away. "I'm so sorry." Wrapping his arms around Kyle, he held on as tight as he could.

His aches and pains dissolved in the heat of Kyle's embrace. The world disappeared. The last two years faded to black.

Kyle's hands ran up and down his back. Warm lips nuzzled his neck as one hand came to rest on the back of his head. "Dustin..."

The low-groaned whisper echoed in Dustin's memory. The sound of Kyle's need had haunted his dreams for what seemed an eternity.

"So sorry." Dustin ran his hands up Kyle's back. His fingers dug into the tight shoulder muscles. "I wish I could go back and do things different."

"Shush." Kyle backed up his soft command by pressing his lips against Dustin's.

A banquet wouldn't taste a quarter as good as Kyle's kiss. Need flourished, spreading through his body in a rush of welcomed heat.

"Kyle..." The slight moan opened Dustin to Kyle's tongue. Instead of comfort, the soft, wet warmth added to his anxiety.

Kissing Kyle was better than any dream, but Dustin still feared he'd wake up any moment and Kyle would be gone. The comfortable bed, the clean clothes, the intense sense of relief in Kyle's embrace—all gone in a flash as he jolted awake in a dirty corner of an alley somewhere, blowing some guy for a few dollars.

But reality didn't intrude. Kyle didn't vanish in the midst of a bleary-eyed morning. The intensity of his kisses grew instead of disappearing.

A little reassured, Dustin returned the kiss with all the pent-up longing of the last two years. His body revived. He pulled Kyle closer, tighter against him. His cock filled as desire burned through him.

"Easy..." Kyle pulled away from the kiss but his arms stayed wrapped around Dustin. "You need to rest." His chest rose and fell with quick breaths. His tongue ran across his lips as if seeking Dustin's taste.

"I need you." Lowering his head, Dustin buried his face in Kyle's shoulder. "I still—"

The warmth vanished as Kyle pulled away. "You should rest." Standing, he ran his hand through his hair. A furrowed brow shaded his gaze as his teeth worried his lower lip.

Despair welled up, replacing the joy from just seconds ago. "Of course. Rest." Easing back onto the pillows, he pulled the blanket over his chest as if it could hide the flush of shame crawling up his neck and face. "I'll rest now. Thank you."

And another dream ended too soon...

Chapter Four

Kyle shut his bedroom door then leaned against it. His traitorous body hummed with need and his heart raced, pounding a staccato beat from his temples to his cock.

"I shouldn't have brought him here." He closed his eyes as he tried to slow his breathing. *No shit.*

He was still in love with Dustin. He'd known that before he'd made the decision to bail him out. Seeing him again didn't resurrect old feelings, it just made them harder to live with.

But getting involved again? No matter how remorseful Dustin might be, could he really have changed enough to make a difference?

No... He'd help him out. Let him stay awhile. Until he found a job, got on his feet. But that's it.

Kyle closed his eyes then pounded the back of his head against the door. Letting him stay was asking for trouble. His willpower had left the building almost as soon as Dustin arrived.

"Just go to bed. In your own bed. Alone."

Like so many nights since the almost explosive breakup with Dustin.

Susan had shown up at Kyle's house in the middle of the night. Evidently, she was supposed to be out of town, like she was on all the nights Dustin stayed over.

Her position as a vice president of sales in her daddy's manufacturing company took her all over the country. Sometimes the world. Leaving her philandering husband free to play with the illusion of being unattached.

Anger boiled, drowning the heat of desire. Dustin had used him, lied to him. Why couldn't he keep the righteous anger going long enough to purge Dustin from his heart?

Kyle shuffled across the room to his bed. Flopping down face first, he didn't bother with the covers. He beat the nearest pillow into submission then stuffed it under his head.

Sleep wasn't going to happen in spite of his exhaustion. Too many thoughts, memories actually, paraded through Kyle's mind. His perverse brain wanted to alternate between remembering amazing orgasms and Dustin's once whispered words of love.

If only he could go back. Free himself from Dustin before he'd lost his heart—and evidently his fucking mind.

Instead, all he could think about was the feel of Dustin in his arms. Even this skinny, battered version of him.

The sound of a door opening and closing caught Kyle's attention, rousing him from his game of self-pity, pushing hope and anticipation to the forefront.

Footsteps creaked along the wooden floors of the hallway but passed his bedroom. The bathroom door closed with a soft click.

He exhaled his breath hard then scolded himself for the flare of hope clutching his gut. Battering his pillow a few more times, he settled down again. "Go to sleep, idiot."

The noise of a flushing toilet warned him of Dustin's imminent return.

He should have stayed in bed, ignored the creak and groan of the floor as Dustin neared his door. Instead, he made it to the door before Dustin passed.

A shock of fear colored Dustin's face. A few seconds later, his expression softened.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Kyle said.

"It's okay. Kind of used to it."

Kyle didn't really make a conscious decision. Holding out his hand to Dustin seemed instinctual. His body reacted with need and longing, with desire for something long lost.

Dustin's hand trembled when he placed it in Kyle's. He took a deep breath then let it go in a hard whoosh.

"Please..." Kyle tugged him into the room, toward the bed.

Dustin didn't need much encouragement. Kyle didn't realize Dustin wasn't the only one shaking until he slid his hands under Dustin's T-shirt. Rucking the material up Dustin's back, he ran his fingers over the silken scars crisscrossing his skin.

"How?"

"A...uh...date gone wrong."

"I'm sorry." Kyle wondered how life would have turned out if he'd answered Dustin's calls those first few months after they broke up. He'd have probably forgiven him. Maybe helped him. But he hadn't.

Dustin's actions had brought him low, but Kyle could have kept him from the worst of it.

"Don't be. My own fault."

"Hush." Silencing Dustin with a kiss, Kyle tightened his hold on the thin body. Emotion clogged his throat, stung his eyes. "I need you."

"Yes..." Dustin's fingers clawed Kyle's back, pulling him closer. "God, yes..."

Kyle pulled the T-shirt over Dustin's head, tugging the sleeves down his arms. "M...want you..." *Missed you* was too much. Too close, too revealing. For now, just being together would have to be enough.

Faint illumination from the streetlight highlighted the toll life had taken. Thin—too thin—Dustin's ribs stuck out at sharp angles. His formerly flat and taut stomach was slightly concave. His carefully wrought muscle tone gone, but his arms tightened around Kyle with a wiry strength.

"You should have let me know." Kyle was almost afraid to touch him.

Even his skin seemed fragile in the faint light. Almost translucent.

"I couldn't. Not after everything fell apart."

"But you're here now." With Dustin's hands in his, Kyle slid onto the bed. "Come on."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." *No... Maybe...* Love. Desire. Need. All clamored against the doubt, but it wouldn't go away. Too many times he'd dreamed of seeing Dustin again. Granted under better circumstances but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Kyle eased toward the middle of the bed as Dustin slid in next to him. Fingers, timid and unsure, traced a line across Kyle's lips. "I'm clean. I mean, I've always been careful and hit the free clinic regularly."

A shudder of combined desire and fear rushed through Kyle. So focused on Dustin's presence, the idea of diseases hadn't crossed his mind. "Glad to hear it." For more reasons than he could voice right now.

Mostly glad Dustin was safe. And in his home.

Emotions flooded him as he leaned over Dustin. Soft kisses grew a little harder, deeper. Hands gripped the side of Kyle's face. His body responded with growing need. His cock hardened, lengthened. "Babe..."

Sliding his hands under Dustin, he held on tight. His hips rolled forward, pressing his cock against Dustin's thin thigh.

Dustin's half growl, half groan made him pull away.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No. God, no. You feel so good." Dustin ran a hand down Kyle's back. Rough calluses teased his skin. "I'm not fragile. I need things to be like they were. If only for tonight."

"Yeah. Okay." Kyle understood even though part of him wanted more than just a single night. If only turning back the clock were so easy.

Dustin hooked a hand behind Kyle's neck, tugging him closer. "Just for tonight."

Just for tonight. Pretend it was nothing more and leave repercussions for tomorrow. Easing down on Dustin's body, Kyle relaxed into his lover's grip. Heat flushed through his body.

Kyle hadn't been with anyone in a while. He told himself it had nothing to do with Dustin. Life was hectic, the job demanding. He didn't have time to date and he wasn't crazy about casual fucks. But the truth could sometimes set itself free.

Burned once, twice shy...

The flare of desire pushed Kyle closer to the precipice. Soft kisses, roaming hands, fingers teasing his hair. Each touch, each breath teased him with the memory of what Kyle thought they once had.

Don't lose yourself...

It's just sex. Kyle couldn't do tender, loving and keep his heart separate. Sex was sex. Fuck him and get it over with—out of his system.

Pulling out of Dustin's embrace, Kyle moved to the nightstand. Claims of clean or not, Kyle wasn't that trusting. He yanked the drawer open then grabbed condoms and a bottle of lube. Hopefully neither had passed the expiration date.

"Turn over." Kyle didn't plan for the order to come out so harsh.

A glint of sadness flared in Dustin's eyes but he obeyed, rolling over. "Like this?" Dustin pushed up on his hands and knees.

No... "That'll work." Kyle would rather face him, able to kiss him, touch his face. Watch him fall into bliss as Kyle made him come.

But those were things lovers did. They weren't lovers. Tonight was about sex and ridding Dustin from his system.

Even as he hardened his heart, his hands lingered. His fingers traced a line down Dustin's spine, counting the vertebra, feeling Dustin shudder.

Kyle yanked Dustin's too-big borrowed shorts over his ass then tugged them down his thighs. The loose material puddled around his knees.

Running his hand over Dustin's ass, Kyle found more scarring like that on his back. "What'd he do to you? Your date gone wrong?"

"Too much." Dustin pushed back toward Kyle, pressing his ass tighter against Kyle's palm.

"Tell me." The need to hurt Dustin, punish him for his lies, rose up in a sharp well of pain. Dustin's reluctance only made Kyle push more.

"Please... I don't want—"

Kyle ended Dustin's words with a sharp slap to his ass. Once upon a time, Dustin loved a good spanking. "Tell me." His hand lingered over Dustin's cheek, rubbing away the sting.

A deep breath hunched Dustin's back. His exhalation stuttered, as if trying to keep sorrow or pleasure under control.

For a moment, Kyle wanted to back off. Take Dustin in his arms and hold him, make love to him. Then the memory of Dustin's wife storming through his front door, making accusations, calling Kyle a faggot, threatening his career.

Another swat, not as hard as he wanted but enough to make Dustin jump.

"He promised me fifty bucks and the hotel room for the night."

"What did he want?"

"Suck and fuck. That's all he said. For fifty dollars and a room. I'd only been on the street for a month."

Kyle ran his fingers down the crack of Dustin's ass. With both hands, he parted his cheeks. His thumbs teased the crinkled pucker around his hole. "So he fucked you?"

"Yes." Dustin rocked back into Kyle's fingers.

"Before or after the whipping?" A belt? A whip? The scars were too vague.

"Before..."

Leaning over Dustin's back, Kyle whispered in his ear, "Did he tie you up?"

"Yes..."

When they were together, Dustin had been into a little bondage play, mild kink but it had satisfied a need in both of them. "You used to love it when I handcuffed you to the bed. I bet you were hard for it."

"No..."

"Tell the truth." He pushed one thumb into Dustin's hole then slapped his ass again.

"Yes." Dustin moaned as he dropped his upper body down to the mattress. Rocking back and forth, he fucked his ass on Kyle's thumb. "At first..."

"Then what happened?"

"He..."

"Tell me."

"Facedown. He pushed me facedown on the bed. He'd already had the room, had it ready."

Kyle slid his other thumb in, using both to fuck Dustin's ass. His cock grew harder with each push and pull. He wanted inside him. Bad. But a perverse side of him enjoyed hearing about Dustin's trials. As if it would dehumanize him. Make him something other than the guy Kyle was in love with.

"Oh yeah..." Dustin rocked his body, matching Kyle's rhythm. "Straps. In place. Already. Tied my arms. Gagged me." His words matched the beat.

"Bet you were begging for it. Ready for his dick." Just as Kyle was ready to fuck. He pulled one hand away to jerk down his shorts. Leaning forward, he pressed the base of his cock against Dustin's scrotum then returned his thumb to Dustin's ass. The heat of Dustin's skin added to Kyle's aching desire.

"Yes. Some. Scared too."

"What happened next?" Kyle rolled his hips, running his dick up and down between Dustin's balls and where his thumbs fucked him.

"Tied my legs with a spreader bar. Knees bent. Ass up."

"Sounds interesting." *Damn...* Much more and Kyle would finish before he got his dick inside Dustin.

"Yeah." Dustin's actions grew more frantic, bouncing against Kyle's hands, his dick. "Then he fucked me. Hard."

"You used to like it rough..." Sometimes, after Kyle learned Dustin was in the closet to most of the world, he wondered if Dustin was trying to punish himself.

"Yes. It was good. So good."

"What happened next?" Kyle wasn't sure he wanted to hear about the whipping, but morbid curiosity got the better of him.

"A knock. The door." Dustin buried his face in the covers, muffling his voice. "His friends showed up." A half-sob escaped around the bedding.

Oh fuck...

"That's enough." Kyle definitely didn't want to hear about a gang rape. Pulling his thumbs free, he wanted to hold Dustin instead of torment him.

"So turned-on."

Kyle wasn't sure he heard him right. "You were turned-on?"

"Yes." Dustin's body moved back and forth harder, bouncing against Kyle's body. "So hot. Tied up. Scared. I...wanted more."

After a deep breath, Kyle exhaled slowly. "How many?"

"Three."

"What'd they do?"

"Fucked me. Made me suck them." His movements grew frantic.

"And the whipping?"

"Last guy couldn't...get it up..." Dustin slowed, his body hunched up, almost pulling away from Kyle. "I laughed... He wasn't happy about it."

"Oh babe..." Kyle ran his hands up Dustin's back. Fingers massaged his shoulders.

"They left me there." Dustin's tone lost the excitement. Now his words were rote, bland. "I think one of them called 9-1-1 later. ER treated me and turned me loose. The cops didn't even take my statement. Another trick getting out of control with a hooker."

The need for revenge fled. Kyle slipped on the bed next to Dustin and pulled him into his arms.

A flurry of kisses, given and received, banished words. Sweet need, loving desire, flooded Kyle as he pressed his body against Dustin's. Slow movements, up and down, dicks pressing together, rolling between their stomachs.

Release and relief mixed with the warm splash of come. Somewhere in between, Kyle realized this wouldn't end come morning.

Chapter Five

Dustin woke wrapped in a warm embrace. Cool air teased his toes where they stuck out from under the covers. The smell of sweat and sex wasn't overpowered by the rancid smell of dirt and grime from the streets.

And he didn't wake up from the dream to living a nightmare. Last night had been amazing. Something to take with him when he left.

Who knew Kyle had a hidden kink for dirty talk? He'd love to test his vocabulary, but he needed to get out of there. Preferably before Kyle woke. Easier without explanations.

Kyle's naked body pressed against him. His morning erection teased Dustin's ass.

The memory of last night flooded him with shame and joy. Telling Kyle about his beating had seemed to clear the air. He wasn't sure how, but he was content to let it remain a mystery. He wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. No matter how long it lasted. Or didn't.

In the meantime, he wouldn't mind finding someplace warm for Kyle's dick. Dustin eased over until he faced Kyle. The old wrought iron bed squeaked even with his slow movements.

Kyle hadn't changed much in the last two years. Maybe his features were a little sharper, leaner. Two years seemed to burn away any remaining baby fat from his face.

One arm rested on top of the covers, draped over his hip. The other crooked back so his hand was under the pillow. Kyle must have been working out more. His biceps were more sculpted and toned than Dustin remembered. And hotter.

Dustin's dick filled, hardened. The heat of desire flowed through him. As sweet as last night was, he'd missed the feel of Kyle inside him. Knowing the charming interlude could end in a heartbeat, Dustin wanted as much as Kyle would give him.

And as much as he could give Kyle.

Sliding down the bed then under the covers, Dustin moved until his mouth was even with Kyle's cock. With a gentle grip, Dustin wrapped his hand around the base. The sweet musk of last night's sex filled Dustin's nostrils. His mouth watered for a taste of Kyle's cock.

Not quite full hardness, Kyle's dick was still a little malleable, but Dustin knew how to fix that. He sealed his lips around the crown. His tongue teased the underside.

Kyle breathed a soft moan as his hips pumped forward. His hand clutched the covers above Dustin's head, catching a few strands of hair in his grip along with the sheets.

Kyle's flesh lengthened against Dustin's tongue. His body moved forward, pushing deeper into Dustin's mouth. His other hand slipped under the covers then caught Dustin by the back of the neck.

"Oh shit!" The covers muffled Kyle's voice but not his enthusiasm. His fingers dug through the covers, grasping Dustin's hair at the base of his skull. "Yes..."

Pull forward, yank back. The roughness of Kyle's motions only made Dustin want more. The thick flesh fucking his mouth gave him more real pleasure than he'd felt in so long.

Deeper Kyle pushed, but Dustin took it. Welcomed it. *Punishment?* Dustin banished the thought. He'd always liked things a little on the rough side. Maybe that's why he'd become involved with Kyle in the first place.

Rough wasn't something his wife would have done. *Not to mention she didn't have a cock...*

The head of Kyle's dick battled with Dustin's tonsils. In spite of Dustin's pure pleasure in taking it, physical reality and a bad angle set him gagging.

"Damn. Sorry." Kyle pulled away, sliding his cock out of Dustin's mouth. "Felt so good."

The covers flipped off Dustin. Cool air invaded his warm cocoon.

Kyle's hand caught Dustin by the back of the neck then tugged him up. "Come here."

Face-to-face, softness mellowed Kyle's gaze. The tense lines around his eyes and across his forehead were gone.

Pulling him closer, Kyle's lips met Dustin's. Sweet, soft with the slightly stale taste of morning breath...and Dustin reveled in each sensation.

His body reacted from his aching cock to the curl of his toes. Maybe things could be different. Hope reared its head for the first time since his life fell apart.

"Need you." *Want you... Love you...* All the things Dustin couldn't say aloud. "Inside me. Please..."

"God yes." Kyle rolled over toward the nightstand and the discarded supplies from last night. Scrambling to his knees, he grabbed the lube and a condom. His cock bobbed up and down, still wet with Dustin's spit. "Come here."

Dustin crawled to the middle of the bed, presenting his ass for Kyle to use how he wanted. As impersonal as it felt last night, Dustin didn't care. He'd do anything to feel his lover's dick inside him again.

Kyle's hand rubbed over Dustin's back then down to his ass. "Not like that. Roll over." His tone was soft, like the caress of his hand. "I want to see you."

Dustin closed his eyes against the sting of tears, but he obeyed. Pulling his knees up, he opened his thighs. Opened himself as he hadn't in two years...willing, wanting, needing more than just money or a clean bed and a hot shower.

With his hand fisted around the bottle of lube, Kyle leaned forward. His hips wedged between Dustin's thighs. His cock dipped against Dustin's lower stomach, teasing Dustin's dick.

Kyle's eager mouth caught Dustin's lower lip. Gentle suckling with a hint of tongue moved to harder kisses. Need and desire grew with each swipe of tongue, each nip and nibble.

A hand caressed the back of Dustin's neck, pulling him closer, sealing the kiss tighter. Tongues met, dipped, explored.

Heat rushed through Dustin. His hips pushed up, seeking pressure from Kyle's body. "Please..." The soft moan escaped between kisses.

Instead of giving Dustin welcome relief, Kyle pulled away. Fear and longing twisted through him. "No..." Dustin reached for him.

"Shush..." Kyle grabbed Dustin's wrists, pinning them to the mattress.

Short, quick kisses fluttered down Dustin's chin, his throat, moving down his chest. Warm, wet tongue circled a nipple. Teeth raked the tender flesh. Hard suckling had him arching his chest, seeking more.

This was the Kyle Dustin remembered so well. Forceful, hard, rough... And he left Dustin needing more each time they had been together.

Punishment?

If that's what it was, he didn't care. He wanted it. Needed it. Needed Kyle.

Kyle moved to the other nipple. His teeth caught the hardened flesh then tugged. "Want me to fuck you?"

"Yes." Dustin couldn't breathe. His memories couldn't compare to the here and now and the driving desire for Kyle's body.

"Hard?"

"Yes. Give me..." His body hurt with wanting. His cock ached, dabbing pre-come on his stomach.

"You look good like this." Kyle's hands tightened on Dustin's wrists then tugged them up toward the headboard. "You remember?"

"Yes." Dustin slid his fingers between the intricate wrought iron headboard and the mattress. Curling his hands up, he gripped the lower edge. The familiar cold metal bit into his palms. "Oh yeah..." His breath pulled a little faster. His heart raced more blood to his cock. "Fuck me. Please."

"Soon." Kyle ran his hands over Dustin's chest. "We need to fatten you up a little. I don't like you so thin."

"Whatever you want." Dustin wanted to yell, scream, force Kyle to get on with it. Fuck him, hard, fast, brutal. Erase the memory of other men, of all the days and nights since his wife stormed into Kyle's home.

Kyle leaned over him. Kisses trailed from Dustin's sternum to his stomach.

Sensitive skin tickled with each peck of lips and swipe of tongue. His eyes rolled closed as Dustin pushed up, seeking pressure to relieve the sensation.

Hot, wet suction engulfed his cock.

"Fuck!" His hips rose up, pushing his dick deeper in Kyle's mouth. A slick finger pushed into his ass without warning or preparation.

Kyle found Dustin's prostate on the first stroke.

The wet heat disappeared. "Don't come!" Kyle's tone was sharp and harsh. "Not until I say so."

"Yes." Dustin tried to dampen his arousal with a laundry list of the worst things that had happened on the streets. Didn't work. The scent of clean sheets mixed with the smell of Kyle, sex and sweat made it impossible to hold on to anything bad.

Gripping the metal railing harder, he focused on strict willpower. *Can't come. Can't come.*

But Kyle was sucking his cock again, crown throat-deep in sweet heat. His balls bounced against Kyle's hand as he fucked his ass with his finger.

"Please." Half moan, half spoken.

Another finger shoved in next to the first. The slight burn of the rough entry helped stave off orgasm for about five seconds. *No pain, no gain...* "Please—" Louder still, almost a shout, but to no avail.

Kyle hummed around his cock as a third finger followed.

Rough strokes jabbed his prostate, pushing Dustin higher, closer. No additional lubrication made the burn intense.

Closing his eyes, Dustin's hold on the headboard kept him from flying away. "Please..." With his half-whispered plea, Kyle pulled away. Mouth, fingers, gone—leaving Dustin empty and desperate.

Rough hands pushed Dustin's legs up. The squishy noise of lube squirting was a welcome sound. Then relief as Kyle's cock pushed into him. Slick, cold lube eased the burn, soothed the pain from Kyle's fingers.

"Yes." His fingers were numb as his body swarmed with both heat and chill. Using the headboard as leverage, Dustin pushed toward the invading flesh. "Yes."

Kyle didn't make him wait any longer. His dick shoved deep, hard.

Almost filled, Dustin wanted more. Another shove met with another stroke. Kyle's pubic bone ground against Dustin's ass. Kyle pulled back until the crown almost popped free then he shoved hard.

Faster, each stroke slapping flesh against flesh. Each time, ramming against Dustin's prostate. Pleasure flooded Dustin. Emotion tightened his throat, stung his eyes. He focused on Kyle's face. Met his gaze.

Locked in body and soul, Dustin couldn't stop his shout. In that single moment, nothing could keep him from uttering those words. "I love you."

Kyle pounded harder, faster. "Love." Slam in. Out. "You." Again. Harder. With a final blow, Kyle's body stilled against Dustin's. His hips pulsed as he moaned. "Fuck."

Sliding between Dustin's thighs, Kyle met him with a fierce kiss. "Fucking son of a bitch." Bruising lips, taste of blood. "I. Love. You." Kyle's words were almost as brutal as his mouth.

The pressure of Kyle's body and the harsh spoken words sent Dustin to the edge. Sweet bliss combined with the rough kisses. Wrapping his arms around Kyle, he held on, hoping time would stand still.

Kyle pulled away from Dustin then rolled over on the bed. Sweat poured down his face and chest. Dustin's come smeared his stomach and chest. *What the fuck just happened...* He stripped off the condom then tossed it toward the wastebasket. At least it gave him an excuse not to look at Dustin.

The last two years seemed to have evaporated while he was tight inside Dustin's ass. Tossing "I love yous" back and forth was straight out of the past. Kyle wasn't sure Dustin had meant it then and he damn sure didn't want to believe it now.

Dustin's life had gone to hell. Kyle knew he was a safe port in a storm. Would Dustin stoop so low as to use Kyle's love for him? For the sake of a clean bed, regular showers and meals?

Kyle sat on the edge of the bed. His mind and heart racing to see which would come up with an answer first.

A shaky hand settled on his shoulder. "I do love you," Dustin whispered. "Always have. But I'm... I won't hold you to something said mid-coitus."

Kyle closed his eyes. Could they forge a relationship out of the debris of their past? Did he want to try?

Yes...

Turning around, Kyle finally admitted he wanted Dustin back. Scars, past, everything that had happened since didn't matter. He still loved him. Nothing could change that. If Dustin had really changed, Kyle needed to see if they could work.

Kyle lay as close as he could to Dustin without touching. If he touched, he'd be lost.

"I'll leave. I promise to show up for my hearing. You don't have to put up with me until then." Dustin lifted his hand as if to touch Kyle's face.

The flinch was almost instinctive. Touching, like sex, led to words Kyle wasn't sure he should be speaking.

Dustin dropped his hand in the narrow space between them. A look of hurt clouded his gaze then he rolled away.

"Stop. Wait." Kyle followed him across the bed. His hand gripped Dustin's shoulder. "I want you to stay."

"You don't have to be nice."

"Not being nice." Scooting closer, he wrapped his arm around Dustin's neck. His other arm slid around Dustin's chest. He pulled him into a tight embrace, Dustin's back to Kyle's chest.

At first, Dustin resisted then he relaxed. His body melted against Kyle's. "You... I... In spite of everything?"

"Yes. I meant it. I love you." Kyle nuzzled the back of Dustin's neck. "I've always loved you." Resting his chin on Dustin's shoulder, he whispered, "I want to give it a chance if you do."

"Yes." Dustin's voice cracked on the single word. "Yes." This time his voice was stronger. Turning his head toward Kyle, his lips found Kyle's.

Kyle fell into the kiss. He was probably making the worst mistake in the world, but he'd always wondered if—under other circumstances—they could have worked. Now it seemed he had the chance to find out.

Pulling Dustin down on the bed, he held on as if he'd lose him if he let go. Legs tangled. Heat rose with each passionate kiss.

A buzzer echoed through the hallway followed by a slow-ringing bell. Kyle needed a few seconds to realize the noise was his ancient doorbell.

Ignore them. They'll go away...

Another buzz and ring. Then knocking, hard and rapid.

"Fuck." Kyle untangled himself from Dustin's embrace. "Don't move. I'll be right back." He snagged his shorts from the floor then hopped from leg to leg, bouncing against the wall of the hallway as he pulled them on. Halfway decent, he stormed down the hall. "Hold your fucking horses. I'm coming!" *Or not...*

A voice added to the racket outside. "Kyle, open up!"

Yanking open the door, Kyle confirmed the voice belonged to Tony Costa. As lead on the serial killer investigation, Tony wouldn't be here unless something big happened.

"What's up? I didn't hear my phone."

"I didn't call." Tony peered over Kyle's shoulder. "Is Dustin Eldridge here?"

"Yeah..." Kyle shook his head. "But I don't want any lectures. I know what I'm doing."

"I don't think you do." Tony shouldered his way past Kyle then turned to face him. His gaze flickered down then up Kyle's body. "Looks like you two had a nice little reunion."

Half-naked, sweaty and smelling of sex made it a little hard to deny. "So what? That's my business." Irritation climbed all over his tone. Kyle wasn't in the mood for overprotective friends.

Tony met Kyle's glare with one of his own. "Your boyfriend's prints hit at one of the murder scenes."

Chapter Six

Kyle's stomach dropped at Tony's words, but then reason tried to claim a stake in the conversation. "Not possible. It takes days—weeks sometimes—to compare new prints to existing cases. Even with ones as high-profile as ours."

"I put a rush on it when a witness described someone fitting Dustin Eldridge's description near the victim's place of business. Eldridge was arrested two blocks away."

"Which victim?"

Dustin was arrested in the general area of the murders, but so were a lot of people. Between Union and Vance covered a lot of territory and smack in the middle was the touristy section of Beale Street.

"A new one. Found last night. Killed about the time Eldridge was seen in the area. Same signature."

The creak of the hall's wooden floor clued Kyle to Dustin's approach. He turned to face him. Locking his gaze with his lover's, Kyle asked Tony, "What was his name?"

"James Lehman, an attorney with a small private office near Union Ave."

Wrapped in Kyle's robe, Dustin stopped short of the living room. "What about James?"

Tony glared at Dustin with his best poker face. "Do you know him?"

Torn between his duty and his newly revived relationship, Kyle wanted to warn Dustin to keep quiet. Instead, he watched for any sign of lying, of shock as Tony questioned him.

"Yes." Dustin glanced at Kyle but couldn't hold eye contact.

Sign of guilt?

"And the last time you saw him?" Tony asked.

"Last evening." Dustin dropped his gaze, not looking at Kyle or Tony.

"What time?"

With a short snort of derision, Dustin held up his arms. "You see a watch?"

"Don't get smart with me." Tony's shoulders pulled back and stiffened.

"What about James?" This time, Dustin met Kyle's gaze and stuck.

Tired of Tony's evasion, Kyle answered, "He's dead."

"Fuck." Dustin's face drained of color. He wavered back and forth then leaned against the wall. "How? When?" Shaking his head, he didn't wait for an answer. "I saw him last night just after dark."

Memphis in July, sunset averaged around eight o'clock. Dustin was picked up at nine-fifteen.

"What business did you have with him?" Tony almost barked the question. Evidently, he felt the need for a bad cop routine.

Maybe since Kyle was fucking Dustin, Tony decided Kyle was the good cop.

"I...ah..." Some of the color returned to Dustin's face. "He was usually good for a few dollars."

"You begged money from him?"

"Not exactly." Dustin's gaze flipped from Tony to Kyle.

Kyle nodded. "You let him fuck you?" Sudden anger welled up out of numbness. Kyle hadn't realized how empty he'd become by Tony's accusation.

"No." Dustin shook his head. "He..." His gaze hardened. Hesitancy disappeared as the rest of his words rushed out. "He liked the occasional blowjob. Generous too. Twenty, sometimes thirty bucks for a fast suck as long as I swallowed. Evidently, the wifey doesn't like to suck dick."

Tony darted a quick look over his shoulder before he turned back to Dustin. "And were you with him last night?"

"Yes." Looking back at Tony, Dustin said, "Quick blowjob and I moved on. And got arrested."

"Where was the fingerprint found?" Kyle needed to know. If it were some place only the killer could have left it...in blood or on a weapon...

He needed some kind of confirmation of Dustin's story. Even as far as his lover had fallen, he couldn't believe he'd kill. Especially not with the serial killer's signature.

A buried memory flashed through Kyle's mind. Dustin talking about the crazy nuns from Catholic school...

Because of the crosses painted on the victim's eyes, profiles pegged the killer as Catholic. Probably since birth, but with bad experiences within the church. Still, a lot of people were Catholic. Didn't make them a suspect.

But a lot of people weren't there and didn't have a previous relationship with the victim...

Tony turned to Kyle with a deep frown and a hard glare. Obviously, he didn't want Dustin to know.

"Where, Tony?"

"On the door."

Anger flared up. Probably not a good thing since Tony was the lead on the case. But Tony knew what he was asking and he wasn't making it any easier. "Inside or out?"

"Outside."

"Are you arresting him?" Kyle already knew the answer. One fingerprint on the outside of a door wasn't enough. If Dustin's prints had shown up near another victim, Tony would have hauled him away already.

"No."

"Fine." Kyle moved out the way of the still open front door. "I'll meet you at the precinct later."

Tony stormed out of the house without giving Dustin another glance.

Resisting the urge to slam the door, Kyle closed it with a soft click. He leaned his forehead against the cool wood. Inhaling a deep breath, he tried to convince himself Dustin couldn't kill, but Dustin had done a lot of things lately he would never have...

"I didn't do it." Dustin's voice was closer than before.

"Good." Kyle turned around then leaned his back against the door, hands behind him. He wanted to believe him. Needed to, but Dustin had lied to him before. Could he really trust him now? "Be a little awkward if you had. Me being a cop and all."

A slight smile curved Dustin's mouth. "Already awkward enough."

"Yeah."

Dustin shuffled forward, closing the gap between them. "I really want to stay, but I don't want to jeopardize your job."

"You aren't." Kyle wouldn't let that happen. His job was the most important thing in his life. *Maybe...*

"But you wouldn't tell me if I were." Dustin's hands settled on Kyle's waist. "This was a bad idea. Nice one. But not good. I'm leaving."

Panic threatened to cut off Kyle's breath. He couldn't let him go now. Not so soon. "You're still a suspect. We need you where we can find you. Here's as good a place as any."

Dustin moved a little closer. His breath teased Kyle's cheek. "A suspect? You think I killed James? You think because I suck cock for money I'd kill too?" His fingers slid under the waistband of his shorts.

To curb the urge to wrap his arms around Dustin, Kyle clenched his hands together behind him. "I want to help. See you get back on your feet." *See you safe, healthy... Whole again...*

"Is that all? Maybe you want to keep me around until you can fuck the memory of my lies out of your system." Dustin ran his tongue across his top lip. "You certainly

seemed to like my little story last night. Liked it a lot. Hearing about all those guys fucking me. Tied up. Helpless.”

Kyle couldn't deny it. Until he talked about the beating, Dustin's gangbang had turned him on. A lot.

“Maybe you liked my description of James too. Interested in details? Maybe you'd like to know how he'd twist his fingers through my hair and fuck my mouth hard. How making me gag got him off quicker?”

Dustin's harsh words had started a response Kyle couldn't hide. Kind of hard to hide anything in his flimsy shorts.

“Get real, lover. Fucking for money is just as easy as taking it up the ass in the backroom of a club. Or sucking someone off in an alley...” Both of which they'd done the night they met.

Dustin leaned against Kyle. “Well?” Cheek to cheek, Dustin's mouth nuzzled Kyle's ear. “You want me to suck your dick. Go down on you for a quick mouth-fuck so you can drop a load down my throat.”

Dirty talk was a new skill for Dustin, and he was damn good at it. He'd never been very open with his wants and needs.

Not that it bothered Kyle. He liked being in control, and Dustin had been easy to...

Because Dustin wasn't out. *Fuck...*

Closing his eyes, he should have seen the signs. He was a fucking cop. Clues were his job. Dustin put out a dozen different signals, and Kyle missed them all. Didn't want to see.

Dustin didn't wait for Kyle's answer. Instead, he dropped to his knees, fingers yanking Kyle's shorts down.

Kyle didn't open his eyes as the hot mouth sucked his cock deep. Still half flaccid, his dick hardened in record time.

Wet heat, hard sucking... Kyle resisted pumping his hips, moving at all. Let Dustin deal with his own demons. *Don't give him fodder for his fit.*

What the fuck did Dustin expect? Their history was full of lies and deceit. He just expected Kyle to trust him because he said so?

His body refused to ignore Dustin. Desire spread through him. Need pushed his hips forward.

Dustin slipped his mouth free but his hand kept up the pace, stroking his cock in short, quick jerks. "Ready to fuck my face?" Tilting his head up, he ran his tongue around his lips. "Come on, Kyle. You like it rough. In control. Being the man." His hand squeezed harder. "Show me how much you like it. Fuck my mouth."

Something snapped. Taunting words, Dustin's hot breath. Whatever.

Kyle twisted the fingers of one hand through Dustin's hair. His other hand gripped the side of Dustin's face, thumb pressing against his lips.

"Do it, Kyle. Punish me with your cock." Dustin opened his mouth then leaned forward. "Fuck my lying mouth."

Dustin didn't have to wait long.

Kyle's gaze narrowed. His nostrils flared. Anger or desire? Both? Didn't matter as long as Dustin got what he wanted. Kyle's fingers tightened on Dustin's hair until sharp pain teased his scalp. Hips pressed forward in a quick thrust and Dustin's mouth was full of cock. So full...

He loved Kyle's dick. Always had. Since that first night at the club where they'd met.

Hard, pumping thrusts grew longer, deeper. Dustin's throat tightened against the invasion of the tip of Kyle's dick.

More... Dustin wanted everything Kyle could give him. Hurt, pain, sex, love... Didn't matter as long as Kyle needed him, wanted him. He didn't have to trust him. Dustin would earn his trust. Somehow.

How could he think things would be so easy? He'd lied so much. Hurt Kyle so badly.

Closing his eyes, he pushed aside everything except the cock in his mouth. Deep, quick strokes. Took everything Kyle could give him.

Not completely erect, Kyle's cock hadn't taken long to harden again once inside Dustin's mouth. The bitter taste of pre-come soon flavored each stroke across Dustin's tongue.

Kyle's free hand settled behind Dustin's head. More fingers tangled in his hair. While he pulled back and forth on Dustin's hair, Kyle also thrust with his hips.

Too much, but Dustin wouldn't stop him. His breath caught in short gasps when Kyle's dick wasn't blocking his airway. Short, hard gags brought tears to his eyes, spilling over his lids. Saliva dripped down his chin.

And Kyle kept going. Stroke after stroke. "You like it like this?" Kyle's words were harsh, his voice a low hoarse growl. "Did you blow them all this way?"

Dustin couldn't answer. Couldn't even shake his head. Kyle's grip was too tight.

"Or just the generous ones?"

A sudden spurt of come splashed against the back of Dustin's throat. Kyle pulled his head closer, stuffing his cock balls-deep into Dustin's mouth. Half gagging, half swallowing, he took it all. Spots of light swam in front of his eyes as oxygen became an issue.

"I should have saved it for your ass." Kyle jerked Dustin's head forward. "I should have..."

The pain and tension vanished. Kyle pulled his cock out fast, leaving Dustin unbalanced. Hands hit the floor. Coughing on his hands and knees, Dustin fought for air.

"Why'd you do that?" Kyle stood over him, shorts around his ankles, his cock wet with spit and come. "Do you want me to hurt you?"

"No." Dustin choked on the word. Drawing a deep breath, he pushed off the floor until his ass rested on his heels. "Rough turns me on. You know that."

"Because you need to be punished for being gay?"

Dustin looked up at his lover's frowning face. "I never thought about it that way. Maybe it's my way of doing penance." He snorted a half laugh. As if he'd ever been truly repentant about being gay—just good at hiding it. "Hail Marys and Our Fathers didn't work. Maybe you'll be my cure. Our priest despaired of ever fixing me."

Kyle's frown grew deeper. "Penance?" He broke eye contact with Dustin then leaned over to grab his shorts. "I need to get to work." He stormed away in all his naked glory with his shorts gripped in a tight fist.

"What'd I say?" Dustin didn't like the way Kyle suddenly avoided his gaze.

"Nothing. Just need to get to the precinct." He strode away, leaving Dustin on his knees with the taste of come in his mouth.

Anger flared, irrational maybe, but Dustin didn't like being used and left. "Wait a minute." Even as the irony struck him, Dustin chased his lover down the hall. Was it the irreverent comments about religion?

Kyle wasn't religious. Dustin didn't even know what faith he'd grown up in, if any. He couldn't be insulted.

"Don't walk away from me like that." Irritation grew with each step. Dustin followed Kyle into the bedroom. "I didn't kill that guy. I swear. On this you have to believe me."

Paranoia mixed with rage. Dustin knew of plenty of homeless people arrested – and convicted – for things they didn't do. Sometimes it was easier to close the books on a case when all the suspect could afford was a public defender.

"You can't pin this on me." Grabbing Kyle by the shoulder, he whirled him around. "Talk to me."

"I can't. Not now." Kyle tried to duck past Dustin.

"Why? Because you need a little distance between us before you arrest me?"

"No." Kyle's hand darted out – to grab or hit, Dustin didn't know – but after nearly a year on the streets, instinct reacted.

A hard grip on Kyle's wrist, a quick twist and jerk. Dustin whirled Kyle around then pinned his arm against his back. His other arm wrapped around Kyle's neck, holding him still. "You won't use this case to get back at me."

"I wasn't going to arrest you." Kyle's words slid out between gritted his teeth. "Let me go." Kyle's struggle was halfhearted at best. He should be able to break free.

"I think you need a lesson in trust, lover. Maybe I should tie you up for a change. Fuck your ass raw." The idea of Kyle helpless and wanting sent a shock of perverse pleasure through him. His cock definitely liked the idea.

"I have. Work." This time, his attempt to free himself had a little more force behind it. He dug his fingers under Dustin's arm, pinching and scratching, but Dustin didn't give.

"Work can wait." Dustin pressed closer, pushing his cock against Kyle's ass. "First, I'm going to fuck you. Hard and fast. I want to see you lose it." The few times Kyle let Dustin top, his macho control had fled, leaving a quivering mass of need.

Kyle pulled away, choking against Dustin's arm on his neck. "Damn it, Dustin. Let. Me. Go."

"Lover, if you really wanted to get free, you'd have already done it."

Chapter Seven

Kyle felt a rush of pleasure at Dustin's words. The truth... Nothing about his job ever seemed within his control. Murder rarely made sense. Not to sane people anyway. He knew he overcompensated in his personal life. The spotless house, the manicured lawn. Everything had a place and everything was in it.

Even Dustin, once upon a time. Kyle had tried to organize him as neatly as his tools on the pegboard.

Except Dustin had stayed elusive, hard to pin down to a schedule. He had showed up at odd hours, called in the middle of the night. Usually a clue to a cheating mate, Dustin had explained it away because of his crazy work schedule. Something Kyle could relate to.

The unpredictability had excited Kyle, kept him on the edge of arousal, never knowing when Dustin would pop in for a quick blowjob or a long night of fucking.

Kyle didn't want to ask why Dustin never invited him to his house. Or why they rarely ventured out for a night on the town. When they did, the clubs were the type with backroom liaisons.

Talk was more about exchanging work stories than personal or family ones. For someone who lived for the job, Kyle didn't question. Maybe he didn't want to know. And right now he didn't care.

Dustin's words sent a flare of excitement coursing through him. Even his spent cock roused a little at Dustin's dirty little tirade.

Kyle took a deep breath. "So what are you waiting for?" The words rushed out as he exhaled.

Heated breath puffed against his ear. "Sweet."

The pressure across his throat eased. Dustin nuzzled his nose behind Kyle's ear. "I always loved watching you fall apart on the end of my dick."

Pleasure circled through Kyle's groin. Not much help for resurrecting his cock. Third time might be a charm, but it wasn't likely. But he didn't need an erection to enjoy the heat of Dustin's body.

"Then fuck me already."

Dustin's hold on Kyle's wrist didn't let up. Using his twisted arm as control, Dustin moved Kyle to the bed. With little space between them, Kyle could feel Dustin fumbling with his robe.

"Who needs handcuffs," his hand bumped against Kyle's back, "when you have a belt?"

Kyle groaned as the thin belt from his robe twisted around his wrist. The other wrist joined the first, wrapped tightly together behind his back. Heat rushed his veins, throbbing through his neck and temple. Blood pushed south, teasing his cock to half-staff.

"This will work just fine." Shuffling toward the bed, Dustin pushed Kyle in front of him. "On the bed."

Unsteady without his hands for balance, Kyle climbed on the bed with awkward movements. A sharp shove from behind landed him face first on the mattress. Fingers dug into his hips, pulling him up so his ass was in the air.

Dustin kneed his way between Kyle's legs. "Oh yeah. This will definitely do."

Calloused hands rubbed up and down Kyle's back, pausing to knead tight shoulder muscles. One hand slid around to his chest to tease an already rigid nipple.

Dustin ran his hand down Kyle's stomach then wrapped around his cock. "Can you get it up again, Kyle?" His chest rested on Kyle's back. "Do you want my dick in your ass that bad?"

Biting the covers helped stifle Kyle's moan.

"Talk to me, babe. Tell me you want my cock." Dustin's teeth raked Kyle's shoulder. "I won't fuck you until you ask for it."

"Yes." The blanket half-muffled the word. Begging wasn't something Kyle did a lot. Not aloud.

"Yes what?"

"Asshole." Kyle jerked up, trying to throw Dustin from his back. Without his hands to balance his thrust, the move was useless.

"Yes, my cock, your asshole. Now ask for it." A laugh vibrated against Kyle's skin.

"Not what I meant." Gritting his teeth, he held back the begging as long as he could. "Just fuck me."

Dustin rested his cock between Kyle's cheeks then leaned over Kyle's back. "Say please." He whispered the words against Kyle's ear.

Kyle couldn't resist the sweet allure of Dustin's words. Or maybe it was the pressure of Dustin's cock against his asshole. "Please." Growing need outweighed dignity. "Please."

"Oh yeah..." Then Dustin's heat and weight were gone.

The blankets muffled Kyle's moan. *Patience*. Dustin was taunting him, teasing. He'd be back.

Rustle of paper, pop of a cap, squeeze of a bottle. Condoms, lube. Good idea, but Kyle was almost beyond caring. He wanted to feel Dustin inside him. Needed him.

The very few encounters he'd had in the last two years had been quickies, usually in cars or clubs. Definitely nothing as intimate as this. No one had fucked him since Dustin. He really didn't want anyone else, in spite of the situation with his lover.

Things like hooker or murder suspect didn't matter. Even lying jerk seemed to fade away with Kyle's growing desire.

He'd missed Dustin. His throat tightened with emotion even as his body tensed with anticipation.

The bed dipped and swayed with Dustin's weight. "Ready?"

"Yes." He'd been ready for nearly two years.

Cold lube teased the ring of muscle surrounding his hole. His sphincter tightened then relaxed as if he could force Dustin's fingers to hurry.

Dustin's agonizingly slow progress was part of his lover's M.O. "Tease" might as well be Dustin's middle name.

Kyle pulled at his restraints. With his hands tied behind him, he couldn't find leverage to push back, force Dustin's hand.

"Patience, lover. I'll fill you soon." One finger dipped inside Kyle's ass then pulled out. Again a quick flicker of a touch then back out again.

Using his thighs, Kyle rocked back and forth. A sharp smack on the ass rewarded his effort.

"My pace. My timing."

Kyle stilled and waited. His heart raced, pumping surprising life to his cock.

This time, Dustin's finger pushed deep then curled.

The soft prodding of his prostate made Kyle jump.

"Like that?" Dustin didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he added another finger so two pressed against the sensitive gland. "Wait until my cock bounces off it. I'll have you begging for mercy."

"No..." Kyle buried his face in the covers. Since Dustin had stepped up the action, Kyle refused to beg again. Hopefully, Dustin's needs would keep him from torturing Kyle for too long.

"I loved seeing you like this." Dustin's tone was as soft as a caress. "And being able to give you so much pleasure." His voice cracked on the last word.

With a third finger in the mix, Dustin began a measured stroke, slow but steady. Each time, he pinged Kyle's prostate, sending shivers of pleasure through his body.

His cock responded with growing enthusiasm. Need and desire rose in ever increasing surges. Staying still wasn't an option.

Kyle met each stroke of fingers with a push back. Each pull, he eased forward. Soon, Dustin's movements matched Kyle's in fast, short blows.

Kyle's dick bounced back and forth, growing harder, lengthening. Kyle moaned around another mouthful of cloth.

Then the fingers were gone, quickly replaced by the thick head of Dustin's cock.

"God yes. Fuck me! Please." What the fuck... Dignity and decorum had no place in the bedroom. Kyle couldn't stop the rush of words. "Need your dick in me. Please." He pushed back as much as he could with his hands still tied behind him.

Dustin backed away so Kyle's effort yielded no reward. "You want it bad, huh?"

A smack on the ass only added to Kyle's growing need to come. "Yes. Bad. Do it!"

"Hard?"

"Yes!"

"Fast?"

"Yes!"

Dustin's hand ran up Kyle's back. Fingers tightened on the back of his neck. "Rough?"

"Yes, damn it! You sorry son of a bitch, just fuck me!"

With everything he promised, Dustin entered Kyle. Hard, with fast strokes. The rough hand on the back of his neck held him down like a bitch in heat.

And Kyle begged for more. "Yes. Oh God yes! Fuck me."

His body went into overdrive. His skin crawled with heat, threatening to ignite like a backdraft in a fire. His cock, now erect, bounced against his legs, the sensitive tip grazing against the covers in little shocks of painful pleasure.

Pressure surrounded his cock. Dustin's calloused hand scratched against tender skin but the sensation added to Kyle's arousal. His body had never been so far beyond need.

Another quick jerk of his cock brought him off. Come splashed onto the covers in agonizing squirts.

Dustin's hand tightened into an almost excruciating grip. His body jerked against Kyle's ass in uncoordinated bumps and grinds.

Love you. Love you. Love you. The words matched the racing beat of Kyle's heart. He wasn't sure if he spoke them aloud or if he was echoing Dustin's words. Didn't matter.

The truth sometimes sets you free...

Kyle wanted Dustin back—warts and all. Within a week of their breakup, he'd wanted to contact him, but stubborn pride and the assumption Dustin's wife was still in the picture had stayed his hand. Now that Dustin was back in his life, he wasn't letting him go again.

* * * * *

Dustin took a deep breath before he stepped out of Kyle's house. In spite of Kyle's invitation to stay, Dustin couldn't. Life wasn't that easy. He'd screwed up too much. His lies, his wife. Prostitution... He wouldn't make a very good cop's mate no matter how tempting. Not now anyway.

His feet dragged as he walked the two blocks to the nearest bus stop. The dark, sweltering room at the flop house would seem like a dungeon compared to the light and security Kyle's place offered.

Maybe someday. Dustin needed to get on his feet without his lover's help. Clean the slate, so to speak. Then he'd see if Kyle wanted him back.

But to do so meant earning money doing something besides sex.

The local day laborers tended to hang out at Johnson and Lamar. He'd tried it for a while but turning tricks paid better. Hard work for little money hadn't been something

he'd wanted. Now, anything that kept him off his knees would be a welcomed change. Since he was showered, shaved and in clean clothes, he'd have a decent chance of picking up something besides tricks, even if it were just day work.

The bus ride seemed to take an eternity. Every block had a stop. Two transfers didn't help. An hour later, he joined the few men left on the corner waiting for work.

Dustin hadn't counted on the trip taking so long. The best jobs would be gone already. He'd be lucky to get half a day's work this late. Plopping down on the curb, he let his mind wander over the last twelve hours.

Seemed like another eternity.

A van pulled up. The front seats were occupied by a couple of men. The one in the passenger side leaned out the window. "Need five guys for construction cleanup."

Not a new job for Dustin. So much for clean and showered. By the end of the day, he'd smell as if he hadn't bathed in a week.

"I'm in." Crowding up to the van, he managed to jump in as the fifth man. Earning the right to be in Kyle's life was worth the hard labor.

* * * * *

Kyle examined every detail in the report on James Lehman's murder. Without a doubt, the signature was the same. Bloody crosses over the closed eyes. This time, the partial outline of a crucifix showed up next to the body, as if it'd been dipped in blood then set on the floor.

Multiple knife wounds, mostly in the chest, were the cause of death. Time of death was tricky. The body had been left in the man's air-conditioned office. The added cooling muddled the coroner's estimate.

"Well?" Tony grabbed a chair from a nearby desk. Flipping it around, he straddled it, with arms across the backrest.

"Close on time of death, but Dustin didn't have a crucifix in his personal effects."

"He could have stashed it."

Kyle cut his gaze up from the paperwork and glared at Tony. "You want it to be him?" Anger bubbled through his words.

"No. But I don't want you getting hurt again."

"My business."

"Which means you've already made up your mind."

Kyle couldn't maintain eye contact. "He's down on his luck, but that doesn't make him a killer."

"No, but he fits the profile."

"How would you know?" Kyle didn't want to hear the answer.

"Don't you think I checked him out?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "He went to twelve years of Catholic school. He was definitely in denial about his sexuality. I mean, he was married, for God's sake. The ex-wife took everything. Kicked him out."

"So? If that were a stressor, the killings would have started two years ago. It's only been three months."

"That we know about."

"Bull. The signature is too specific. We've had it on VICAP since the first killing. Any similar murders would have popped by now."

"What if he developed the signature?"

"You know that's not likely. M.O.'s change. Not signatures." Kyle garnered a little relief from that.

"So, what if something happened three months ago? Did you question him? Or did you just fuck him?"

Kyle pushed away from the desk then jumped to his feet. "Fuck you, Tony." Other detectives looked around at the commotion. Easing back into his chair, Kyle spoke through gritted teeth. "None of your business."

"I don't know if it's your dick or your heart making you blind, but you're out of line and you know it. He's a viable suspect. If you'd let me bring him in this morning instead of protecting him, we'd have had our answers by now."

"He didn't do it." Kyle clenched his fists but kept them tight against his side. "And he's safe at my house."

"Is he?" Tony's irritating eyebrow quirked up again.

"Yes. He promised to stay there."

"According to the officer watching your house, he left about twenty minutes after you did. Caught a bus. We lost him on a transfer."

"You were watching my house?" Anger warred with shock. Dustin left? But he said...

"You really think I'd just leave him there? You're letting personal feelings get in the way of my investigation."

Our investigation... Kyle closed his eyes. Tony was right. "You lost him?"

"Yeah." Tony stood then twirled the chair back into its place at the desk next to him. "We have a BOLO out on him."

Be on the lookout... Kyle had been on the lookout for Dustin for two years but he had lost him again. "Fine."

"I really am sorry." Tony squeezed Kyle's shoulder before he walked away.

Kyle envied Tony. He wanted what Tony and Ryan Nilsson had. A real relationship. Someone to share a life with.

Once upon a time, he'd thought Dustin was the one for him. Last night, this morning, hope resurrected. Maybe Dustin wasn't that person after all. Now he'd have to learn to bury it for good.

Chapter Eight

Hot, tired and very dirty, Dustin approached the house where he had a room. Hopefully, he could sneak past Larry the landlord. Asshole looked to grab anything he could from his tenants – be it cash or a piece of ass.

And Dustin's ass wasn't for sale anymore. At any price.

The construction site had kept them until dusk when it was too dark to see. A rainy spell had kept a lot of sites out of work. Many were playing catch up, so he'd managed a full day after all. With twenty bucks from James Lehman and another sixty from the construction site, he was a rich man. If only the asshole landlord would shell out for hot water. A long shower to wash off the sweat, dirt and ease the ache of manual labor would be close to heaven.

Of course he could go back to Kyle's place.

Not yet...

The foreman wanted Dustin back tomorrow and maybe the day after. Back-breaking work, but for the first time in a long time his self-respect reared its head. A very long time.

"Hey, faggot."

Larry the asshole landlord. Way to fuck up a good feeling.

"What do you want?" Dustin didn't look toward the open window where Larry liked to keep an eye on his little crackhouse kingdom.

"My dick, your mouth."

"Not tonight, Larry. I have a headache." Dustin ducked into the darkened doorway. Maybe if he walked fast enough.

The door to Larry's apartment jerked open. "It wasn't a request." His big beefy hand grabbed Dustin by the back of the shirt. "Get in here."

"I said no." Although Larry had five inches and fifty pounds on him, Dustin had a sudden rush of anger on his side. The last two years, the things he'd done, everything fueled his anger. "Get the fuck off me!" His punches landed on the solid muscle of Larry's stomach.

"This should be fun." Larry's arm snaked around Dustin's throat. "You've always been a little too easy."

Elbows didn't seem to have any more effect on Larry than the punches. Dustin stomped on Larry's instep.

Fortunately, the man was barefoot. His howl echoed in the hallway as Dustin ducked out of his hold.

Pure fury pushed all of Dustin's buttons. His attack wasn't coordinated or particularly effective, but all his anger poured forth with a flurry of punches and kicks.

When the dust settled, Larry lay on the floor, blood pouring from his nose. One eye was swelling and his lower lip trailed blood down his chin. Leaving him unconscious on the floor, Dustin ran for his small room.

He'd clear out before Larry regained consciousness. The man had been known to be very vindictive when he didn't get his way. Dustin needed to be far away or he'd be on the receiving end of one very pissed asshole's revenge.

Not that he had much in his room. A few extra clothes for winter were it. Stuffing his things in a threadbare pillowcase, he took off.

When he passed Larry's apartment door, the man was still unconscious. A little niggling worry had him stop at the first working payphone to call 9-1-1. Calmer now, he didn't want to seriously hurt Larry. Just wanted him to stop.

"There's an injured man. Might need an ambulance." Dustin rattled off the address then hung up without answering the operator's questions about his name or the seriousness of the injuries.

She'd have to send someone to investigate, but Dustin planned to be long gone before anyone arrived.

He didn't have a destination, but the journey to clean up his life felt good. As tired as he was, his steps were light and his heart full of promise. Maybe he could even redeem himself in Kyle's eyes.

The whoop and wail of sirens put a little kick in his steps as he turned toward Beale Street. He'd get lost in the crowds for now and look for a cheap motel later.

* * * * *

Kyle stood over the body of Larry Mansfield. The red crosses on the eyelids and the multiple stab wounds told him what he needed to know.

Several ladies of the evening hung around outside. Ryan Nilsson and several vice cops showed up to assist with the questioning. Seemed Mr. Mansfield ran a brothel of sorts. A piece of the action and part of the proceeds in exchange for tiny, airless rooms.

Stepping out on the landing, Kyle eavesdropped on Ryan's interrogation of one of the women.

"Don't know what I'll do now. Larry'd rent us rooms. Cheaper than a pimp and he'd make sure no one got too rough." The woman sported a black eye and her cheekbone showed signs of swelling.

Ryan pointed at her face. "Didn't seem to do you much good."

"I was behind on the rent. He'd take it out in trade." She shrugged. Her fingers touched the swelling. "Sometimes he liked it a little rough."

"Did you see anyone here tonight who didn't belong?"

Her gaze darted back and forth then dropped. "No."

Kyle stepped closer. "We can overlook a prostitution bust, but you can't protect a killer. What if he comes back? Comes after you?"

"But Dustin wouldn't..." Her lower lip pouted out and she worried it with her teeth.

"Dustin?" Kyle's heart stopped for several beats. "Do you have a last name?"

"No. But he wouldn't hurt a fly. Larry wanted extra...payment."

Kyle edged Ryan away. He really didn't want him to hear any more, but the vice cop wasn't giving in that easy.

Ryan backed up but stayed within earshot.

"What did Dustin do?"

"Larry had him in a choke hold." Her hand rose to her neck. Fingers stroked her throat as if remembering her own interludes with lovable Larry. "Dustin got away but he kept punching Larry."

"What happened next?"

"I don't know. I ran back to my room. I didn't want Larry to know I saw. He gets...got mean when he thought anyone was laughing at him."

"Were you?"

She lowered her head. "A little. Taste of his own and all."

"Thank you." Kyle walked a few feet away. His hands shook as he swallowed hard. Looked like Tony was right. The hot Memphis night seemed chilly with the idea his lover was a savage killer.

A strong hand gripped Kyle's shoulder. "I'm sorry." Tony's tone was soft, but his words didn't help.

"We don't know for sure."

"We need to pick him up." Tony squeezed Kyle's shoulder again. "And you need to go home. Stay there until this is done."

"Is that an order?" As lead detective, Tony had the power. But as friend, would he use it?

"It's a very strong suggestion. You can't be part of this now. You're too close."

"I know." Way too close. Tears stung his eyes but he kept them from escaping. "I still can't believe he did this."

"And that's exactly why you can't stay part of the investigation." Tony patted his shoulder. "Go home. I'll call you if there's any developments."

Kyle nodded. He didn't look at Tony before he walked away. His superior would recognize the rebellion already stirring in Kyle's mind. He had to find Dustin first.

Dustin's words this morning, his insistence of his innocence, his fear of being falsely accused... Kyle feared his lover wouldn't give up so easily. With everyone assuming Dustin was the killer, they'd consider him armed and dangerous.

The idea of Dustin...

Kyle pushed aside a vision of bloody gunshot wounds covering Dustin's chest. Whatever happened, he had to find him first.

A marked unit blocked his truck. "Hey, let me out," Kyle yelled at the uniform near the cruiser as he opened the door of his vehicle.

The young cop seemed startled but jumped in the vehicle then backed it away from the others.

Where to start...? The witness had retreated to her room and hadn't seen which direction Dustin headed. Beale Street was just a few blocks away. On a busy Saturday night, the crowds would be a great place to hide.

If Dustin was hiding. If he wasn't the killer, he could be making his way back to Kyle's house right now. Maybe he just wanted to gather his belongings from his room. Except why had it taken him all day to get from Kyle's house to here?

And why hadn't he told Kyle he had a place to live? No matter how pitiful.

“Because he wouldn’t want my pity.” Kyle turned at the next corner. “I offered him plenty of that already.”

The lights of Beale Street showed ahead. The street was one of the main nighttime tourist attractions in Memphis. The home of the Delta blues, clubs, restaurants and bars lined both sides of the short street. Shops with everything from voodoo dolls to cheesy souvenirs were wedged in between.

The crowds were an eclectic mix of every race, gender and class. Suits and dresses vied with jeans and shorts.

Since crime followed tourists like a gator on a kill, police—both uniform and plainclothes—patrolled the area. And every one of them would have Dustin’s description by now.

Double parking on a side street, Kyle took a deep breath before he opened the door. If he got out of his vehicle, his career was in jeopardy. If he didn’t, Dustin’s life could be.

Not much of a choice. Kyle climbed out. His hand caressed the slight bulge of his weapon. Caught between a moment of doubt and complete confidence in Dustin’s innocence, he didn’t know whether to lock the gun and his badge in his truck or not. If he was unarmed, without a badge, he couldn’t be accused of disobeying Tony’s order to leave the case alone.

On the other hand, a killer was out there. Somewhere. Didn’t matter if it wasn’t Dustin. He might need to defend himself or others. His weapon went with him.

He slammed the door then locked it. With a heavy sigh, he started down the busiest street in Memphis in search of one man.

* * * * *

Dustin ducked into a familiar alley. He’d spent more than a few nights sleeping here when he’d first lost his apartment. Tourists were more generous than natives when

it came to begging. Plus guys on vacation were more likely to pay for a quickie than the typical resident.

A few loose bricks hid a hole in the wall just big enough for his pillowcase of pitiful belongings. Carrying it around was a little conspicuous. In spite of the sweat and dust from his day's labor, he could pass for just another visitor to Beale Street without his bundle.

Leaning against the wall, Dustin took a deep breath. His hands ached, scratched and cut from his altercation. A sharp pain in one of his fingers might mean he'd broken something. But it had felt good.

Larry had pushed him too many times and he'd taken it. Today was one push too many.

Parched and hungry, Dustin headed for one of several restaurants with a service window open to the street. He could avoid going in but get something to eat and some water.

As he ducked out of the alley, a uniformed cop glanced in his direction. Paranoid, Dustin moved on down to the next street. When he turned the corner, he thought he saw the black uniform bobbing through the crowd.

So much for food and water.

He kept moving. The next block, he doubled back, hurrying up the less-crowded street to the next cross street. Making a full block, he came out on Beale Street again.

With all the business at this time of night, he should be able to hide in plain sight. Unless Larry had managed to get the cops looking for him. He didn't think Larry would want to bring attention to himself or his house. At least, Dustin hadn't planned on it.

His gaze darted around, looking for more cops. He'd become pretty good at picking out plainclothes too. Well, except for yesterday.

Only twenty-four hours ago he'd been in jail when Kyle swooped down to rescue him. So much had changed in such a short time.

His attention on the street behind him, Dustin wasn't expecting an attack from an alley. A hand gripped the back of his shirt then slammed him up against a wall, knocking the breath his lungs. His heart raced as he gasped for air.

"Larry..." How'd he find him so fast?

A well-meaning passerby yelled, "What are you doing?"

"Back off!" Kyle almost growled at the man. "Police business."

"Yeah. Sure." The man disappeared into the crowd.

Kyle twisted Dustin's arms, pulling his hands behind his back. Cold steel shackled Dustin's wrists.

"What are you doing?" Playing innocent was always a good starting point. "Just because I didn't follow orders to stay put doesn't give you the right —"

"Shut the fuck up." Kyle yanked Dustin's manacled wrists, pulling him deeper into the alley.

Dustin didn't know whether to be pissed off or turned-on. His body reacted to Kyle's roughness, his hoarse command. "I would have come back."

"What? After you butchered Larry Mansfield?"

"Butchered? Come on! So I roughed up Larry. He asked for it. Son of a bitch wouldn't take no for an answer."

"So you gutted him? Painted the crosses on his eyes?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Fear pulsed through Dustin, adding and subtracting from his arousal at the same time. "I punched him out. I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?" Kyle slammed him against a wall.

His sore knuckles collided with the rough brick. The handcuffs bit into his wrists. "You're not kidding?"

The faint illumination from the well-lit street highlighted Kyle's angry frown. "He's dead. Same as James Lehman and the others. And you were at the last two murder scenes."

"But I didn't do it. I swear!" Dustin's worst fear was compounding problems by the second. Kyle would never believe him again. Never trust him. And the idea of jail... "Oh God..."

"Where'd you go when you left my house?"

"I found some day labor work." Dustin struggled against the handcuffs. "Check my pocket. The contractor's card is there. He wanted me to come back tomorrow."

The rough frisking collided with Dustin's fear and turned to arousal. Kyle had to notice his cock filling out the front of his jeans.

Unfortunately, Kyle limited the frisking to his pockets. He held up the card in the dim light. "March Construction." Kyle's gaze met Dustin's. "What time did you get back?"

"I don't know exactly." Dustin gasped as Kyle's hand clenched the front of his T-shirt. "Around dark. Larry was there to greet me."

"What happened?"

Dustin avoided Kyle's gaze. "He wanted a little rent bonus. Not the first time, but I'd already decided... I'm done fucking for a living. That's why I picked up some day labor." Glancing up, he watched Kyle's expression for something...approval?

"Really?" Kyle's frown softened. The corners of his mouth curled up a little then drooped again. "Then what happened? With Larry."

"He grabbed me. I tried punching him in the stomach, but the guy's built like a brick shithouse. He caught my wrist, twisted my arm around and put me in a choke hold. I stomped his instep, caught him in the face—probably broke his nose. He fell over and hit his head. I grabbed the few things I had stashed in my room and left. But he was breathing when I left him."

"And that's it?"

"Yes. Well, except I stopped to call 9-1-1 after I left. Head injuries can be serious. I heard sirens and ran."

"Where's your stuff?"

"I stashed it in an alley a few blocks back. I didn't want to lug it around while I got something to eat." He didn't bother to mention he didn't want to look conspicuous. No need to give Kyle more to distrust about him.

"Who were you running from?"

Damn... Dustin took a quick breath. "A cop. I thought Larry had reported me. Had them looking for me."

"Humph... Tony has a BOLO out on you. Has all day."

"BOLO?"

"Cop lingo for be on the lookout."

"What the fuck for?" Righteous indignation welled up. The bastard still thought he was the killer.

"He had my house watched. When you left, you were followed but they lost you. Evidently, they're better at following cars than the Memphis transit authority." A wry smile finally eased Kyle's frown.

"MATA confuses most people."

Kyle raised his hand. His fingers trailed down the side of Dustin's face.

A shiver of arousal quickened Dustin's hardening cock. "I didn't kill anyone. I swear."

"I believe you, but Tony doesn't. And with Larry's death... I wish you hadn't left the house."

"I didn't want to... I decided to give up hooking. I left because I need to get my head on straight before I...we can go anywhere."

Kyle rested his forehead against Dustin's. His hands settled on either side of Dustin's neck. "I want to help."

"You already have. You rescued me. Made me think I could make something of my life. The rest, I need to work on for myself."

"Do you have to do it alone?"

If he'd have asked this morning, Dustin would have said yes. Now he wasn't so sure. In his darkest hours—and some not so dark—the idea of spending his life with Kyle had been a favorite daydream. Never far from his mind.

"Maybe not..." Soft lips stopped him from qualifying his surrender. They could always negotiate later. The kiss was tempered, slow and easy. Lips melding and parting then Kyle stopped.

Once again pressing foreheads together, Kyle sighed. "First we have to deal with Tony and the fact the entire Memphis police force is looking for you."

"Yeah. That could be a problem."

Kyle backed up then fished around in his pocket. Pulling out a set of keys, he held up the small handcuff key. "Let's get these off of you."

"Can we play with them later?" Dustin wagged his eyebrows before Kyle pulled him away from the wall. His body thrummed with desire. The idea of the handcuffs added to the ache in his cock.

"Yeah. Definitely."

With Kyle's hands encouraging him, Dustin turned around. With a click of the key, one cuff dropped, dangling from Dustin's wrist.

Kyle's hand massage Dustin's wrist. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No. Just made me so horny I can't see straight."

A snicker of laughter brushed warm breath against Dustin's ear. His lover's hard body pushed him against the wall. The ridge of Kyle's dick nestled in the crack of Dustin's ass.

"Maybe one more tryst in an alley?" Dustin placed his hands against the wall in the standard "frisk me" position.

"I wish." Kyle ran his hands up Dustin's arms. "So hot for you. Can't wait to get you home."

Home...

Shivers of need spread through Dustin's groin even as his throat closed with emotion. If only this could work...

And why wouldn't it? If he tried. If they tried. "Yes." Yes to trying, yes to a home with Kyle. Yes to hot for his lover's touch.

Footsteps echoed in the alley. With a sharp grunt, Kyle's body heat disappeared.

"Fuck!"

Dustin turned. A glimmer of light flashed against raised metal. Kyle lay on the pavement, his hand fumbling inside his shirt.

Dustin's brain processed his lover's danger in seemingly slow motion. Lunging at the attacker, Dustin hit him hard in a very solid middle. Breath rushed out of Dustin's lungs as the man stumbled back a few steps.

Big guy, well-built. Hard muscles. More than a match for Dustin, but fear for his lover pushed adrenaline through his veins.

With a howl, almost like a wild animal, the man pushed Dustin across the narrow alley.

The barrel of a gun flashed toward his attacker. A loud bang coincided with the crack of Dustin's head against a brick wall. Another shot rang out as the dim light in the alley faded to a pinpoint then disappeared.

Chapter Nine

Dustin struggled toward the sound of voices. His head ached with the intensity of a thousand migraines, but an urgency he couldn't explain pushed him to wake.

The murmur of voices droned around the pain.

"Kyle..." He couldn't speak louder than a whisper, but it renewed his determination. Swallowing against serious cotton mouth, he tried again. "Kyle?"

"He's awake." Not Kyle's voice but familiar.

His eyelids refused to cooperate. Like a desert in his mouth, dryness glued his eyes shut. "Where's Kyle?"

"He'll live."

"Live?" Was there any question? "What happened?" His heartbeat sped up, pumping pain in a measured beat through his brain.

"After you attacked him?"

"Didn't." Why would he attack Kyle? "Where's Kyle?" Dustin lifted his hand to rub his pulsing temple. The clank and clang of metal on metal warned him before his hand stopped short of his head. "Handcuffs?"

A memory of Kyle, a dark place and cuffs... Usually a fantasy, it seemed now a nightmare. "Where's Kyle?" Panic threatened to overwhelm him.

A dark figure, a gleam of metal... A shot echoing in the alley.

"Is he okay?"

Tony's tone cut like a knife. "He'll live, no thanks to you."

Dustin drew a deep breath of relief. "Didn't hurt him."

"Oh, so he attacked himself?" Tony leaned over the bed.

"No. Attacked. Big man." Dustin needed to pull out of the pain and clear his head. Convince Tony his story was true. Find out where Kyle was. "I didn't attack him. We were in the alley. Kyle was removing my cuffs then we were attacked."

"And why would I believe you? Your fingerprints are all over the flophouse where Mansfield was killed. Witnesses place you at the last two murders and you were found in the alley where Kyle was attacked."

"What happened to Kyle?" Desperation softened his demand to a plea. "Please. Tell me."

"Like you don't know? You stabbed him before he managed to crack your head against the wall."

"Wouldn't hurt him."

"You did before."

Dustin knew Tony meant his lies. "That's different. And in the past. I didn't hurt him." His voice strengthened as fear rushed through him. Why hadn't Kyle told them what happened?

"That's what they all say." Tony turned his back on Dustin then walked toward the door. "And it doesn't do them any good when the evidence is stacked against them."

"What evidence?" The flash of the knife flickered at the edge of his memory.

Stabbed. Big guy. With a knife. Shots fired. The sound echoed in his head like it had in the alley.

Dustin struggled to sit, hampered by the shackles on both wrists chaining him to the hospital bed. "The knife. Did you get the knife?"

Tony paused but didn't answer.

"You didn't, did you? Or you'd already know my prints aren't on it."

Turning around, Tony met Dustin's gaze with a stony stare. "We'll find it."

"And it'll prove I didn't do it." Dustin flopped back on the bed. "A gunshot?"

"Yes." Tony's poker face didn't give anything away.

"No one else found in the alley?"

A pause. Pursed lips. "No."

"Did you find the bullet?"

"No." Tony's frown eased a little. "Can you describe your so-called attacker?"

"Big guy. Hard body." Dustin rolled his shoulder. Pain lanced through his muscles. "I tried to tackle him. Kyle was already on the ground."

"What was he wearing?"

Dustin closed his eyes, trying to recall the scene in more detail. When he raised his hand to rub his forehead, the handcuff yanked his arm back. With a sigh, he shook his head. "I don't remember. He came from behind while Kyle was taking off my cuffs. By the time I turned around, the light from the street was behind him. Couldn't see more than a silhouette." He held up his hand, eyebrow raised in an ignored hint.

"What else?"

"Clothes were probably casual. The outline of his shirt didn't look loose like a dress shirt. More like a T-shirt." Taking a deep breath to relax, Dustin closed his eyes again. "Musky smell with a hint of something spicy..."

The fragrance teased his memory, deepening the sense of — acrid, spicy, burning his eyes. Something from much farther back than the attack.

His mind drew him back to holy days. The church filled with people, the smell of bodies crowded into the tiny building. He could almost smell the incense wafting through the hospital room.

"Incense!" Dustin yanked both hands against his restraints. "Church incense. Catholic church. You can't forget that smell."

Tony didn't say anything to Dustin but his rigid stance relaxed a little. He nodded at the uniform standing near the door. "Officer Baker, uncuff him."

Dustin drew a sigh of relief. "You believe me."

"Mostly. Kyle was able to talk a little before they took him away. I just wanted to make sure your stories matched. However, I'd prefer you stay where I can find you. Officer Baker will be outside your door. I'd advise you not to try to get past him."

Baker was a big guy. Young, probably no more than twenty-five, and with well-developed muscles. He didn't make eye contact with Dustin when he walked over with the key to the cuffs.

"I could probably take him." Dustin flashed a smile at the incredulous look the young man threw his direction. "But I'm a little tired right now."

Tony laughed. "I'd like to see you try."

"When can I see Kyle?" Worry gnawed away at his relief.

"Soon." Hands on the foot of the bed, Tony frowned. "He's in surgery, but the doctor assures us he'll be fine."

"Where was he stabbed?"

"In the shoulder, pretty deep with some tendon damage. He'll probably need a little help while he's recuperating." Tony's quick wink made Dustin laugh.

"More than happy to take the job. I just hope my head stops pounding by then."

"Doc said you had a mild concussion and they wanted to watch you for any serious brain injuries."

"Yeah. I won't argue with that." Severe brain bruising can cause death when a person feels nothing more than a headache.

Relaxing into the hard mattress, Dustin pushed his worry aside. Kyle would be okay. Dustin would make sure of that. And this time, he'd go into the relationship with the truth in plain sight.

* * * * *

Kyle flexed his shoulder a little, testing the pain. The memory of being stabbed blurred with really good meds. He could almost sleep if curiosity wasn't gnawing at him like an old dog with a bone.

And where was Dustin? The nurses wouldn't tell him much. They did say Tony was off somewhere following up on something. What, no one seemed to know. Or were unwilling to share.

The not knowing was driving him crazy. Someone needed to tell him something soon or he'd go looking for answers.

A quick rap on the door interrupted his escape plans.

"Come in." His response was a bit sharper than it should have been.

The door pushed open a little then Dustin's head appeared. "Hey, you." Dustin's deep frown morphed into a huge smile.

Relief washed through Kyle. Didn't matter that everyone said Dustin was fine, Kyle needed to see him, in the flesh.

"Come in." He motioned Dustin toward the bed. A sharp pain lanced through Kyle's shoulder. "Oww." Through clenched teeth, he said, "Forgot myself."

Dustin moved across the room in three long strides. "I'll just have to make sure you don't forget again."

A young officer followed Dustin into the room.

"Can I help you?" Kyle asked.

"No sir. Following orders."

Dustin nodded toward the officer. "Meet my shadow, Officer Baker."

"Shadow?"

"Tony's orders. Evidently, Baker isn't supposed to let me out of his sight unless I'm in my room alone or with my attorney."

"Attorney?" Kyle's shoulder throbbed as anger increased his blood pressure. "You aren't a suspect. Tony knows that."

"Tony seemed to believe my innocence but maybe he changed his mind."

"Well, I know you're not a suspect." Kyle glared at the officer. "You can wait outside."

"Sir, just following orders." The young man shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"I'm changing your orders."

"Sorry, sir." A flush of red crept around Baker's neck.

"You realize I'm a detective on the same case as Detective Costas." Kyle's face warmed with anger. Wait until he saw Tony again.

"Yes sir."

"Don't badger the boy, Kyle." Dustin leaned over until his lips brushed Kyle's ear. "We'll just pretend he isn't here. Maybe he'll run screaming from the room." A soft kiss teased Kyle's jaw near his ear then Dustin nibbled on Kyle's ear lobe.

Kyle's anger leveled off as amusement took over. "What'd you have in mind?"

"Well." Dustin glanced at their guest as he spoke. "Maybe a sponge bath? With my tongue?" He emphasized his words with a hard kiss.

"Oh yeah..." Kyle moaned as he opened his mouth for a little non-sponge bath tongue action. Forcing his eyes to stay open, he kept his gaze on Baker.

The red around Baker's collar climbed up. Soon his ears were beet red, almost glowing, but he stood his ground, practically standing at attention.

Kyle bit back a laugh as something else about Officer Baker moved toward attention. Kissing quickly up Dustin's jaw, Kyle said in a loud whisper, "Not working. I think Baker likes to watch."

The door burst open and Tony stormed in. "We have a suspect in custody."

Kyle's heart skipped a beat and everyone jumped at the interruption. "Great, but damn, Tony. Bad enough I've been stabbed, do you have to scare me to death?"

"Sorry." Tony's gaze settled on Baker and a deep frown cut his brow. "What are you doing here?"

"Following orders, Sir. Watching Mr. Eldridge." Baker's frown matched Tony's.

"Eldridge isn't a suspect anymore."

Baker took a deep breath but didn't say anything. "Yes sir. Very good, sir." The young man twisted around on his heel then left the room.

Kyle held back his laugh long enough for the door to swing shut. "You know those last two 'sirs' had nothing to do with respect, right?"

Both Tony and Dustin broke into laughter.

"Yeah," Tony said between guffaws, "I think one meant asshole and the other fuck off."

"Probably." Dustin rubbed his temples. "We'd been tormenting him because he wouldn't give us a few minutes alone."

"Poor kid." Tony took a deep breath as he regained his composure. "I'll make sure to put in a good word for him."

"So a suspect?" Kyle wanted to know this creep was off the street.

"Yes, Harold Tichner. He was brought into the emergency department an hour ago suffering from a gunshot wound. Good Samaritan found him in an alley and called 9-1-1. Another couple of hours and we'd have saved the State the cost of a trial."

"You're sure it's him?" Too many times a good suspect turned out to be a red herring. Like Dustin. Relief threatened to overwhelm him.

"He had a bloody crucifix on him. Bloodstains on his hands. And his clothes smelled of incense, just like Dustin said."

"Huh?" Kyle looked back and forth between Dustin and Tony.

Dustin shrugged. "Catholic Church incense. Something I remembered about the guy in the alley. He reeked of it."

Leaning against the wall, Tony nodded. "The surgeon is removing the bullet. Between ballistics and an analysis of the blood on the crucifix, I think we'll have a lock. As soon as he's conscious, I'll question him. Hopefully, we can add a confession to the list."

"Great." Kyle leaned back against the pillow. Exhaustion or relief—or maybe those really good drugs—drained Kyle of energy. "Great news."

* * * * *

Kyle reached for the truck door but Dustin beat him to it. "I'm not a fucking invalid." Dustin's kid-glove treatment would get old fast.

"Nope, you're not." Dustin held the door, waiting with seemingly bountiful patience. "But you're slow as shit and I'd like to get home sometime today, if you don't mind."

"Asshole." Getting in the passenger side with his left arm in a sling was a touch awkward. At least he could get the seat belt on his own. If his lover attempted to strap him in like a child, he'd...he'd bite him.

Dustin just grinned. "Love you too." The door closed before Kyle could respond.

"Love you too," Kyle said to the empty vehicle. Emotion constricted his chest and left his mouth dry. If this worked...

They would work. Everything was over. Murder solved. Dustin was out, proud and divorced. Almost too out!

Poor Officer Baker. Kyle chuckled as Dustin slid into the driver's seat.

"What's so funny?"

"Baker."

"Well, he wouldn't leave."

"Poor kid had his orders."

"And I have mine." Dustin held up the hospital's discharge instructions. "Which I'll make sure are followed."

"In other words, you're going to be a pain in the ass." Kyle's shoulder throbbed. His meds must be wearing off.

"Only if I'm not doing it right!"

Kyle laughed as he relaxed into the seat. "One thing..."

"What?"

"Is that sponge bath offer still good?"

"Absolutely." Dustin put the truck in drive. "I plan to implement it as soon as we get home."

"Something to look forward to." A lifetime, maybe?

Life was too fickle for Kyle to believe in happily ever after but maybe...

"So is Tichner the one?" Dustin's hands gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles whitened from the pressure.

"Yeah. We think so. One good print on the knife. The three types of blood on it and the crucifix matches the victims, including me. DNA takes months so we're just waiting on ballistics analysis. We have a solid case now, but if the bullet shows it was fired from my weapon, it's a lock."

"I overheard a nurse saying he was out of his head."

"Maybe. More likely off his meds. We'll need to prove he was lucid for at least one of the killings otherwise his lawyer will push for commitment to a psych facility. Tony promised to let me know what the lab says as soon as he hears." Kyle leaned his head back against the seat.

The doctor had said he'd lost a lot of blood and should be careful for a little while.

Fortunately, the drive was short. In spite of the lure of sponge baths from Dustin, Kyle hated hospitals. The idea of going home made him feel a hundred percent better. And Dustin would be there with him.

"You asleep?" Dustin's hand rubbed Kyle's thigh.

His eyelids fluttered open. The truck was in his driveway. "Guess I was."

Home. One with Dustin. Forgetting his shoulder, Kyle lifted his hand toward Dustin. Pain lanced through his wound. "Damn."

"Easy." Dustin mirrored Kyle's action except he ended by caressing Kyle's cheek. "You scared me."

"Me too." Leaning into the caress, Kyle took a deep breath. "The alley...my fault. I shouldn't have let my guard down."

"No blame game. We both knew danger was out there. It's just you're so distracting."

"Likewise."

Soft kisses eased Kyle's guilt. Dustin was fine. Kyle would live. A killer was caught. Life was good.

"Come on before I start that sponge bath in the driveway."

A different kind of aching throb from his shoulder settled in his groin. A soft chuckle bubbled up. Kyle had missed Dustin's easygoing humor. He'd missed a lot of things. The idea they could start over was almost too good to be true.

The hurt of Dustin's lies still stung. Part of it was Kyle's pride. His instincts—even his training—had warned him. He should have paid attention to his brain instead of his dick. Still, lies led to mistrust. Kyle had to work on the trust issues.

"Come on." Dustin held out a hand. "Let's go inside."

"Yeah." Climbing out of the car left him huffing and puffing. Weakness wasn't something he was accustomed to dealing with. Sweat from exertion beaded his forehead and between his shoulder blades.

The hot summer morning didn't help. Temperatures had already hit the nineties and were supposed to rise into triple digits.

Dustin slipped his shoulder under Kyle's arm. "Let me help." His thin frame hid a wiry strength.

Easing into Dustin's grip, Kyle let his lover carry some of his weight. "Don't know if I'm going to be able to participate in a bath..."

"Ah, but that's the fun of a sponge bath. You're not expected to do anything but lie there and enjoy."

"I might be able to handle that." Kyle leaned against the porch railing while Dustin unlocked the door. Cool air rushed out into the humid Memphis morning. His body played tug-of-war between dealing with pain and looking forward to pleasure.

"Come on."

Once again, Dustin's body pressed against Kyle's, hips bumping as Dustin helped him through the door.

"Bed or couch?"

Bed sounded good but couch was closer. "Couch." He could put his feet up and catch his breath before dealing with the trip down the hall.

"Couch it is." Dustin eased his grip, letting Kyle maneuver between the coffee table and the couch. "Relax and I'll get you some water. Time for more pills."

"Yeah." Kyle sank onto the couch, careful of putting pressure on his wound. The stab wound had been deep, almost a through and through. The entry point had been high on his shoulder striking down so he could lean back without putting too much pressure on it.

If Tichner had struck lower, the angle would probably have hit his lungs. Maybe his heart.

His memory of the attack was a little vague. Everything had happened so fast. Something had made him straighten up, turn. A noise? A shadow? He wasn't sure even now.

The sharp, stabbing pain he remembered. Over and over in the hospital he'd dreamed of the knife penetrating his flesh. And the fear. For himself and for Dustin.

Fear had fueled adrenaline, pushing him to action. His need to protect Dustin had overridden even his good sense. He knew that now. Shooting blind toward the main street could have killed an innocent bystander.

So far, internal affairs hadn't done more than check his gun and take a statement. Kyle worried it was only the beginning. Especially since he'd been honest about the incident in the alley with Dustin.

"Here." Dustin's hand, holding a glass of water, appeared in the corner of Kyle's vision.

"Thanks." Kyle took the water then rested the base on his thigh.

"And this." After digging around in his pocket, Dustin pulled out two bottles of pills. He shook one out of each bottle then handed them to Kyle. "The pain pill should help."

The other was an antibiotic. The knife hadn't exactly been clean. Multiple blood types on it as well.

"Thanks." The pills hung in his throat. Gulps of water finally pushed them down. "I think I'm too tired for a sponge bath right now." His cock simmered on low, but the idea of doing anything, even taking pills, wore him out.

"No problem." Dustin settled on the couch next to him. "I'll be here when you're ready." His arm spread across the back of the couch, fingers brushed through Kyle's hair.

Kyle leaned into Dustin, snuggling under Dustin's arm. "Good." With a deep breath, he let his eyelids close.

Dustin mimicked Kyle's long sigh. Relief at Kyle being okay, at being there to make sure he healed. So many things to be grateful for.

He'd called March Construction from the hospital and explained why he didn't make it back to work yesterday. The owner was more than understanding. Small world. David March lived with a cop and had already heard about Kyle's injuries. He offered Dustin fulltime work as soon as he could come back.

Construction work wasn't something Dustin had ever considered. He'd been a self-centered little shit. Marrying the boss's daughter was merely a stepping-stone to a semblance of success—and his so-called heterosexuality. His real talent had been ass-kissing. Figuratively. At least at first.

He stifled a laugh as Kyle's breathed a soft snore. Kyle would probably be more comfortable in the bed, but Dustin didn't have the heart to wake him.

Now...well, construction was honest work for honest pay. Backbreaking, but he knew the job situation hadn't changed. His degree in business management was too vague for the market now. His experience wasn't varied enough and he was still on his ex-father-in-law's hit list.

With jobs so tight, everyone was looking for the jack of all trades—and ones who were masters of everything. Definitely not Dustin.

So, manual labor would work out the remaining poison of his pride. Maybe earn back some self-respect. Plus prove to Kyle just how much he'd changed.

Maybe he could even make amends with Susan. He'd lied to everyone for so long. Couldn't hurt to try.

Kyle's mouth dropped open. A low groan pushed out on a sharp puff of air. "No..."

"It's okay, Kyle. You're home." Dustin ran his hand over Kyle's stomach. "Everything is okay."

Squirming slightly, Kyle settled deeper against Dustin. His snores resumed.

"Everything is okay," Dustin whispered against Kyle's forehead. He ended the words with a gentle kiss. Closing his eyes, he savored the warmth and pressure of Kyle's body.

* * * * *

A sharp knock at the door startled Kyle out of a light doze. His head rested on Dustin's lap. Last thing he remembered was leaning against Dustin. Maybe not such a

light doze. A quick glance at his watch revealed two hours had gone since they'd arrived home.

"Just a minute." His words weren't much more than a hoarse whisper. Trying to keep his voice down didn't make sense, but he wasn't exactly awake yet. He sat up with a groan. Stiff muscles added to the ache of his wound.

The knock sounded again, along with the buzz and ring of the ancient doorbell.

"What?" Dustin bolted up from the couch. "I'll get it." Dustin scrambled to his feet then rushed to the door. "What's the big fucking deal?" He yanked the door open.

Tony pushed past Dustin. "We got him. Kyle, we got him. Ballistics is dead-on. Between that and blood types on the knife and crucifix, we've already arrested him. DNA will be icing on the cake."

His face pale, Kyle sank into the couch. "Good."

Tony stopped. A frown creased his brow. "You don't look so good. Why aren't you in bed?" He turned to Dustin. "Why didn't you get him in bed?"

"I tried." Dustin raised an eyebrow as well as his tone. "He wanted to rest on the couch for a minute and we both fell asleep. Your incessant knocking woke us up rather abruptly. Thank you very much."

"Oh sorry." Tony took a step back. "Kyle wanted to know as soon as I heard anything."

"It's fine, Dustin." Kyle waved toward Dustin. "I did want to know. Need to know it's over." A little emotion welled up in his chest at Dustin's protectiveness.

"It is." Tony's tone softened.

"What about him taking an insanity plea?"

"That's up to the district attorney now, but we may have some basis for premeditation in the first murder."

"How?" Relief washed through Kyle. He didn't like the idea of Tichner getting away with multiple murders because he didn't take his pills.

"He knew the first victim. Seems Tichner was a seminary student ten years ago. He was kicked out after an instructor caught him in a compromising position with a local hooker. She was giving him a blowjob."

"And the instructor who caught him..." The first victim, Carl Rinehart, was a professor at the University of Tennessee.

"Was Rinehart. He was a lay instructor at the seminary back then. Seems like Mr. Rinehart was also caught with his dick where it shouldn't have been."

"With a hooker."

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "The officer guarding Tichner overheard him ranting about a hooker. I put a canvas out to talk to all the ladies in the area. One identified Rinehart. She'd 'helped' him out the day of his death. Another woman remembered Tichner in the area. Said he was so mad he scared her."

"That's that then. But it doesn't really sound premeditated. Sounds like anger driven. Second degree." Still could keep him locked up for a long time. Part of him wanted the death penalty. The man killed five people. Why should he live? One of them could have been Dustin.

"Doesn't have to be a long premeditation. We're working on the timeline. But coming off his meds appears to be deliberate. He was functioning perfectly normal under medication, only becoming erratic after the first murder. The current theory is he stopped taking his meds so he could claim insanity for the first murder but he ended up out of control."

"Still hard to prove." Kyle leaned back on the couch. "How'd Dustin end up near two of the murders?"

"We think he was targeting the flophouse. Following the girls and Dustin to find victims."

"But the kid? The teenage boy?"

Tony snorted a short derisive laugh. "Evidently his daddy decided it was time to make him a real man. The boy was still a virgin so his wonderful father bought him a hooker for his eighteenth birthday."

"And the woman who was killed?"

"Not sure." Tony shook his head. "Her blood type was the same as two other victims so we're not ruling her out. Closer analysis may show it wasn't her blood and she wasn't one of his victims. The news story about the crosses on the eyes broke shortly before she was killed. May be a copycat. We're taking a closer look at the husband in that one."

Dustin stepped closer to Kyle. His fingers brushed through Kyle's hair. "I think that's enough for today."

"Yeah. Okay." Tony's frown returned. "You really look like shit."

"Thanks. With friends like you..."

Tony chuckled a quick laugh. "Get some rest. I'll stop by tomorrow and bring you up to speed."

"Hey, Tony, what about internal affairs?"

"Haven't heard from them. I think you're in the clear. No whispers about anything. I'll check with the captain, see if he's heard anything."

"Thanks." Some relief. Not much. IAB could be waiting until he healed. He was already on administrative leave because of his injuries as well as an officer-involved shooting. Not that IAB was usually so considerate. Maybe Tony was right.

"Take care of yourself." Tony turned toward the door then swung back around. "Dustin, take care of him."

"I plan on it," Dustin replied.

Part of Kyle warmed at the strength of conviction in Dustin's tone. Smiling up at his lover, desire surged through his tired body. Maybe they could discuss the sponge bath again.

The front door closed behind Tony.

"Help me to bed?" Kyle raised his good arm toward Dustin.

A calloused hand met his, pulling him up from the couch. "Happy to." Once again Dustin slipped under Kyle's arm.

With Dustin's support, they shuffled toward the hall. Dustin's closeness, the touch of his body overrode some of the pain from his wound. "Maybe we can renegotiate the sponge bath?"

"More than happy to." Dustin's laugh sounded good.

Laughter hadn't been much a part of Kyle's life since Dustin left. Buried in work—in murder—Kyle hadn't found much amusing.

The hall wasn't wide enough to accommodate them side by side. Dustin fell behind. His hands settled on Kyle's hips. Just touching more than supporting.

The short trip to the bedroom seemed to take forever. At least according to Kyle's dick. Between the pain pill and the short nap, Kyle's energy seemed to have returned. Or maybe he was just horny.

His feet shuffled to a stop near the neatly made bed. "Did you clean up in here?" Three days ago, he'd left the bed rumpled, smelling of sex and with Dustin in it. Seemed like a lifetime.

"Yes. When I came by to get your clothes."

Kyle looked down at the short-sleeved button-down shirt and his faded jeans. "I hadn't thought..."

"Was it okay? I guess I could have asked Tony."

"No, fine." Kyle shook his head. "I... My last memory of the bed had you in it." Turning, he faced his lover. "You were still flushed from sex and I was late for work."

"Sorry about that." A sly smile lit Dustin's face.

"Not sorry. I liked it." Kyle wrapped his hand around the back of Dustin's neck. "And I want it to happen again and again."

"Well," Dustin moved closer until their chests met. "Maybe the sex part. But I'll have to be up earlier than you to get to my new job on time."

"New job?" For a second anger heated Kyle's skin. If Dustin planned to still hook —

"Yep. With March Construction. He offered me a job when I called to say I couldn't make it yesterday. Seems he has a soft spot for cops and impossible relationships."

"Really?" The name was familiar, but Kyle wasn't going to waste energy trying to figure it out. He wanted Dustin. Now. "Need you."

"Good. The feeling is mutual." Dustin's hand slid between them. Fingers began popping buttons free. "You know you'll be much more comfortable out of these clothes."

"I think you're right."

"I'll just help you with that."

Kyle leaned against the dresser. Dustin's fingers brushed his skin as he freed the buttons on his shirt. Kyle's body responded with fervor. Need grew as his cock lengthened, hardened.

Emotion caught him in the gut and the throat at the same time. Kyle had dreamed of someone to share his life. Once upon a time, he thought Dustin was that person. Now... A smile plastered across his lips.

Dustin's gaze darted to Kyle's face. "What are you grinning about?"

"You. Here. Everything."

Instead of matching Kyle's elation, Dustin's expression was serious. "I really do love you, you know. Everything that happened before...it was all my fault. I know that. Denial... I've changed. I promise things will be different."

"I know." Kyle lifted his hand to Dustin's face. His fingers ran across the frown lines on his brow. "I believe you. And I share some of the blame. I should have known something was up. Should have questioned. But we're starting over. I need to work on some trust issues but I believe you."

"I won't lie to you again. I swear."

"Never say never." Life wasn't always so black-and-white.

"Okay, if you ask me if your ass looks fat in your jeans, I might commit a white lie. But the big things in life, no. I won't lie about those." Dustin moved closer until his body pressed against Kyle's. His hand ran up Kyle's left arm, across his shoulder. He caressed Kyle's jaw. His gaze locked with Kyle's. "I lost you once. You can't imagine how miserable I was without you. Every day for the last two years, I've berated myself for fucking things up so badly."

"I can imagine. I was miserable too." Kyle leaned into Dustin's palm.

"I want a fresh start more than anything in the world. I'll do anything for it."

A slight smile tugged at the corners of Kyle's mouth. "Anything?" His body responded to Dustin's nearness.

"Yes." Dustin didn't smile, but his eyes sparked with mischievousness. "What kind of penance did you have in mind?"

"That sponge bath you keep threatening me with?"

"I think that can be arranged." Backing away, Dustin dropped his hand to Kyle's fly. "First, we need to get you out of these." His fingers curled inside the waistband as he popped the button free. The zipper went next.

One hand dipped inside Kyle's briefs. Warm, calloused flesh squeezed his dick. "Feels good." Kyle's eyelids drooped. He reached behind him, placing his hands on the dresser for support. A sharp pain lanced through his shoulder. "Fuck!" He opened his eyes as he gasped.

"What?" Dustin's mouth dropped open, his eyes grew wide. "What did I do?"

"Nothing. Not you." Kyle moved his right arm forward slowly. "I forgot about it." Cradling his arm across his stomach, he took another deep breath.

"Maybe we should wait a few days." Dustin reached for Kyle then dropped his hands to his side. "Why don't you lie down? Rest for a little while."

The shooting pain still burned, reducing his erection to half-mast. "Stay with me?" Sweat beaded his forehead.

Nodding, Dustin's smile returned. "Always." He held out his hand. "Come on."

Kyle let Dustin lead him across the room to the bed.

"I'm going to try again with the clothes. You really will rest better without them."

"Probably." And maybe things would revive as the pain lessened.

Although Dustin was beyond gentle as he helped him out of his clothes, Kyle's shoulder burned with a deep ache. As he eased back on the cool sheets, he drew a deep sigh of relief. "Seems a few days' recuperation may be in order before any kind of celebratory sex."

Dustin sat on the bed, smiling. "Yeah. No rush." His finger brushed through Kyle's hair. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." Tension dissipated, easing some of the pain in his shoulder. He hadn't realized how much he needed to hear those words. "Very good." He patted the bed beside him. "Rest with me?"

"Yeah." Dustin stood then began stripping his clothes.

His body was so thin. The scars and ravages of his time on the street stood out in sharp contrast on his pale skin. In some ways, Kyle blamed himself for Dustin's misery. If he'd answered Dustin's calls, he might have saved him from the worst of his trials.

Kyle smiled at Dustin's almost exaggerated care as he climbed on the bed.

Settling on his side, close but not touching, Dustin propped his head on his hand. "Need another painkiller? It's a little early but should be okay."

"Nah. I'm fine. Just need to rest. And didn't the doctor tell you to take it easy too?"

"Yes, which is why I'm lazing around in bed at three in the afternoon." A smile crinkled the corner of Dustin's eyes.

The urge to touch surpassed the lethargy creeping through Kyle's body. Need forced his hand up. Fingers trailed across Dustin's chest on their own accord. He kept

moving, over the sandpaper five o'clock shadow gracing Dustin's chin. Up to the crinkle of skin around his eyes. Down again, teasing the full bottom lip.

Wet and pink, Dustin's tongue slipped between his lips, touching the tip of Kyle's finger. His mouth puckered around Kyle's finger, hinting at suction. "I thought we were going to rest."

"We will." Once again, Kyle's body had other ideas. "Later."

Dustin leaned over Kyle until his mouth hovered over Kyle's. "Later."

Gentle, melding kisses, lips pressing, barely open mouths. Almost slow motion. Kyle closed his eyes, falling into the pure sweetness of the kiss. Heat rushed through him. His cock filled again, hardening.

Pressure settled on his length. Need pushed past minor considerations, such as stab wounds. Dustin was his cure for so many things beyond physical pain. A deep longing in his soul eased, loosened with each kiss, each touch.

"I've missed you so much." The words rushed out in a blur of sound. Kyle's chest tightened. An ache in his throat made saying more too difficult. He blinked hard against the sting in his eyes.

"Me too, baby. Me too." Dustin's voice was low and husky. His eyes clouded with moisture. "I love you and I swear things will work out this time."

Kyle nodded, not trusting his voice.

Dustin's hand slid up Kyle's stomach. At Kyle's chest, Dustin made a U-turn, sliding under the covers then retracing the route, pushing the sheet down Kyle's body.

Strong grasp circled Kyle's dick as Dustin covered his mouth with another kiss, this time with deeper contact. Tongues met and tangled. More. Harder with urgent need. Teeth banged against lips.

Dustin's hand moved back and forth around Kyle's length. Kyle rocked his hips to match the rhythm. Soft groans punctuated the kisses. Rapid breath puffed back and forth between mouths.

“Yes...” Too quick but too late to stop, Kyle’s body reacted to the almost languid lovemaking. So close... “Awww...”

Dustin rested his forehead against Kyle’s. “Come for me, lover.”

“Oh fuck!” Heat swirled through Kyle, pulsing through his balls, his cock. Warm release splattered over his stomach. “Oh yeah...”

“I love you.” Dustin’s whispered words added to the intense ecstasy swarming through Kyle.

“I love you too.” Kyle reached his hand around Dustin’s neck, pulling him close enough for a kiss. “Love you.” He mumbled through quick, hard kisses.

Dustin matched his feverish need for a few seconds. “But now you rest.”

“Yes.” The aftermath of the last few days—Dustin’s return, the killer, the stabbing—combined with the lethargic aftereffects of orgasm. His body seemed to sink into the mattress, pulling him toward sleep. “But you...” Dustin hadn’t come.

“You can make it up to me later. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Yeah.” The words sounded as an echo, following him into sleep.

Dustin would be there. Life was good...

About the Author

By day, Shayla Kersten is a mild-mannered accountant. By night, she's a writer of sexy romances. Torn between genres, Shayla writes erotic stories about hot heroes and their sexy women as well as hot men and their passionate heroes.

A native of Arkansas, Shayla spent four years in the Army as a missile specialist, stationed in Germany and Oklahoma. After her enlistment was up, she spent eleven years in New York City taking a bite out of the Big Apple. Even her love of theater and the nightlife of the big city couldn't cure terminal homesickness for the Natural State. In 1995 she returned to her roots in Arkansas.

Shayla now divides her time between her mother, her spoiled-rotten dogs, her dratted day job and her obsession – writing. And no, her mother doesn't know what she writes. That's between Shayla, her dogs and her readers!

Shayla welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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