

IMPERATIVE



Belinda McBride

Changeling Press

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ISBN: 978-1-60521-441-2

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF, EPub

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

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Cover Artist: Reneé George

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Imperative (Collection)

Belinda McBride

In the future, we don't choose our mates. Nature chooses for us. Nature doesn't make mistakes. And if you don't pay attention to Nature's Imperative, you suffer.

You wake up one morning, and the world as you know it has changed. You look into blue eyes and see forever. You glance at the woman across the office, and dislike shifts to unfathomable need. A life that seemed unbearably lonely suddenly holds infinite promise.

Come into the garden. The Imperative is calling you.

Missing You Belinda McBride

In the future, we don't choose our mates. Nature chooses for us. Nature doesn't make mistakes. And if you don't pay attention to Nature's Imperative, you suffer.

Aquamarine Davis has an exciting future. The up and coming young choreographer is leaving town for a new job when she feels the unwelcome call of the Imperative. Hounded by an intense, biological compulsion to find her mate, Marina reluctantly attends the local mating assembly.

Artist Con Montgomery is thrilled that the Imperative has finally called! At thirty-two, he believed his time had passed. For years, he's been haunted by visions of blue, which he knew symbolized his mate. The Imperative leads him to Duncan Sinclair, and Con immediately recognizes his future in the smiling blue eyes of this man.

When Con and Duncan walk out of the Assembly together, they leave something behind: Marina.

Their mate.

Chapter One

Standing outside the Morris City Gardens, Marina Davis glared at the ivy-draped walls of the enclosure. She'd hoped her single life would have lasted longer. After all, she was only twenty-three years old. Her parents had not felt the Imperative trigger until they were much older than she. But there was no denying the tingling that swept from her nipples down to her sex. Hell, even her toes were tingling. There was no mistake. Her mate was near and their genetics were calling to one another. She had no choice.

Marina entered the cool garden and left her name with the staff at the desk. The normally serene garden was a symphony of sensation, color, sound and smell. Hundreds of young people were milling, expectant looks on their faces, heads tilted as they honed in on a signal only they could sense. The resonance of the Imperative. The call to their biological mate.

Nature wasn't always intent on reproduction. To her left, two young women gazed at one another in surprise, quivering hands outstretched in disbelief and infatuation. Marina stifled a smile and moved on.

He was here. The air fairly vibrated with his presence. A strong wave rose behind her. She whirled, beaded braids whipping her cheek, expecting an outstretched hand. She saw no one. The resonance was now to her right. She changed directions. For long moments, contradictory signals pummeled her senses. Confused and discouraged, Marina surrendered and sank to a bench in the shade of an ancient tree. If she stayed put, he would be able to locate her.

What was he like? She scanned the crowd, looking for a man of her own race. He would surely be of African heritage. She prayed that he would be understanding about her new position with the Ashland City Ballet. It was only for their Summer Festival. As

choreographer, she would be required for auditions and rehearsals, and possibly for the run of the festival. Marina always danced in the productions she choreographed, and was anxious to begin work on this one. She'd be gone three months, tops. But what if he didn't agree?

Marina turned to her comp pad, losing herself in notes for the production they had chosen to highlight this year's Festival. Minutes stretched. An hour passed. Then another. In horror, Marina looked around. The gardens were empty, and the last of the participants were filing out the gate, leaving their names and the names of their partners with the volunteers. She was alone. Unclaimed.

Long after the volunteers had bundled up their table and departed, casting sympathetic looks her direction, Marina sat in the City Gardens, waiting in the darkness for her mate to come.

* * *

Conrad Montgomery was dangling upside down from the twenty-first story of the Harbor Building when the Imperative hit. And hit it did, slamming like a fist to the groin and a fireball to his heart. Con was profoundly grateful for the safety harness that held him snugly in place.

Shaking, he lowered himself to the bamboo scaffolding he used when he worked. Scattered before him were the saws, nippers and other tools he needed to trim and secure the exotic stone inlay for this particular project. He cut the basic patterns in his workshop, and then refined them up here as they were set into place. Con's workmanship was so precise that he never used fillers. His inlays fit perfectly through precision and craftsmanship. He was now finishing the contract, putting the final embellishments on the crown of fiery haired Apollo who graced the building and gleamed in the sun.

Con's hands were trembling too badly to continue working. His balance was shot to hell. He'd thought it would never happen. At thirty-two, he had begun to think he was too old, that the Imperative had skipped him. His brother and sister had mated years ago, leaving Con the bachelor uncle.

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and fished out a velvet pouch. Inside the pouch was a pendant. A perfect, clear blue-green aquamarine he'd purchased for his mate years ago. He'd seen the cut stone at a gem show. It had called to him, whispering of his future love. Con's subtle precognitive sense had kicked in overtime, so he'd purchased the stone and had it set in an ornate white gold setting. He knew her eyes would be as vivid blue as the stone. She would be a cool beauty, a vibrant contrast to his sun-darkened skin and blue-black hair. Grinning, Con kissed the stone and returned it to his pocket.

* * *

Con arrived early, pushing his way into the Gardens, tilting his head, listening. No call yet, so he entertained himself watching others wander in, most with eager looks of anticipation, others looking dismayed. Every time a new woman entered the gate, his heart quickened, his eyes darted in that direction. But somehow, he missed her.

Con straightened on the bench, certain that he felt a calling tickling the back of his head. He rose, and was briefly distracted when he saw Antonella Sillis in the arms of a pretty redhead. He grinned. He'd slept with Nella just last week, but it looked like she was through with men.

The buzz now seemed to be coming from elsewhere, so he scanned the crowd, not seeing the source. He wandered, homing in on it, and then lost it again. He turned in another direction, and then back again. It was strong now, coming from first one direction, then the other. Damn! Why didn't she just stay still? Finally, in frustration, he clasped the necklace in his pocket and closed his eyes, trusting his inner senses to lead him.

Con moved slowly, opening his eyes for occasional reference. Once, he bumped into a stone bench, almost treading on a pair of coffee brown feet that quickly slipped out of his way. The buzz became stronger, more intense, finally holding still as he approached. His cock swelled, rose, acting with a will of its own. Bemusedly, he thought it was like a witching seeking out water in the desert with a stick. He allowed it to lead him.

His eyes were closed, shutting out all the other distractions, focusing only on this single line of resonance. Con clenched his hands as he came to a stop, smelling, feeling and knowing he stood before his mate. He looked into bemused eyes, as blue as the sky above. As blue as the stone clenched in his fist. Lush, wavy hair as auburn as a redwood. Creamy, unfreckled skin and a face as lovely as he could ever have hoped. His heart skipped a beat in answer to his mate's eyes as they widened in perfect understanding. Perfect recognition.

Con's fingers lost their grip on the aquamarine, the chain sliding loose and the stone falling deeper into his pocket. He stepped forward into the arms of the man he would live with forever.

* * *

When Duncan first saw the dark-haired man moving toward him, his heart lurched in devastation and joy, warring emotions tangling together. He would never lie beside the mother of his children, but he would have this man that Nature had designed just for him.

Duncan had never wanted a man before, but as soon as his sight settled on this one, he knew. The resonance screamed inside his head, and his cock tightened in response. He'd known this sometimes happened, but he assumed the individuals in same sex matings were already predisposed that way. This would take some adjustment.

The dark man moved with grace and strength, even though his head was down and his eyes were shut. Duncan knew exactly why he had resorted to such measures. The resonance had been confusing and difficult to follow. He'd finally halted in the middle of the lawn, hoping to hone in on the message. And then he had turned to see the dark-haired man make his way carefully up the walkway, almost falling over a stunning African woman who was busy with a comp pad. Duncan had been watching her in awe, wondering if the resonance was coming from her.

His breath froze. Even without the Imperative raging through his body, this man was striking. His skin was naturally dark, but tanned darker from the sun. His black

hair was unfashionably long, caught back in a single braid. Latin? Native American? Duncan couldn't tell. When they finally touched, the man's hands were rough and hard, the hands of a workman.

His almond shaped eyes tilted up at the corners, slightly crinkled from the sun and a happy disposition. The color was odd, a dark gray that hinted at green. They were similar in height, but while Duncan's shoulders were wide, his stomach cut, his body muscular, this man's body was lithe and sinewy. He carried much less weight than Duncan. Judging by the corded muscles of his arms, his strength was probably comparable. Duncan knew that lithe body hadn't been developed in a gym, but by his lifestyle.

The men embraced, and Duncan could feel the other man's cock straining against his own. There they stood, forehead to forehead, chest to chest, and thigh to thigh. Duncan thrilled to the feel of a muscled arm holding him tight. Their lips came together in a tentative first kiss that jarred them both to the bone. Duncan closed his eyes and savored the experience. Not too different, except as they bumped noses, he realized they would have to work out some dominance issues. Nevertheless, it was good. It'd add spice to things.

"I'm Con. Conrad Montgomery."

"Duncan Sinclair." Feeling giddy, Duncan began to laugh. "Were you expecting this?"

Con stepped back, surveying Duncan from head to foot. "Anything but. I was expecting a blonde, actually. But a redhead will do."

"It's not red, it's auburn."

Con snorted in laughter. Duncan had probably learned to be tough, growing up with hair like that.

The two men began moving easily together down the shaded pathways, focusing more on one another than their destination. They both had goofy grins on their faces, and as they walked, their hands occasionally brushed, bringing jolts and thrills down their bodies. A new and completely unexpected world had just opened to them both.

"So, Con, what will your family think?"

Con's eyebrows flew up in surprise. "Wow, hadn't thought of that. Dad's gonna be okay, our culture is pretty open about same sex unions. Mom though... she's gonna want grandbabies. But my brother and sister have already done their duty that way." He shrugged. "She loves me. She'll love you too. How 'bout yours?"

Duncan's eyes creased in a smile. "Same thing. My father's gone, passed away a few years back. Pop might have been uncomfortable, but he mated through the Imperative as well, so he'd have come around. My three brothers have scattered seed far and wide. The family name is secure." His dimples were deep and charming. Joy fairly radiated from his face. Con felt like Duncan looked.

They walked a wide loop through the garden, eventually returning to the gate. As they left the park, Con paused, his brow wrinkling a bit. He scanned the grounds briefly and then turned back to Duncan.

"I'll miss having kids. But I guess we can work around that."

Duncan nodded in agreement. "Adoption is good. Or a surrogate. I can afford one."

He watched as Con turned back to the park briefly. "What is it?"

Con turned back to his new partner. "An echo maybe? I think we're still putting off the calling vibe. It's got me feeling a little off." Duncan waited while Con stood, listening, and then shaking his head clear. After a moment, they headed down the street to their new future.

Chapter Two

Too sick to eat, and too shamed to face her family, Marina went straight to her tiny apartment near the campus. As she hurried in the waning daylight, the almost finished mosaic on the front of the Harbor Bank building caught her eye. It faced west, towards the setting sun, and the gargantuan image of Apollo caught the last rays of sunlight, casting them about in a frenzied dance.

As always, she paused to admire the work, a little disappointed to see it was almost complete. But when the scaffolding came down, it would be incredible. The formal presentation of the artwork would be later this summer, while Marina was away. She was sad to miss it. She'd have liked to watch the festivities and meet the genius who'd created the work. She'd love to meet the model! Day after day, for months on end, she'd walked past the building, peering up at the artist perched spider-like in his webbing and bamboo. He seemed lonely up there. But not as lonely as she was now. Could anyone be as lonely as she was now?

Slowly unlocking the door, she looked around the place that she'd called home for so long. The apartment had been her haven, her workshop. Now it was an empty shell, waiting for someone else to come fill it with life. All that remained was a sleeping bag on the floor and a change of clothing for tomorrow. Her furniture and most of her possessions were in storage. She'd packed her luggage into the tiny electric car that was programmed for her next destination, hours away in Ashland City.

She would ring home tomorrow, tell her mother about the missed connection and then leave. They'd want her to delay, to come and cry on their shoulders. Marina didn't want that. Somehow, she knew she was responsible for the mishap. Guilt gnawed at her, and shame worried at her mind. She would go to her new job, but somehow, the glamour had fled. After the summer, her new future stretched out, blank

and unmarked. *Tabula rasa*. Blank slate. And for the life of her, Marina couldn't think of what she could possibly put on that slate.

Her womb contracted at the thought. She'd never really thought about having children before, but the sudden realization that she might never have them ate away at her body, just as a new and bone-deep loneliness ate at her soul.

In the back of her mind, Marina had always expected the Imperative to come. She'd looked forward to it and resented it at the same time. It was a safety net that took away her freedom to choose the mate of her choice, at the time of her choice. But now that the worst had happened, she felt lost and devastated. Years ago, a friend of hers had attempted suicide. He'd told her the single most evil emotion that a person could harbor was despair.

He'd been right.

Marina paced the empty apartment, checking closets, checking anywhere that she might have forgotten something. She used an empty soda cup to drink some water. She checked her comp pad... for what? An incoming plea from a missing partner?

All excuses now exhausted, she lay on the top of her sleeping bag in the darkness. She didn't break down, but allowed the waning Imperative to roll over her, swamping her in yearning and want. She was aroused, her body screaming for her missing mate. Never in her life had Marina felt want like this. It was as though her old body had fled, and Marina had crashed into this new, discontent body. Her ears strained for the echo of the resonance, an answering call. Her skin burned for a touch. She didn't even have a fantasy face to comfort her to sleep.

* * *

They ended up at Duncan's home, mostly because it was closest to the City Garden. The place was old, probably dating to the previous century, designed and built in now forbidden wood. Con's breath hissed in appreciation as he walked over the lovingly polished antique hardwood floor in the living room. The furnishings were modern and comfortable, the living room set up for conversation. An adjoining room contained computers, vid screens and music equipment. It was tasteful, masculine and

just the tiniest bit sterile. Con was already creating art in his head to enhance the well-seasoned features of his new home. This was vastly nicer than his rented walk-up downtown. He could live without the ocean view.

After a brief tour of the house and the manicured backyard, the two men moved to the bedroom where Duncan hovered uncomfortably.

"Looks like you were expecting company." Thankfully, that broke the tension. Candles studded the room, and flowers from the garden were scattered on all the surfaces. The bed was huge, but then Duncan was a tall man. Con had prepared his own rooms with scented oils and flowers, waiting for a woman. He'd even bought chocolates and champagne. They could christen his place tomorrow.

Con flexed his shoulders and settled himself on the bed, propping his back against the massive headboard. He toed off his boots and stretched his long legs out in front.

"So, Duncan, what do you do for a living? Not many people your age can afford a nice place like this."

Duncan's cheeks flared with color, making him look younger. He was what? Maybe twenty-five? He settled onto the bed next to Con, kicking off his own shoes.

"Electrical engineer. I design the wiring for buildings, vehicles, robotics and that sort of thing." He leaned back against the headboard. "I graduated young, got an early start on my career. When I bought this place, I thought it would be good for a family. It's got three bedrooms, with a big attic I've been finishing as a rec room or something. So if we stay here... I mean..." He looked away, flustered. "There's plenty of room if you want your own space. We don't have to..." He broke off as Con planted a hand firmly over his mouth.

"We've got all the time in the world to work this out. Neither of us expected to mate with a man, but I know it's right. We'll be fine, Duncan." He lowered his hand, grasping Duncan's in his. "Tell me about yourself... how old are you... what do you do for fun... all that stuff..."

Duncan twisted his hand, and then entwined his fingers into Con's. The sun was setting, the golden red rays drifting into his window. In the distance, the sun's rays struck the giant Apollo mosaic across town.

"I love that art piece on the Harbor Bank building. God, that thing is impressive!"

"Thank you. I'm proud of it."

Duncan turned to him, jaw dropping open. "That's you? Yours?"

Con nodded, with a cocky grin on his face. "I'd have had it finished today, if the damned Imperative hadn't come knocking."

"Do you want to go downtown tomorrow? I can give you a hand finishing it."

Con shook his head. "No, it's my job, and I'll get back to it on Monday. Besides, we should probably meet the families tomorrow. My folks are having a barbeque. Do you have anything planned?"

"My brothers and I go to Mom's most weekends. We get together on Sundays to watch the game. I was thinking we could go over then. If that's okay?"

"Sounds like a plan. So, are you going to warn them about me?"

"Are you?" Con grinned.

"Nah, let 'em get the full impact when we show up. It'll liven things up."

As the sun dropped, they talked on, sharing their lives, their loves and their hopes. Some of their plans would change out of necessity, but the two men discovered they synchronized so well, they felt like longtime companions.

* * *

The sun was fully set, and the room glowed with the candles that Duncan had lit. They'd polished off the champagne, and Con had raided Duncan's music disks, finally settling on a mix that Duncan had put together himself. It was a good mix of contemporary rock and old school.

"So Con, when Apollo is finished, what next?"

"Off the building and back into the studio, that's what. I've got a proposal in for a new building. Harbor's so happy with the Apollo design, they're working with the

City to expand the Greek project to other buildings. I've finished a design for Poseidon on the City Center Tower, but site work's a bitch, and dangerous to boot. I'm gonna do some studio work for a while. Maybe some stained glass projects. Maybe some sculpture."

"Just how dangerous is the site work?" Duncan was wearing a frown. Like everyone in town, he'd seen Con spidering around the building, using ropes and pulleys to maneuver huge slabs of stone and marble into place. It looked fearfully dangerous, in Duncan's opinion.

"Well, I always use safety harnesses, and the scaffolding is amazingly sound. The wind can be a problem. But in all, I'm probably safer than the average traffic cop." He reached out and settled his hand on Duncan's bent knee. "It's what I do, bud. I created an art form and it's my life."

He watched his hand as it followed Duncan's knee up his hard thigh. Through his loose cotton pants, he could see Duncan was hard. Hard as Con was himself.

He turned to look at Duncan. "Do you want this?"

Duncan's eyes were hot. Frightened, but hot. He nodded.

"I've never been with a man, Duncan, but I know what feels good on my body." He slid Duncan's loose shirt up, baring the other man's hard belly, bending down to let his tongue trail over the lightly tanned skin. "You taste good. Different, but good."

Duncan's belly flinched, and he began opening the buttons of his shirt, shrugging out of it. Fast.

Con sat up on his knees and grinned at Duncan, pulling his own tight T-shirt over his head, catching his braid on the shirt collar. What the hell... Con unsnapped his jeans and was out of them before he could think twice.

Conrad fell back in surprise when Duncan swooped down on him and kissed him hard, pushing him back against the bedding. Con was flat on his back, arms pinned to his sides, Duncan's hard-on pressed tight to his thigh. Duncan's lips were hard on his, tongue sliding against lips in an intent invasion.

A shot of panic coursed through Con's belly. He surged up and wrestled Duncan onto his back in a primal dance for domination. They wrestled until Con's greater strength and agility dominated, and he had Duncan pinned on his back, arm behind his body. They lay still for a moment, muscles straining against one another, breathing hard, marshalling their forces, neither willing to give in to the other. Slowly, Con began to release his grip on Duncan's hands.

"I'm going to let you loose, and then you're going to drop those fucking pants."

He was breathing hard through his nose, trying not to pant. The panic had fled, leaving behind only heat and lust and fear, all mixed up in a crazy cocktail. He was not going to allow this to devolve into a crazy fuck. Maybe later, but not this first time.

Con watched cautiously as Duncan's shaking hands untied the drawstring and pushed down his pants.

"Now Duncan, we're going to lay here on our sides for a few minutes, slow this thing down. Got it?"

Duncan's color was high, his chest flushed and ruddy with arousal. Con still hadn't adapted to looking at another man's body as an object of lust, but he could see that change would happen quickly. The redhead was beautiful, his creamy skin lightly tanned, his muscles hard and cut. His cock reddened with arousal in a clashing contrast with the deep red hair of his pubic pelt. Cautiously, Duncan settled back onto his side, facing Con.

"Now can you kiss me without taking out my teeth?"

Wordlessly, the other man nodded.

"God, Duncan, I hope you didn't do this with your girlfriends!"

"I never felt the need to make a woman submit. I guess... being bigger and stronger..." He sighed gustily and reached out to stroke Con's cheek. "I'm sorry."

They tried again, a bit awkward, finally finding just the right angle. Con found himself awash in an entirely different sensation than he'd experienced before. As they opened to one another, tongues explored, hands wandered, and then Con slipped away, pressing long, wet kisses along Duncan's jaw, down to his neck. Con didn't usually

have strong tendencies toward domination, but he wanted the younger man's surrender.

With a despairing groan, Duncan rolled onto his back, submitting to the older man, opening his throat, his chest, his belly to hot kisses and sharp bites. He brought one knee up to his belly when Con ran the flat of his tongue over first one nipple, and then the other. He grabbed Con's dark head and held it close to his body, guiding him slowly lower. And lower still.

Con paused when faced with Duncan's erection. He felt unsure, tentative. But damn, he had one of these as well and he knew what it took to get him off! He hovered over Duncan's pelvis, licked slow and wet, down his rigid shaft to his balls, grinning as the other man's hips jerked and hopped. He leaned in and looked at Duncan's balls. They were hard and ruddy and pulled tight to his body. Con gently pulled them into his mouth, rolling them over his tongue, feeling his partner shudder with delight. He reached up and laid his hand over Duncan's flat belly, holding him still, rubbing gently. Duncan opened his legs wider, allowing Con greater access to his body.

Con glanced up at his new mate, gauging his comfort and his arousal. Good. Duncan was watching, aroused but unafraid. Con let the stones slip from his mouth and began to move on Duncan's cock. He started gently, and then began to use his hands and mouth to work the man more aggressively.

If he'd been pleasuring himself, he'd use a heavier hand, more friction, so Con followed his instincts, pleased with the chest deep groans coming from Duncan. He immersed himself in the experience, comparing the hard, aggressive member in his hands and mouth to the delicacy of a woman's body. With a woman, his tongue would be circling gently on the tiny pearl of her nerve-rich clit. A woman was wet and to his taste, scrumptious. Duncan was salty and dusky and male. His arousal was blatant and wonderful.

Con circled the head of Duncan's cock as he would a woman's clit, coming in like a hungry bee to take the salty pre-come from the slot on the glans. He tongued lightly over the sensitive underside, giving special attention to that delicate spot beneath the

head. He smiled as the other man groaned, and then pulled the entire cockhead tightly with his lips, feeling it fill his mouth. Con was amazed as heat, literally waves of heat, rose from Duncan's now twisting body, and that heat transferred to his own body, his cock roaring for attention. Fearing that Duncan was coming too close, he squeezed firmly at the root of his cock, mentally wishing someone would do the same for him.

"Duncan, do you want me to finish it?"

Duncan forced his eyes open, looking down at the man making love to him. Con's cock was jutting, seeping. He was close, and Duncan hadn't even touched him yet!

"Get your ass up here, Con. I wanna touch you." He reached out and enfolded the head of Con's cock in the palm of his hand.

Con straightened in distraction, letting his grip loosen and then tighten again. Duncan's cock was slippery with saliva and pre-cum. Con could feel himself sliding around in Duncan's palm with dry friction and heat.

Without a word, he moved away from Duncan's grasp, kneeling between the other man's legs. He pushed in, aligning their cocks root to tip, holding them tightly in his fist. Con began to thrust upward, forcing Duncan to move the opposite direction. He guided the other man's hand to their joined cocks and together, they made a slippery, hot tunnel. Con's body reacted wildly, while his mind was still in confused denial of what it was seeing. Two cocks, one long and flushed red, cut and clean. The other wider, though not as long, the skin darker, the fat, rounded head peeking from his foreskin. Two cocks, two sets of testicles, snugged tightly together.

As they moved in counterpoint to one another, Con lowered his body, supporting his weight on one fist. Seeing his predicament, Duncan reached down and took over for Con, holding tightly to their straining cocks, allowing him the freedom to thrust, to guide their movement. Their stones slapped together, adding to the sensation, and as Duncan became more sure of himself, Con bent forward and kissed him deeply and hard, thrusting his tongue, fucking his mouth, as dirty and hot as either had ever dreamed.

Duncan's fair skin revealed his arousal, rising ruddy up his chest. Flags of color emerged in his cheeks. His skin was pink where they slapped together at the groin. Con looked down, groaning at the wonderful, forbidden sight. Overwhelmed by emotion, he lowered himself fully to his partner. They wound together, making love. It was as erotic and as romantic as anything Con had ever imagined in his life. Two bodies in a fragrant, candle-lit room. Two bodies, perfectly matched, their limbs entwined, hard chests, hard bellies, masculine and perfect. Neither was top or bottom, dominant or submissive.

They moved faster and harder, the rims of their cockheads catching in an almost painful confrontation, but good, so very good! Con's head dropped forward as Duncan thrust his head back into the pillow. He almost cried out when Con buried his face into the hollow of his neck, teeth nipping, tongue soothing the pain away.

They were moving fast now, flat bellies straining towards one another. Con arched his back upward, Duncan's hips coiling and thrusting, their combined heat mingling. When Con didn't think he could take it anymore, Duncan let out a harsh moan. The tension in his thighs increased. His neck corded, veins throbbing. His hands clamped down on their cocks, almost painfully. With a suddenness that took his breath away, Duncan slid his fingers down behind Con's tender sack, massaging firmly, and suddenly Con found himself there as well, shouting as he came, nonsense and curses and words of love alike.

Duncan was shaking and cursing, his semen spurting out onto his own belly, and that wet warmth was the last straw for Con, who dug hard, freezing as he released, remotely in awe of the strangled cry that escaped his own throat. His hips dug, buttocks strained, and then dug again and Duncan squeezed him, pumping the last drop of seed from his body. Con hovered, back tight as a bow, suspended over the other man's body, letting his eyes drift open, taking in the shared expression on Duncan's face. Shock. Exhilaration. Joy.

Slowly, Con became aware of his body, arms shaking as they struggled to support his weight. His cock, only half-soft, was nestled against Duncan's in the wet

pool of their release. He was panting, his braid hanging over his shoulder. If he'd been with a woman, she'd have let his hair loose. It would be a tangled, sweaty mess. If he were with a woman, she'd want cuddling and words of love. She'd want to bask in the afterglow.

Unlocking his elbows and shaking, he rolled to Duncan's side, where he was enfolded in a powerful hug.

"Oh, shit, Con. What the hell did you just do to me?" Duncan's arms loosened, but didn't let go. Many long minutes passed before they could rise and make it to the shower. After the afterglow had worn off.

Chapter Three

"Mareeena!" The voice was high-pitched and frenzied, bringing a wince to the faces of many gathered in the darkened auditorium. She pasted on a smile and took the seat next to Jackson Smith, forcing him to shush. A group of dancers was on stage warming up. She wanted to watch before they began to audition.

"Sweetie, you said you'd be late..."

"I know what I said, Jack, but plans changed. I got in last night."

Jackson leaned in close, bringing his head next to hers. "The director called in late, wanted me to warm them up and hold them till he made it. Not a very good first impression for a director." Jackson's tone was dry and sarcastic.

Marina didn't comment. This was her first solo gig, and she wanted to make it count. She welcomed the time to gather her composure.

"Marina, sweetie, not to impose..."

She shot him a lethal look.

"Weren't you supposed to have other plans? Maybe a honeymoon?" He looked at her anxiously. "Oh God, I've hurt you, haven't I? Oh sweetie, tell me all about it!"

Marina looked around the room, seeing curious eyes. She'd avoided all discussion of the subject, even with her parents. A friendly shoulder would be nice. "Look, Jackson, this isn't a good time, but maybe after work today?"

He nodded.

"I missed my mate. I was in the park. He was there, and then he wasn't. We missed each other completely."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry! Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. The low-level arousal ebbed and flowed. The yearning had evolved into a feeling of deep-seated grief. She shook her head once more, feeling the whisper of heavy braids against her cheeks.

"We'll talk tonight, Marina. Don't you leave without me! I'll fix you dinner if you'd like."

She pulled herself upright, refocusing on the dancers. "We'll talk tonight."

They glanced up as the director joined them, glaring at the two as though they had been the latecomers. He opened his charts and spread them on the dimly lit table. "Are we all ready?"

Jackson and Marina exchanged glances. It was going to be a long summer.

* * *

As expected, Jackson's version of fixing her dinner was to take her to the nearest pizza dive, where they sat and nibbled at pepperoni and sipped beer. She didn't really like beer, but the warmth in her belly helped with the ache.

"Is it true about the physical symptoms?" Jackson was one of the majority who would never be subject to the whims of Biological Imperative. The drive appeared to be inherited, and while it often skipped generations, it would always come back to the same family lines.

The Imperative was a mystery, even after centuries of research and study. Biologists, anthropologists and all the other "-ists" that could be named had taken their shot at the phenomenon. Answers were rare. The one certainty was that Mother Nature rarely, if ever, made mistakes in her game of matchmaking. Divorce was non-existent among Imperative-mated couples. Their children were brilliant and well-adjusted. And if an individual denied the call, both parties suffered. Forever. Outside relationships were awkward, sex was a near impossibility. Children? Well, the body just wouldn't cooperate without the proper mate. Evolution at its finest.

"I feel like I'm having a mild withdrawal from something, sort of feverish and shaky."

And horny. Goddamned horny. She'd raided a sex shop on the way out of town, feeling horribly embarrassed by some of the toys she'd purchased. Never in her life had she even heard of an anal plug, but she'd found herself purchasing one!

"I feel like someone died, but I don't know who. It's not a good thing, Jack."

He bit into a slice and wiped his chin. His grey eyes were sober, his normally frenetic behavior was calm. Sometimes Jack knew how to be a friend. A very good friend indeed.

"The worst thing is that I feel ashamed. I was angry about it coming, so I sat and worked and tuned everything out. It's my fault."

Jack listened as Marina talked, feeling bad for her. She was a driven woman, always focused on her career, the next production, the next dance, the next eight counts of movement. In the years he'd known her, Marina had never taken time for herself, and she was right. She'd probably unconsciously sabotaged herself and her partner.

He reached out and cupped her cheek, and she closed her eyes tightly, a reluctant tear squeezing from her eye. She wore her black hair in tiny, artfully arranged micro braids. He'd never liked them, feeling they hid the lush beauty of her face. Jackson was fanciful, and had always believed that Marina was the reincarnation of the Queen of Sheba, or some great Egyptian goddess. Her bearing was regal. No doubt her dance training contributed to that, but Marina was the nexus of fire and ice, aloof dignity and passionate abandon.

Onstage, she could move from the classical elegance of ballet, to the earthy raunch of Old School hip-hop. He'd seen her barefoot and nearly naked, whirling in an African tribal dance. Jackson idolized her, and though he'd never been with a woman in his life, if she gave him the chance, he'd love her. It would be a disaster of course. He'd stray. Some tight-assed dancer would always catch his eye. But given the chance, he'd try. For Marina, he'd play straight.

How could her mate pass her by within the confines of Morris City Gardens? It had to be sheer blind stupidity. His heart ached for his best friend.

Chapter Four

One year later

Duncan leaned casually in the door of Conrad's studio, watching quietly as his partner worked at the drafting table, deep in concentration. The past year had been a revelation. Now that the newness of the relationship had worn off, they'd begun to settle into an amicable and deeply satisfying relationship. They were best friends, hanging at the bar, watching the Sunday games with Duncan's brothers, and spending the occasional weekend hiking in the Redwoods. They were lovers, sometimes sensitive and gentle, at times passionate and nasty, experimenting with new positions, with penetration, with wrestling and frottage. The sex was just damn hot.

But something was wrong. Duncan knew he wasn't alone in the uneasy awareness. He felt that somewhere, tucked away where he couldn't really see it, there was a hole in his heart. He wasn't certain if it was the setting aside of certain dreams, or simply the fact that he missed female companionship. Duncan caught himself glancing speculatively at women, and then burning up in shame for doing so. As his discomfort increased, bit by bit, he'd begun to withdraw.

He loved Con. Duncan knew that as clear as day. Sometimes, like now, he caught himself watching, fascinated, as his man worked, often for hours on end, forgetting food, forgetting sleep. Duncan had long been aware that the artist who'd created the murals was a genius, but living with him, loving him, brought that awareness to painful focus.

Sometimes the process of creation ate him up, and Duncan wondered if Con remembered him at all. In the beginning, that had been painful, but that was Con. And he more than made up for that artistic abstraction. When Con's attention turned to Duncan, it was just as intense, just as passionate as the attention he gave to his art.

He was designing now. Duncan recognized a graph for a large project. Above Con's head, dangling from a cabinet, was a large, faceted gemstone in an elaborate setting. It winked in the sunlight, swinging lazily as a light breeze caught it. Con called it his muse. The aquamarine did almost seem to have a personality of its own.

Duncan stepped behind Con, touching him lightly on the shoulder to alert him to his presence. Con smiled in welcome, lifting his head, leaning back against Duncan's hard belly.

"Hey."

"Hey." He dropped his hands to Con's shoulders and began to massage lightly, feeling the tension in the other man. "You up for lunch? I can go get something, if you like, or we can go out." He leaned over, brushing his lips over Con's temple, catching his first glimpse of Conrad's next great project, a new mural that would go up next to the City Center building. It made his hair stand on end.

"Aphrodite. Anyway, my version of the goddess."

Duncan moved to his side and whistled. Traditionally, the Greek goddess of love was blonde, voluptuous and naked, clothed in long flowing hair. This Aphrodite was different.

"I'm drafting a couple versions, but this is my favorite. They probably won't like her though. Too non-traditional."

She was standing in the traditional sea shell. But in place of the lily white goddess stood a vision of power and sexuality. She looked more like an Egyptian goddess, her skin mahogany brown, her body lithe and powerful, muscular long legs leading to gently curved hips. She modestly covered her voluptuous, round breasts with one hand, the other resting over her mons.

Her features were strong and regal. Full, high cheekbones tempered by a lush mouth and liquid eyes. Her nose was strong and aquiline, just this side of arrogant. Her eyes tilted upwards, traced in kohl. Her braids were clearly Egyptian in style. Duncan felt a frisson of recognition. And it made him hard. It made him want.

"God, Con, who's the model? She's stunning!" He moved closer to the design, looking at the figure surrounded in hues of azure and aquamarine.

"No model. I'm like Zeus, she sprang from my head fully formed!" He grinned, stretching and twisting, loosening up after hours at the table. He then stepped back and stood beside Duncan, arm hooked casually around his waist. "They might want a blonde Aphrodite, but I'll make the pitch anyway. If they don't want her, I'll make a panel of this design for the house." They stood looking at the drawing for a long moment. Con sighed heavily and turned away.

"We have a problem, don't we, Con?" The dark man turned and looked steadily into Duncan's eyes. "You aren't happy."

Conrad sighed and pulled Duncan to a table. They both took seats.

"I don't think the problem is between us, bud." He pulled his braid forward, tugging it absently. "I love you, completely and truly. You are undoubtedly the man that I'll spend the rest of my life with. But..."

"There it is. The 'but'."

"Yeah. I don't know. I always liked women. I always figured there'd be a woman in my life, a wife, having children, grandchildren with her. I love my mom and grandmothers so much. Maybe I'm just missing that. You too?" He almost grimaced, the words sounded so sexist. But so true.

Duncan nodded. His mom had been the traditional mother. She baked and ran the house with an iron fist. He knew Con's mother was like that, too, except instead of cinnamon rolls, she made fried bread and churros. "What did you think she was gonna be like?"

Con leaned back and crossed his legs at the ankles. "Blonde. I guess opposites attract. I picked up that aquamarine years ago, thinking she'd have blue eyes like yours. You?" Duncan's eyes flicked to the gemstone that lazily caught the sun.

"A redhead. We tend to flock together, you know. You notice my brother's wives all have red hair?"

Con grinned at that. Indeed, they did, and their children were all in varying shades of red, from Duncan's deep russet to fire engine red. One of his little nieces had pale strawberry blonde curls. Con's nieces and nephews were dark, like their parents and grandparents. They were mostly from Plains Indian lineage, and he was proud of it.

"Maybe there was a third, and we missed her."

Duncan burst out laughing, though Con didn't join him. "Every man's fantasy, but no man's reality. God, Con, could you imagine, me and you, and our perfect woman?" He visibly shivered, and Con felt the same frisson of arousal. "I saw same sex couples, multi-racial couples, but no trios. Why on earth would that happen?"

Con just shrugged. Much as he'd wrapped his brain around it, there wasn't an answer. "Just a thought. You're right. We're probably just having to adapt, now that the honeymoon's over." But still, Conrad felt that pulling inside his gut. That same pull that grabbed him when he first found the stone, and when he left the garden, with Duncan at his side. They'd left someone behind. He knew it. He just didn't know what to do.

* * *

Marina paused on the sidewalk, gazing up at the huge mural in progress -- the second. This one was Poseidon, rising from the waves. He was only partially complete, and would be a stunning counterpoint to Apollo on the Harbor building. She'd heard rumors that the city had commissioned a third mural, a female. Probably Aphrodite. She gave a delicate snort. So typical. She'd rather see Athena, or Artemis. But Aphrodite would fit the sun and ocean theme.

She tilted her head back, blocking the sun from her eyes. Today was her first day back in Morris City. She was doing a guest stint at the City Ballet, and being paid quite well, thank you very much. In the year since she'd left, her work at the Summer Festival had led to a gig at the Dance Theatre at the Capital. Now, she'd finally come home.

She'd grown accustomed to the discomfort of the missed connection. Every time an Assembly gathered, Marina had been there, waiting patiently, always leaving alone. The constant buzz in her gut told Marina that he was alive, but a vague uneasiness told

her that maybe he was not so well. If she felt so damn hellish, her mate surely would as well. The guilt of that knowledge ate away at her, until Marina had no choice but to lie down and die, or stand up and go on.

After many dark hours, she had chosen life.

Marina poured her pain into her work. Critics had proclaimed her a genius, worthy of the greatest future. Problem was, she didn't really care. Oh, her work was still her greatest, indeed, her only, joy. But her driving, overriding ambition had flown out the window. Marina would be just as pleased to work with a local children's group as she would be working with the greatest divas on the planet. It made little difference. Fame didn't fill an empty heart.

High above, Marina watched the artist as he lay flat to the building, piecing the stones of the mural into place. It was tedious, painstaking labor. As she watched, a gust of wind caught him, and he steadied himself, light glinting off his protective helmet. She wondered what sort of man would have such a vision, and the determination to follow it through. He rappelled across the brow of the god. From this distance, she could see that he was dark and muscular and so very agile. His movement was as much a dance as anything she'd ever choreographed. Marina breathed through the rise of arousal in her belly, felt a surge of moisture in her panties. Orgasm by observation. Now that was a new one.

Marina laughed and walked away, ducking into the doors of the City Center where rehearsals would begin in just a few hours. She brushed wrinkles from the crisp cotton skirt of her sundress. It was surprising how good the pale, seawater color looked against her dark skin. She saw her reflection in a window and grinned. The new skull cut looked damn good on her, revealing the graceful curve of her neck and skull. Jackson had talked her into it. He'd said it made her look like a goddess. That was silly, but it certainly made her feel like a queen. And low maintenance to boot!

She headed into the darkened Theatre Arts Complex and brought up the house lights, settling in to take notes. She just missed seeing the artist rappel to the ground, his

work for the day finished. A wave of dizziness had struck, and he decided to call it quits. No sense in courting danger.

Chapter Five

Opening night was a success. Dress rehearsal had been a disaster. A bad dress rehearsal was always the sign of a good opening night, according to theatrical lore. Marina gave over her responsibilities to the stage manager. The show was up and choreographed, so she was finished here.

The Arts Board had requested that she do a solo for the gala opening, and she'd been thrilled, opting for a modern piece that she had choreographed herself. While she was a choreographer, Marina's ego still popped when she went on stage. She'd designed her own costume, a simple dress, filmy and sheer in the shades of turquoise and aquamarine that she simply couldn't get enough of lately. Blues for the blue. Even her music had been chosen for its bluesy tone.

A standing ovation was a good cure for the blues, though, and after her curtain call, she skipped backstage, sharing hugs and kisses, laughing as roses and champagne were pressed in her arms. When the director suggested drinks, they all spilled out into the balmy evening, under the angry brow of Poseidon, and the burning gaze of Apollo. She blew a kiss to the Sun God, and winked at the dark God of the Sea. Marina hooked arms with Jackson, and they moved into the evening, singing, doing little dances, and having too much fun. It had been over a year now, and she was finally learning to laugh again.

* * *

Duncan frowned into his drink. He really didn't like being here alone, but with Conrad away to visit family, the house had echoed with his absence. He hadn't really wanted to hang with friends, though it was a Friday night. The pub was a good sort of place to be, just enough activity to keep it hopping, but it didn't feel like a meat market.

Con had been troubled lately. Work on Poseidon wasn't proceeding well, and secretly, Duncan was worried about Con. He went up every day, and every day, had to cut off work early, complaining... well, not complaining, but mentioning a persistent vertigo. Dizziness and unease. He was well behind schedule, yet there was little he could do. One afternoon, Duncan had watched in consternation, and then horror, as his partner tottered on rickety scaffolding, losing his footing on an afternoon that they'd met for lunch. If he hadn't still been hooked into his harness...

Con's mood hadn't been black, but maybe blue. Duncan knew what he was feeling. The same restless unease took him to the City Garden, wandering about as though he'd lost something, but he wasn't certain what exactly that was. The men moved around one another with tension, but in bed, they made love with a frenzied passion, as though they felt an impending loss. While Con tended to dominate the sex, Duncan often woke to find Con's head resting on his chest, sleeping with a frown on his face. People just shouldn't be unhappy when they slept. Something had to give, and it had to happen soon.

He paid his tab, feeling slightly sick to his stomach at the prospect of sleeping alone. He glanced up as the door opened. A crowd entered, laughing and bringing in the cool ocean breeze.

The group vibrated with laughter and high spirits. Duncan ordered another whisky and watched in amusement as an effeminate man in a striped suit did a broad parody of a ballerina, laughter breaking out, and the obvious target of his joke laughed good-naturedly.

Duncan turned round and leaned back on the bar, enjoying their happiness. A tall African woman turned her head slightly. She was exquisite. She was tall and willowy, with a dancer's taut, lean body teasing under her filmy blue and white dress. Her warm, dark skin glowed in contrast to the cool tones of the garment. Her skin was so very dark... he didn't recall ever seeing anyone with skin that rich and dark. Her legs were bare and rippled with muscle, her elegant feet clad in strappy heels.

In spite of the short, almost shaved hair, she was feminine and sexy, made of long, curving lines from head to foot. And when she met his eye, Duncan thought his heart had dropped to his stomach. His cock rose. Blood flushed his fair skin. She was perfect. Laughing brown eyes rimmed slightly with kohl, full, lush lips slightly tinted with gloss. Her African heritage was as strong as his Scots or Con's Sioux. From across the room, he could hear her laughter, husky and rich, her white smile flashing. When she caught his eye again, Duncan felt his heart slide back into place with a click. He smiled back.

"Okay, Marina, he's just hot." Jackson had his arm hooked into hers and was whispering into her ear. "Shall I try him out, or do you want to go for it?" She leaned away, an amazed look on her face. Glancing over, she looked at the man at the bar. He was watching them... her? His intensity was uncomfortable, and the buzz between her legs and in her belly rose to a roar.

A live band was kicking up and the partiers began dancing as a group. Duncan's breath caught as he watched her, dress provocatively tight across the bust, the swirling skirt kissing her legs, offering brief glances of the vee between her thighs. He ordered another drink, needing the hot spill of whisky in his belly.

She was so damn familiar! The dance company was advertising a great deal, so he might have seen her on a vid screen broadcast. Or perhaps, since the theatre was in the City Center, he'd seen her while he was meeting Con. Lust and guilt warred inside his belly, and with every drink, the battle grew hotter. He was ready to turn away, walk out of the bar and go home.

And then she was at his side. She placed her drink order and glanced up at him, a sidelong glance of speculation and curiosity. He was so not her type! And yet he was. The buzz settled to an easy vibration when she stood next to him. She could smell him, a nice woodsy fragrance, mixed with the whisky he drank. Judging by his over-bright eyes, he'd had one or two too many. She stifled an urge to kiss him.

"Come back and sit with me."

She had several drinks, it was her round, but she paused and looked up at him. Bright spots of color lit his cheeks. His fair skin betrayed his feelings so openly, so completely. Before she picked up the tray, Marina picked up her drink and set it carefully on the bar, and then returned to her group. In mere moments, she was back at the bar. He was standing, their drinks in hand, and he led her to a darkened booth. She slid in, and he settled next to her.

Jackson watched for a few moments and then shrugged. Hell, a good fuck wouldn't hurt her. Not at all. He stifled a bite of jealousy and ordered another drink.

* * *

Her apartment was one of those pre-furnished, temporary studios downtown, designed for long-term visitors. They didn't stumble into the bedroom like a pair of laughing drunks. Instead, the alcohol seemed to heighten the intensity between them. They spoke little, and Marina quickly forgot their conversation. She was simply lost in his fragrance, his looks, and his eyes.

Duncan was certain he'd never seen such feminine perfection before. When he dipped his head to kiss her, she was sweet with the orange juice of her drink. Her mouth was warm and welcoming as he slipped his tongue in, stroking and whispering over hers. He clasped her head in his hands, amazed at the graceful lines that her closely cropped hair revealed. She was exotic and mysterious. Forbidden.

Duncan pulled the tie at her waist. The simple dress was a wrap-around, and when the top went, so did the skirt. Her breasts were small, but firm and round. She wore no bra, and her panties were the same blue as her dress. She stood in front of him, unashamed, flawless. He saw the dark spot of moisture on her panties, and his breath caught.

Moving close, she slipped off his jacket and unbuttoned the shirt underneath. Her hands trailed over his muscles, fascinated by his pale skin and the silky hair that grew lightly on his body, leading her on a trail down his stomach. Where the trail reached his jeans, she dipped her fingers and brushed his swollen cockhead, smiling as his breath hissed in excitement. He toed out of his shoes and quickly dropped his pants.

Her hands dropped to his hips, continuing her exploration, rubbing his hard thighs, his muscled bottom.

If she saw the ring on his thumb, Con's ring, she didn't comment. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was just the chemical reaction between the two. He didn't care. Somehow, it was right, and Duncan knew that if Con had been here, he'd be doing the same thing. Con would be there behind her, his hands coming around her waist, up to cradle her small, perfect breasts. He prayed it wasn't the alcohol whispering in his ear.

Duncan dipped to her mouth, kissing her deeply, fervently, wondering what that mouth of hers would look like wrapped around his cock. As soon as he thought it, she did it, down on her knees, face in his crotch, her high-heeled feet braced behind her bottom.

Her mouth was as soft as her appearance promised, delivering wicked little licks, and when she sucked, it was hard enough to make his eyes cross. She bobbed up and down, teasing his cockhead, and then diving deep, pulling him to the back of her throat. Unable to bear much of this, he pulled her up and they drifted to the bed, mouths locked together, hands wandering. He worked her panties off, dropping them on the floor. When she went to toe off the high heels, he stopped her, feeling wonderfully perverse.

Marina was on top, feeling his hands wander her body freely now. He was massaging and stroking, as much to learn her contours as to arouse her body. She dove into his neck, raining kisses down his muscular throat, down to his collarbone, loving the taste of him, loving the texture of his skin. His hand on her bottom wandered lower, to her cleft, long fingers dipping and swirling, pulling her cream back to her ass. Never had she imagined that would feel so good, but God! it did, and she tightened involuntarily as he worked the tip of one finger into her anus.

Gently, he lifted her and rolled her onto her back, worshipping at her breasts, laving her belly with licks and kisses. She was neatly trimmed, almost bare for costuming, and his tongue snaked down her mons, bringing hot shudders to her body. When his head dipped and he went down, Mariana amazed herself with her abandon.

She brought up her knees, caressing the stranger with her legs, her hands buried in his auburn hair.

She hadn't been with many men, and never a white man. His hair felt like silk between her fingers. She cradled him as he nuzzled and licked, making her cream flow faster and wetter. His tongue fluttered over her clit, digging into her folds, dragging down to her ass. Dampened by his saliva, his finger slipped in, easier this time as she relaxed, while his mouth continued on her pussy.

Marina didn't want to come, not yet, but she had no choice as a second finger pushed into her ass, and his mouth fucked her pussy. She rocked, moaning, thrusting herself into his face, pushing harder on his fingers, her mind simultaneously appalled at the invasion, and turned on by the forbidden sensations. She'd been craving this, alarmed at the desire to have her ass fucked, but now that it was happening... heaven. He suddenly pressed up hard, brutal. She bucked and came, sucking her breath in. Obscenities that never passed her lips flowed freely.

"F-F... Oh God, fuck!"

Her ass bore down on his fingers, and he grinned, wishing Con were there. He'd take her ass, while Con took her pussy. Guilt grabbed his gut once more, but he was on this woman, and didn't plan to leave until he was finished.

She lay for long moments, dark against the white sheets, looking stunned, sated and amazed. When her warm, dark eyes finally opened, she looked at Duncan with intensity, and he knew she was ready.

He rolled over on top of her, nudging her knees apart. She shifted her hips, allowing him access to her entrance. She was tight and wet, but once past her outer muscles, he moved in easily, not fully, but almost. She was flexible, bringing her knees up toward her shoulders, offering him more space to continue. Then her legs came down, seating him right to the balls.

Duncan marveled at the soft, wet embrace of her body. This... this was what he'd been missing. Softness and breasts, wet pussy and delicate skin. The soft cries of a woman's climax. They moved together, face to face, gazing into one another's eyes.

They shuddered as sweet spots were stroked, passions ignited. They rocked. She cradled him in her pelvis, stroking his hair, his back. His hand slid under her bottom, lifting her tighter to his pelvis.

Together they twined, two people, one intent. As he brought her higher and closer, she did the same. He kissed her softly, catching her cries, and drove in, deeper, faster.

The sweat of climax settled on his skin, dewy and light. He could see it beading on her skin as well. She shifted, hitched her legs to his bottom, urging him into her deeper as she undulated under him, seeking closer contact.

He moaned then, trying to hold back, trying with every fiber of his being to give her the climax that she was fighting for. Her eyes clamped shut and she moaned, deep and guttural, the head of his cock pounding the upper wall of her pussy, until his back tightened reflexively, and his balls grew hot and tight.

She was close to coming. Duncan shifted his hips once again, driving in deep and brutal, his balls slapping her ass, every bit of his body tightening and releasing, his cock tensing a shade further before spilling. He stiffened, his back curved, his hips frozen, holding his spitting cock tight to her womb. He released and drove in again, and again. When he was milked dry, Duncan lowered himself beside her, not wanting his weight on her, but she pulled him down, kissing him gently.

For a long moment, they lay together. He stroked her body, her face, running his fingers over her lips, her bold cheekbones, down her beautifully arched nose. They twined together, wrapped in a tight embrace.

Marina sighed. For once, the buzz of the Imperative was gone, solidly buried by her sated and satisfied body. Not even the trickle of his seed between her thighs disturbed her as she rolled into sleep.

* * *

He was gone when she woke. The early dawn light played over the rumpled sheets where he'd lain. She found a stray hair on the pillow, and carefully lifted it,

laying it on the bedside table where it glinted like a strand of fire. Apollo's fire. That made her smile.

If it hadn't been for the ring on his thumb, indicating that he belonged to a male partner, she'd have thought he was her missing mate. He'd cheated someone he loved to be with her. He'd made no promises, and accepted her love like a precious gift. She couldn't bring herself to be sorry.

Marina rose and showered, and then returned to bed, sliding between the sheets, savoring the smell of him in her room. She didn't even know his name. Somehow, that made her glad. He could have broken her heart.

Chapter Six

He didn't tell Conrad what had happened right away. He knew he should have, but the heavy feelings were on Con again.

His great-grandmother had passed while he was visiting. She'd held his head in her hands, passing on a blessing. With her white hair and shaking hands, Con was certain she knew little beyond her fleeting memories, but the last time they'd spoken, she'd seen his pain, his crippling, crushing pain. She'd whispered in his ear, telling him that things would come right. He had to suffer through the pain, but indeed, the circle would close.

Not long after, she'd passed to the other existence, and Con had cried, not certain if it was from the pain of her death, or the pain of his own decimated soul.

He loved Duncan, but in the past weeks, something had been eating at Con's heart. He couldn't work, couldn't think. The further behind he grew on the mural, the deeper his heart sunk. He'd even gone to a doctor, who'd assured him nothing physical was wrong. Funny, Conrad had thought that maybe he was dying.

And today, his world shattered even more when Duncan confessed his infidelity. Unable to think for feeling, Con left the house, first embracing Duncan, assuring him of his love. He then walked aimlessly to the city. It was the weekend, so the streets were quiet in the business district. Conrad found a bench and looked at the figure of Apollo, and for the first time, saw the stunning similarity between the artwork and his lover. He hadn't known Duncan at the time he'd created the image, and yet there he was, shining out for all to see.

He looked over at the dark, moody visage of Poseidon and had to laugh when he saw his own image there. No wonder the work wasn't going well... it was a self-portrait! Amazing that neither he nor Duncan could see Con's own face glaring out

across the Harbor to the ocean. Con had always thought of himself as a happy, good natured person. That is, until lately. Poseidon was simply grumpy looking. Did he really look that gloomy?

He thought of the third work, his Egyptian Aphrodite. To his delight, the City Council had loved the design, feeling that the bold, sexual female was the perfect foil for the other two images. She would be his final mural on the waterfront, and frankly, for now, he was pleased. It was demanding and lonely work and Conrad no longer had the heart for it.

He thought back to Duncan's pained confession, rolling it around in his mind. The other man was in the same soul twisting pain that he was suffering. It made sense on some level that Duncan would seek out a woman. But the way he described her rung a chord within Con. A three-note, harmonious chord. Conrad pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Duncan.

"Hey, it's me."

"Hey. Are you all right?" Duncan's voice was throaty, as though he'd been crying. Big, tough Duncan crying? It was simultaneously funny and pathetic.

"I'm good, just wanted you to know I'm at the work site. Just gonna do some observation here, try to figure out what the problem is." He meant the problem with the job, but knew what Duncan would read between the lines.

"Okay, if you go up, though, be careful."

"Will do. Like I said, I'm mostly just sitting here, observing. I won't be real long." The silence between them was awkward. "Duncan, it'll be okay. I love you... all right?"

Duncan pulled a long breath. "I love you too. And I'm sorry, Con. I am."

"I know. There's just something... can't put my finger on it. We'll talk later, bud. Gotta go." They rung off, the awkwardness still thick and painful.

Finally, Con slapped both knees, rising with a purpose. "Time to get up close and personal. See what's going on."

He crossed the street and stood under the mural. The problem wasn't the materials he used, or the design, the problem was Con himself. Hard as he might try,

Con was unable to do his job up there with the physical maladies that were hitting him lately. But today it didn't seem so bad. He moved around the safety tape and unlocked his onsite tool storage, hooking himself into his safety harness.

The trip up was slow and deliberate. Con was determined to get to the root of the problem, whether it was physical, environmental, or psychological. He rose to the level of the god's eye, and then lowered himself yet again. He rappelled across the face of the building, and then returned safely to the scaffolding. Thankfully, the uneasiness didn't hit till he was almost to the ground.

The wave of sensation made him slip and fall two or three feet, coming to rest just inches from disaster. Con lowered himself the rest of the way, toes finally reaching the sidewalk.

"Are you all right?"

The voice came from behind, but it might just as well have come from the heavens, the impact was that powerful, that soulful.

Con turned slowly, to see... Aphrodite. His goddess. His mate. All of the pain and confusion, all of the unease of the past year slipped away as their eyes met.

Marina stepped back in confusion, certain this was exactly how she'd felt last week, while she'd been with the red-haired man, the gorgeous stranger she'd taken home and made love with. This one blinked at her, his face a mask of recognition, confusion, and then grief. He was beautiful.

"We missed you. Duncan and I met in the Gardens, and somehow, we missed you. I'm so sorry."

Her hands flew to her mouth as the pieces fell into place. She looked at the mural above, the black haired Poseidon, eyes stormy and dark as an angry ocean. Behind her was Apollo, golden and bright, blue eyes shining in the sun. The man from last weekend, the man who was mated to a male. He reached out, his big rough hand taking hers, and all the loose pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"The third mural, they requested Aphrodite." She smiled at the knowledge that her guess had been correct, and he led her to his workspace. He pulled a file out, spread a vivid design on the table. She looked, her eyebrows flying up in surprise.

"How did you know? How did you know what I look like?" She fingered the sketch in amazement. It was her, stepping from a shell in the frothing ocean, Poseidon's horses below, Apollo's rays above.

He shook his head in confusion. "I just knew. I just knew that the third had to be her... you."

She glanced at his hand, at the golden band around his thumb. "You're mated."

He nodded, a huge smile crinkling his eyes. "Duncan's probably the only hold on sanity I've had this past year. He's suffered as well." He dropped his head slightly. "I'm sorry we left you behind. I can honestly say we've missed you and grieved for not having you with us."

She lifted her hand tentatively, stroking his smooth cheek. A trio! No wonder she'd been confused! No wonder they'd missed her.

"I think you met Duncan last week. I think it would be very good if we go home now. He confessed his infidelity to me this morning, and he's still torn up." Con carefully put the design back into the file.

"You're not. Torn up, that is."

He locked the cabinet and turned back to her. "Not anymore. Now that I know who you are, what really happened. A little jealous that he met you first!"

Her laugh was husky and soft and he loved it.

"I came here seeking answers. I thought maybe the answer was here, for some reason." He pulled her into a hug. "It seems I was right."

She stood quietly in his arms. The painful buzz was gone now, and like last week, when she'd met Duncan, it had settled into a warm, sexual glow.

"I don't know your name. Or his. In fact..." She looked up, shocked at the pure male beauty of his face. "You don't know my name."

"You're Aquamarine Davis, but you usually go by Marina."

She raised a brow, suspicious.

"I went to the Gardens, looked over the sign-in sheets for the past year. Your name was always there. I just hadn't figured out how to track you. All your data is private. I'm Con, by the way. Conrad Montgomery. My... your other mate is Duncan Sinclair."

Damn, but she felt good against him, all lithe and strong and soft. Her perfume was light, like the ocean. Con traced the contours of her face.

"A few years back I found this." He was digging in his pants pocket. "I knew it would be for my wife. I knew it would be perfect." He settled a worn velvet pouch in her hand. Sliding open the drawstrings, a gemstone tumbled out, causing her to gasp. It was huge. A beautifully clear, pure aquamarine, its color putting the ocean to shame. It had to have cost a fortune. Aquamarine had been mined out for centuries! He unclasped the chain and settled it around her neck, shaking his head at the stunning contrast between her coffee colored skin and the vivid blue of the gemstone. The knot in his chest loosened and melted away.

He looked at her curiously. "Do you work here? At City Center?"

She nodded. "I'm the choreographer for the new dance recital. I was coming in early to pick up my stuff. As choreographer, my work is basically finished. I had a solo piece, but it was only performed for the opening weekend."

"Wow. Another artist in the family. Poor Duncan!" And then he looked sad. "And we missed it, your dance."

"I can do it again. Maybe they'll work it into closing weekend."

He began to lock up his gear. "Since last May, I haven't been able to work much here. I'm okay in the mornings, but come noon, I can't stand being in the harness or scaffolding. The discomfort was almost painful, ringing in my ears, and my stomach was upset." He straightened up, looking at her in amazement. "That was you, wasn't it?"

"I started in May. And yes, I always felt worse than usual here. They've offered me a permanent position with the dance company. I was going to turn it down. I

thought maybe I was allergic to the place!" She said that with a smile. "Con, why don't you come with me to my apartment? I'll drop off my stuff. I was packing to move. But maybe the move won't be as far as I thought."

As she settled into the low seat of her car, plenty of long leg flashed from under her skirt, and he could see her sweet breasts from the scoop neck of her dress. His mouth cocked up in a half-grin; his cock perked up as well. Conrad lowered to the window and caught her lips in a slow honey-sweet kiss. It was smoky and seductive, darker than Duncan's kiss. Wicked. They separated and moved apart.

"Pack a bag. You won't be going home tonight."

She looked long at his lean, dark face. Not as dark as she'd expected, much lighter than her own. His hair was jet black and straight, not curly like hers. Today, that braid was coming loose, and she visualized him, hair spilling down his shoulders, all tousled and sweaty. She inserted Duncan's golden image next to him and shivered. This explained a few needs she'd been struggling with this year.

She reached up and laid her hand on the front of his jeans, feeling his cock pressed hard against his denims. "Get in the car."

Her voice was husky and low. Breathless. Sexy. He couldn't wait.

Chapter Seven

They stopped at a gourmet grocer on the way to the house, choosing simple foods for dinner, champagne for afterward. Con slipped a box of chocolates into the basket. He'd wanted to taste chocolate on this woman's lips for over a year now.

As they drove up, Marina's eyes widened when she saw the quaint house the men had been living in. It was walking distance to City Center, yet in a quiet neighborhood, large yards gracefully landscaped with old, established plants, creating a garden-like haven of privacy and seclusion.

"Duncan bought this place before he was twenty-three. He's a bit of a wonder kid in electronics. At his age, I was wandering around, still trying to find myself."

She liked the way his voice softened when he spoke of Duncan. She thought back to last week and her interlude with the red-haired man. It had been powerful and intense, yet fraught with a tinge of sadness. Con wasn't much older, but he seemed like an old soul compared to Duncan. She felt like she could say anything to him.

"He comes from a big family. He wanted to have kids someday, running all over. We were thinking of using a surrogate. Or adopting."

She swallowed hard, realizing how the two men must have suffered through missing her, as she had missed them.

"I didn't want children... not before." She stood next to him, hooking her fingers into his, leaning in tentatively. He felt good. Warm and accepting. Home. "When I knew that I'd missed... knew that I was on my own..." She faltered, and he stayed quiet, letting her find the words. "All I could think was that I'd live the rest of my life alone, without even the hope of children, grandchildren. I tried to be with other men, and it didn't work."

"Until Duncan."

The laugh she gave carried more tears than humor. "Until Duncan. Guess that should have given me a clue."

"Him as well. We'd considered the idea that we'd missed a third, but he didn't believe it. Guess I win the bet."

Inside the house, they moved silently, laughing softly as they stepped over squeaky floorboards. Marina's great-grandma had lived in a house like this, long ago. It felt warm and imbued with good memories. The late afternoon sunlight kissed the windows, light dancing through elaborate stained glass panels. Con's work, developed in his mind and soul, made with his hands.

Con put the champagne into a fancy ice bucket and gathered three crystal flutes. Marina carried the food on a tray. Together, they crept upstairs, to the master bedroom, breathless in anticipation. Marina's eyes fell on Con's tight ass. She bit the inside of her lip and smiled, anticipating seeing him unclothed. He slowed at the top of the stairs, and she slid her free hand forward, cupping his balls from behind. He stopped completely in his tracks.

"God, woman..." He dropped his head for a moment, savoring the sensation. He took a shaky breath and continued down the hall, to the bedroom.

"Duncan? Bud?" He pushed the bedroom door open with his foot, peering around the corner. Duncan was on the bed, shirtless, his hair tousled, his eyes heavy. "Don't get up..." Con set the champagne bucket and glasses on the bureau, then turned to retrieve the food from outside the door, where Marina remained hidden.

"Look, Duncan, I'm gonna cut to the chase. You're hurting way too bad for me to play some stupid game." He settled on the bed, reaching out to stroke Duncan's arm gently. "What you did was not a bad thing. In the same situation, I'd have done the same."

Duncan raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"I wouldn't have had a choice. Just like you didn't have a choice. Have you ever noticed that the Apollo design is a portrait of you? And the Poseidon is me?"

Duncan mulled that over for a moment. "I thought it was odd, but you designed those images before we met, so I thought it was just coincidence."

"So, Duncan, think about the third image, the Aphrodite. Remember her face. Where have you seen her before?"

Duncan went white, immediately seeing the connection. "It was her. From last week..."

"And Duncan, last year in the garden, you watched me come towards you with my eyes closed. I bumped into someone, a woman who was sitting on a bench. I didn't see her, but you did. Remember how confused we were?"

The younger man was sitting up straight, looking as though he was ready to flee.

"You couldn't resist her any more than I could, or any more than she can resist us. Because she's our third."

At that, Marina stepped into the door, pausing for a moment, her innate flair for drama getting the best of her. She then crossed the room, crawled up on the bed and settled next to Duncan, across from Conrad.

"I'm Marina. Aquamarine Davis. I'm your mate, and Con's, through the Imperative."

He looked at her, the face that had haunted his dreams throughout the week. Throughout the past year. They sat in a circle, or perhaps, more accurately, in a triangle on the bed. Duncan's eyes teared up, and then cleared. Speechless, he turned to Con.

"The mural at the City Center. I couldn't work because she was there too. The Imperative kept buzzing me as soon as she got close. We've been just yards apart since May."

"And today was to have been my last day there. We met because I've always liked to watch him work up there, and today, he was looking kinda distracted. I thought it might be a good idea to check on him."

Her voice was husky with tears. She sounded like that really fine whisky Duncan liked so much. In the afternoon light, he was certain she was more beautiful than she'd been the night they met. The three joined hands, feeling the energy give one final burst,

and the bond was sealed. The circle closed. They didn't speak, but Con's lips were on hers, and she could feel the weight of Duncan's gaze as they kissed, tasting, learning one another. She'd had a night with Duncan. Before they proceeded, she wanted to learn Conrad.

He was more assertive than the younger man, and Marina gave a half smile, thinking she and Con might have some dominance issues to iron out. As one, though, they broke the kiss and looked down at Duncan. Sweet, edible Duncan with his bare chest and worn jeans. In a flash, Con was unbuttoning the denims and Marina had lowered her head to his mouth, in the sweetest, most healing kiss. Together, she and Con tended him, soothing away his pain, his guilt. Duncan could see her breasts through the soft fabric of her dress. She liked dresses. Such strength and power, cloaked in the trappings of femininity.

She loved their hair, she loved the foreign, silky texture and the length. Duncan's dropped in waves to his shoulders, while Con's braid hung like an arrow down his back. She reached over, grasping the braid, pulling him closer. It made a good handle. Maybe she wouldn't let it loose till later.

Duncan reveled in the attention, but he wanted more. He glanced at Con, who immediately read his intentions. Together, they turned on her.

"The dress. It comes off now." Con's voice was dark. Marina smiled and complied, sliding the silky length over her head, letting it fall to the floor.

"And the high heels stay on." Duncan's voice was firm.

She looked over at Con, who nodded his agreement. She grinned at her kinky partners. They liked heels? She had shoes they'd drool over!

"Up on your knees. Get rid of the panties. Now."

She hooked her thumb into the lace underwear, stopping as Con reached out a hand and halted her. His dark head lowered to her mons, biting lightly through the lace, his tongue tasting the wet crotch of the underwear before allowing her to proceed.

She was graceful, she was nimble. Marina smiled when she thought of the treats she had in store for the two men. When Con dipped her over his arm, lowering his head

to her breasts, she flexed backward until her head brushed the bedding. Her belly was taut with muscle, her breasts thrust up for him to take. Duncan groaned in reaction to the sight. He leaned down and kissed her as Con licked and nibbled and tongued her breasts.

“Oh fuck, Con... she’s... flexible!” Duncan breathed as he rose from the kiss.

Con returned her upright, letting Duncan slide behind her body. Duncan’s teeth caught her exposed nape, sliding down to her ear where he nibbled the heavy gold hoop there.

Con... Oh Lord... Con lowered himself, rolling on his back, between her spread knees. Duncan positioned her forward slightly, until her pussy aligned with Con’s mouth just right. “Oh... oh oh oh...”

He knew his stuff. Con licked her from stem to stern, his tongue dancing around her clit, teasing, but never claiming. He probed her folds and furrows, at first with sharp intensity, and then laving with the broad of his tongue, urging her on, his tongue catching and pulling the cream. When his tongue danced around her anus, she was too enraptured to protest. And when Duncan’s lubed finger worked its way in, she submitted, knowing she’d have them both inside by the time they were through. For months, she’d been getting ready for them... for this. She’d thought herself pathetic and twisted, but she’d simply been wanting her men. Both of them.

Duncan whispered in her ear as Con used his face, his hands, his mouth to draw her near the peak, and then let her fall. Duncan’s cock was pressed hard against her back, and she could see Con was still dressed, a damp, dark spot at the front of his jeans.

“Duncan... he’s dressed... he shouldn’t be...”

She gasped as Con slapped her ass. “Don’t talk.”

Obviously, he meant business. Yep, they had some dominance issues coming. But for now...

“I want her to come, Duncan. Should we make her come on my face?”

Duncan closed his eyes tightly.

"You're close yourself, aren't you?"

Duncan nodded.

"Take her pussy from behind."

Con slid out from under Marina, leaving her gasping with disappointment. She then watched happily as he undressed for her, black T-shirt first. His body was lithe and hard. She smiled to see that one nipple bore a ring. She wanted to bite it, to suck it into her mouth.

Con slipped out of his shoes and jeans, dropping them slowly. He stood, his braid trailing down the side of his shoulder, the end brushing past the pierced nipple, almost to his waist. "Loosen your hair."

He looked at her steadily, as though thinking to challenge her command. His hand loosened the tie, and he allowed the braid to slip free, his silky hair hanging down his chest.

Behind Marina, Duncan was probing. She bent forward, hearing his gasp as she opened herself to him. She dropped slowly to her hands, looking like a wild creature, creeping forward, stalking. Con shook his head slightly. Normally, being on all fours felt submissive. She felt like a cat on the prowl.

"Put yourself in my mouth, Con." She raised her bottom, closing her eyes briefly as Duncan pressed in, slowly. Marina didn't take her eyes off Con as they fought for control.

He stood before her. His penis had softened a bit, looking heavy and dark as it curved down to cover his balls. She looked him over greedily, liking the way his hips cut into his waist, the dark hair that nestled around his cock. Duncan suddenly hilted, pushing her forward. As though obeying an unspoken command, Con moved, feeding his now soft cock between her lips. Marina decided that the standoff had ended in a tie.

He hardened in her mouth, and she ran her lips and tongue over his head, enjoying the sensation of swelling, of growth. Duncan was thrusting now, and she needed both hands to support herself, so she looked to Con's eyes. He reached down, supporting her head with both hands, allowing Duncan's movement to carry them. She

moved to deep throat him. Both men groaned, and Con hooked his fingers under her jaw, stopping her.

"I'm not coming in your mouth, Marina. Not today." He straightened, facing Duncan. "Don't you come either. I don't care how fucking close you are." His voice was an angry, aroused growl. Without their consent, Marina pulled her mouth off Con's cock and lunged away from Duncan.

"Duncan, stay back there, and get a condom..."

Conrad grinned, lowering himself onto his back. "This time, Marina, we'll do it your way. Next time... I swear, if I have to tie you up, I will."

She crawled up his naked body, settling her wet pussy to rest on his cock. "You can try, Con, but you might find yourself tied up instead." She softened the words with kisses, tugging the nipple ring, nipping his chin. She fisted his hair, running the length through her fingers, making sure she hadn't trapped it between their bodies.

"We could always tie up Duncan," she whispered in his ear. They both turned to look at him as he rolled the condom onto his shaft.

"What?"

They both smiled evilly.

"Oh, shit. Our first time, and you're plotting!"

Marina undulated over the top of Con's cock.

"Marina, have you taken a man this way before?"

She shook her head at Duncan's question. She'd never taken a man anally, but she'd been fantasizing... obsessing about just this for a year now.

"It might be uncomfortable this first time, but if you need me to, I'll stop."

She continued to gaze into Con's eyes.

"He's gentle. We were both new to men when we met. If it's too much for you, we'll take turns. We want this to be good, love." She nodded, and suddenly felt Duncan's cock gliding, slick with lube. And then his fingers were there, working in gently, lubing her anus, stretching and relaxing her entrance.

"I'll go first, then Duncan. But be sure to tell us if you're not comfortable."

She nodded, then leaned forward as Con shifted, pressing up into her passage. She settled down, then rose, unable to prevent the natural inclination to fuck this man.

Con caught Duncan's eye. The younger man nodded, moving away, giving them this time. Instead of being impaled by Duncan's cock, Marina found herself on the bottom, Con between her legs, pumping, stroking. They rode together naturally, neither giving nor taking power, just being themselves.

"I want to feel you come on my cock, Marina..." He was panting, an occasional grunt escaping. "If you come on my cock, I'll let Duncan join us, but you have to come first."

Like that was a challenge? She was so wet and ready from his oral priming, it only took his words. She wrapped arms and legs tightly around him, holding him close as she heaved and lunged, coming easy, coming hard. She clenched her jaw against a scream, but it escaped anyway.

Con had to grip his cock hard, so badly did he want to come. He pulled out and let her recover for a moment, loving the way her chest heaved and her belly undulated. When she was ready, he rolled her again, guiding her shaking legs into place.

"That's good, love. Now take me..." He held his cock and guided it into her slippery heat. Con loved Duncan with all his heart, but nothing compared to the wet heat of a woman, the glistening flower of her sex. The feel of her breasts cushioned against his chest. As strong as Marina surely was, she made him feel powerful, masculine.

Duncan again rose behind her, his cock erect and glistening with lube. Con's hips surged involuntarily, and then he went still, feeling Duncan settling into place.

"Now, lean back, bear down on me and it'll go easier." She did as he instructed, and Con couldn't hold back a smile as her expression went into shocked pleasure. She collapsed forward, her neck arched, her head bowed back. Duncan had free access to her body and neck. He stroked her skin gently, whispering softly.

"That's it, baby, we're both here, inside you..." His breath was coming fast, the sensations overwhelming. Her tight passage, the crowding, the feel of Con inside, so close, so very close. He pulled back and sunk in again, feeling her accept his size.

"You've been preparing for us... for both of us..."

She nodded, groaning as he pulled out and thrust in. And then he did it again. He forced himself to stop, afraid of causing her pain.

"C-Con, I'll just hold still here, you need to control the movement..." His breath was surging, his chest heaving.

Slowly, carefully, Con began to move, while Duncan simply remained still, overwhelmed by the steady press of Con's cock against his, her heat, her tight, tight passage.

"Oh... guys... I'm gonna come... it's too much... good..."

Marina was down on Con's chest. He held her tightly, allowing Duncan to control the pace now. His eyes rolled shut in bliss as Duncan's hard length stroked over his cock, while Marina's wet passage fluttered and contracted. He knew with every thrust, Duncan was pushing him tighter into her passage, putting more and more pressure on the G-spot. There was a rush of fluid from her passage, and then he could feel it, her orgasm rolling over her body. She was unable to move, unable to fight it.

"Come on, love, scream... we want you to scream with it!"

She flexed her hips down, her strong muscles squeezing them both as she panted, a dainty squeal breaking from her lips at each contraction. When she peaked, she ground down on them hard, a full, breathy groan bursting from her throat.

Duncan wasn't far behind. His pace picked up. He covered her back, raining kisses over her body as Con joined them. His head pounded, and his heart beat like a drum. His cock throbbed as well, and he came, forever it seemed. He thrust wildly, his seed bursting again and again until it seeped from her passage, joining her cream in the most primal of unions.

They lay, sweaty and blissful. Con's hair was tangled and wild, long strands caught in the sweat streaking down his face and body. It was the sexiest thing Marina

had ever seen. Her fingers itched to get into that hair. She grinned as the two men met over her body, sharing a long, very hot kiss.

"Does this bother you?" Duncan's eyes were suddenly concerned.

"Oh please. I'm a dancer, don't you think I've pretty much seen everything?" Besides, when Con kissed her with Duncan's taste still on his lips, there was nothing hotter. "Duncan, you'd better not be planning to leave this bed!" She growled the command, and he sat back, perplexed.

"I was gonna get champagne..."

"Oh, well then." She nodded. "And you, Mr. Conrad Montgomery, had better not be falling asleep." She looked at his heavy lids, her suspicion confirmed. "I demand my afterglow and cuddling."

He grinned, wrapping his entire body around her.

Duncan paused at the dresser, opening the champagne and pouring. "I couldn't figure out why you had three glasses." He smiled as he passed out the glasses, settling gracefully on the bed. He raised the glass to toast. "To Marina, who completes our hearts."

Con raised his glass and continued. "To Duncan, who followed his heart straight to our missing treasure."

And at Marina's turn. "To Con, who saw us all before we happened."

Glasses clinked.

"So... are we going to tell the parents, or just drop in?"

Con laughed happily. They'd asked the same question last year.

"Let's not warn them, just invite them to dinner tomorrow. All of them." He kissed Marina's forehead. "You might want to give yours a heads-up though. It might come as a surprise."

Marina stretched and grinned. "I vote we wait till next weekend. I've got some catching up to do."

She grabbed Con's hair and pulled him close for a kiss. Their noses bumped as they adjusted. When she kissed Duncan, he moved in easily. Yup, she and Con definitely had some alpha issues. That was cool, it'd make things spicy.

"Duncan, I'm thinking I like that sexy hair of yours. But I'd like it better longer." He smiled, absolutely willing, bless his sweet soul. "And Con, sit up, I'm gonna play with yours."

He sighed as she began parting off sections, finger combing them into order. "God, Marina, I've missed you." Con's voice was tight with emotion.

She leaned forward, resting her face against his shoulder. Duncan moved close, kissing tears from her cheeks, his arms circling her in a warm embrace.

"I've missed you guys too."

The aquamarine pressed against her breast, warm with the heat of their bodies. It was home as well.

Always You

Belinda McBride

In the future, we don't choose our mates. Nature chooses for us. Nature doesn't make mistakes. And if you don't pay attention to Nature's Imperative, you suffer.

She could always get under his skin. He could always send her spinning into fury. Marilyn and Neil aren't like oil and water, they're like dynamite and a fuse! Not only do these co-workers hate each other, but Mari's still in love with her ex-husband, and Neil? Well, Neil is gay.

Nature's got some explaining to do.

Chapter One

“Harder... damn it! Harder!”

Neil reared up onto his knees, rolling his partner back a bit, pounding deeper, his own hips and thighs stinging at the contact of flesh on flesh.

Jase groaned, a haunting blend of ecstasy and pain. His cock was flaccid, rolling on his belly with each of Neil’s hard thrusts. His climax would come at a cost. A cost that punched Neil in the gut every time they played this game. Just the same, he felt the telltale pulling at his groin, the tightness that ran from his cock and balls, all the way up his spine.

“Soon...” he choked out, his breath harsh and ragged. On cue, Jase brought his hand up, pumping his cock frantically, trying to bring himself to erection.

“Hit me!” Jason’s voice was rough with desperate need.

Neil brought his hand down in a stinging slap, his own flesh burning from the contact. With each slap, Jase grew a little harder, the pain fueling his erection. Neil brought his hand down again, and then again, and finally Jase howled, his ass clenching Neil’s cock, fingers digging into the skin of his arms, dragging him along into a noisy, painful climax.

Shuddering from the aftershock, Neil supported himself over his lover, unable to meet his eyes. No orgasm felt good enough to justify the sick feeling he had afterwards when Jase was in this frame of mind. He wanted punishment. Hard, painful fucking, and if Neil wouldn’t oblige, Jase would fulfill those needs in other ways, in other places. The first time he’d come home bruised and bleeding, Neil had called the police, only to discover that the injuries were consensual.

That had been nearly four years ago. Things weren’t getting any better.

Neil's slowly softening cock slipped from Jase's passage. He didn't look but knew that blood streaked the semen, and guilt seared through his very being. Regardless of how good the good times were, he was a participant in a behavior that brought pain to Jase.

He didn't know what percolated inside his lover's brain at times like this, and frankly, he no longer wanted to know. Neil rolled to his back, hand over his face. No more. He couldn't do this anymore. Rough sex had slowly degenerated into violence, and Neil wasn't a violent man.

He inhaled, ready to quit, to tell Jase that he was leaving, but the other man caught him in an embrace, holding him tight, fierce. "Thank you. God, Neil, I love you. Thank you." As Neil watched, a peaceful smile drifted over Jase's face, and the words dried up in his mouth.

Trapped. He trapped me again. Reluctantly, his arms came around Jase, cradling the man's head to his chest, fingers running through long, silky blond waves. The love was still there, but it was grudging, harder to coax from his slowly hardening heart. He lay in the darkness, watching his lover's face, a sentinel against Jason Anders' pain.

Like a beacon, a shaft of sunlight slowly worked its way across the room. Morning had finally arrived.

I have to go to work. I have to get out of here.

He gently pushed the other man off his chest, tenderly pulling the covers up to his shoulders. Tomorrow. He'd tell him tomorrow. Just as he'd been planning every day for the past six months.

Neil quickly showered, fingering the long scratches down his ribs, the bruising on his arms, his back. Jase wanted punishment, and wasn't unwilling to hand it out as well. The marks were always on his body, hidden under his clothing. Nobody could see them, and the secret suited him just fine. In the heat of the moment, Jase's desperate need for pain drove him to extremes, his mindless quest for punishment spilling over onto Neil.

He dressed stiffly, carefully debating the merits of the color of his shirt, the cut of his tie. Deliberately, he combed his hair and shaved, wincing as the razor skimmed over a broad scratch on his jaw. Jase was growing careless. And frankly, Neil didn't want anyone to see those marks.

An odd thought crossed his mind, and for a long moment, Neil frowned at himself in the mirror. *Now why in hell would I care what she thinks?* He shook his head and headed out the bedroom door.

He'd pick up something to eat at work. He had to leave now.

* * *

"I really could kill you right now."

Marilyn stood, arms crossed, glaring as the high-tech printing unit choked and then froze. Anxiously, she glanced at the clock. She had a good hour before the office began to wake up for the day. This early morning privacy was her most creative time. No staff, no bosses, and most important: no Neil.

She could sit at her drafting unit and touch up the art she'd started the day before, edit the copy, get everything prepped for the critical eye of her design partner. The bane of her existence. She had no idea whose bright idea it had been to pair the two. They weren't like oil and water. More like dynamite and a match. And Marilyn had a short fuse.

"You break it again?"

"Shit!"

Marilyn jumped as a hand dropped on her shoulder. She turned to glare at the handsome man invading her space. Not that he did it out of interest. It was simple arrogance. Just for her benefit. He knew she hated to be touched. Specifically, by him.

"What..." She took a deep breath, remembering her last round of anger management. "Neil. You're early." A smile just wasn't there for him. It never had been. When she stopped to think about it, she wondered why on Earth this man got under her skin so easily. She sometimes felt as though her world revolved around being angry at

Neil. Her husband had said that she loved hating Neil more than she loved her own husband.

Well, they'd certainly put that to the test. She still hated Neil, and the jury was out on Dale.

She resumed glaring at the machine. Surely, it would do something sometime? Besides, it was better than looking at Neil in his crisp summer suit and shower damp hair. She really didn't want him standing here when the print spit out. It was just a raw idea, far from ready for production. But he wouldn't care, all he'd see was disproportion and rough edges. His work was never rough.

His shit probably didn't stink either.

"Thought I'd see how this early bird thing works out." He shrugged out of his caramel colored linen jacket and headed for their shared office. In moments he was back, pushing up his sleeves, popping the machine open at the side. For long moments, he made typical male sounds, "mmhhmmmm" and "ahhhh." Finally, he scooted back on that fine ass of his, crossing his arms over his knees. "Going to have to wait for IT."

"Great."

He gave her a grin and rose a bit stiffly, wincing as he stood.

"You okay?" She didn't want to be concerned, but the guy was usually pretty spry. In fact, for a pretty boy he was damned athletic. She frowned at a purple bruise that circled his wrist. It matched a larger one on his forearm. Carefully, Neil pushed his sleeves down, buttoning the cuffs.

"What happened to your arms?" Now that she was looking, she saw a slight abrasion on his neck, running up to his jaw. Hopefully, she sounded curious rather than concerned.

"Not really your concern, Marilyn." He ran a hand through his carefully cut hair, natural gold highlights catching the office light. His usual arrogant mask settled over his features.

Shut her down cold and lit her short fuse in a single stroke.

Marilyn spun on her high heels and stalked away, barely restraining the urge to slam the office door in her wake. She so did not need this! Not now. Fucking prima donna...

He headed off to the break room and coffee pot, while she fumed in front of her graphic screen. They'd be here alone for the next hour, no clerks to buffer their tension, no bosses telling them to play nice. But it was Thursday, and she was leaving early, taking Friday off. Things to do, bridges to burn, that sort of thing. She breathed deeply, forcing her anger into submission.

Marilyn opened a new screen and started on the copy for a new article.

Chapter Two

The message light flashed on her screen. She'd studiously ignored the thing for the past fifteen minutes. It was making him crazy. Add to that the huge bouquet of flowers that had been delivered. She'd casually left them in the lobby of the small office. Well, in truth, she'd trashed them, and then fished them out, setting them gently on an end table. His curiosity was beginning to rear its ugly head.

She left the room, leaving him alone with the blinking messages.

Neil slid over to her desk, peeked at the message icon. The subject read "Happy Birthday." A second layered over it. "I'm sorry. Please. Dinner tonight."

He smirked and rolled his chair back into place just as Marilyn strolled back to her desk, glass of water in hand. She moved like a gazelle on those long legs of hers. No, not a gazelle. A leopard. Or something else with sharp teeth and a nasty temper.

So it was her birthday. Wonder how much mileage he could get out of that?

"I'm leaving at noon, out for the weekend." She slid into her chair, deleting the messages without opening them first.

"What is it now? Thirty-six? Seven?" He hid a grin as her jaw tightened.

"Thirty-five."

That was a surprise. He actually thought she was more his age, maybe thirty, tops.

"Taking a holiday for your birthday?" He turned to his screen, focusing on his work. Neil lacked his partner's ability to throw his complete attention into his work, but he could give the illusion.

"Moving. I sold the condo."

At that, he looked up. "You and Dale getting a bigger place?" The condo was choice, a corner unit overlooking the Harbor. He and Jase had attended a couple parties there. She'd invited him because she had to; he'd attended to piss her off.

She didn't answer at once, focusing on her screen. "We divorced a couple months back. I'm moving into the Walden Units until I find a new place."

He blinked, uncertain what to say. Divorced? Did he say he was sorry? He didn't really care. Dale had been an asshole, and she wasn't far from that herself. But still, shame trickled into his brain. He'd had no clue they were having problems. An unexpected surge of sympathy caught him off-guard. "So what'd you do to tiff him off?"

He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth, but he couldn't back down. He could feel her ever-simmering anger rise to the top, spilling over.

"Gee, Neil, let's see... I had the audacity to be in my thirties instead of my twenties. The temerity to be a tall blonde with small breasts and no sex appeal. Oh, and I'm boring in the sack, if that makes a difference to you. Cold bitch and all."

Her jaw was rigid, and never once did she look away from her screen. Her pale blonde hair was tightly pinned back in a controlled chignon, as always. Her navy blue suit was mannish and chic, looking forbidding with its high button neckline, and alluring. The tailored jacket gave hints of the willowy figure that it embraced so well.

Her blue eyes were stormy, almost the color of the suit.

"I'm sorry." He turned back to the screen, mumbling the apology.

"What?"

"I said I'm sorry, for my comment, and that he made you feel that way about yourself. You're beautiful, and you shouldn't think otherwise."

* * *

Marilyn stretched and rose, crossing to the window to clear her mind. Out across the square, the three massive Harbor Buildings boasted murals of Apollo, Poseidon and Aphrodite. The huge works were the pride of City Center, created by a local artist. The sun reflected off the bay. The ocean gleamed like a sapphire under a cloudless sky.

This place really was beautiful.

She'd been tempted to leave. Those first weeks after Dale had moved out had been bleak, yet inside, Marilyn knew that running would be a mistake. She planned every aspect of her post-marriage life carefully. Not trusting her overwrought judgment, she ran every financial option past an advisor. The decision to sell the condo had been difficult, but she needed a new start in a place that wasn't stamped with her ex-husband's presence.

He hadn't even given her the option of counseling or negotiation. He'd broken the news on Friday, moved out on Saturday, the signed papers were delivered on Monday. A blitzkrieg break-up in the very worst sense.

And now he was trying to talk to her? To apologize?

"It was Jase."

"Hmmm?" She turned from the vista, looking back to where Neil sat working, not a hair out of place, a look of studious focus on his face.

"The bruises. Sometimes he likes rough sex."

"And you?"

"Don't like it." He refused to look her in the eye.

What in hell was going on today? She had no idea why she'd dumped on him earlier, and now he was sharing with her. "Why are you telling me this?"

Neil pushed back from his desk, hitting the remote that smoked the windows, giving them privacy from the rest of the office. The staff would just think they were having one of their weekly screaming matches. He yanked his tie loose and opened his shirt. She winced. There were broad scratches and abrasions over his otherwise smooth skin. His chest and belly were muscled, but purple bruises marred their perfection. Some contrary part of her brain shot signals to her belly, causing a twist of reaction that she brutally stifled.

"I spend more time with you than anyone else in my life. It just seems that I should have known about you and Dale, but I didn't. It occurred to me that this..." he rubbed a broad scrape on his chest, "...this shit is consuming me."

"So what are you going to do about it, Neil?" Marilyn remained across the room, her hips propped on the windowsill, long legs crossed. Over the past hour she'd fussed with her hair a bit. Long strands had broken loose. She watched him steadily as he pondered the question.

"I love him."

"That isn't an answer. So you're going to go down like some virgin sacrifice? Give yourself up for love?" She snorted. "Dale suddenly came out of his funk and wants me back. I was leaving early today to meet him. I planned to take him back. I still love him." She pushed off the wall and walked across the room. In her heels she was nearly Neil's height, and for once, he allowed her to invade his space. Slowly, she reached out and ran a fingertip over the scratch. It stung, bringing goosebumps to his skin.

"I gave up on waiting for the Imperative, married the man I loved. And Neil, the beginning was good. But the last few years I've slowly allowed myself to be beaten down in the name of love. Maybe not like this, but God!" Her hand dropped and she looked up at him, meeting his dark eyes fully. "I've been so consumed by my shit that I didn't realize that the person I spend most of my time with was a victim of domestic violence."

"I hurt him also." His voice was raw and strained.

"Because he forces you to, isn't that true? And somehow, I doubt that he carries your marks afterwards. That isn't your nature."

They stood for a moment, face to face, taking each other's measure.

"So what are you going to do, Marilyn?"

She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest in a long familiar gesture. Neil suddenly realized it wasn't an offensive move, but rather self-consciousness. She was uncomfortable with her body. "I guess I'm going home to move my stuff."

Neil began to button his shirt, looping the tie around his neck. He'd been pleased when her eyes had settled on it briefly. He thought she'd like the colors. "Need any help?"

"Yeah, sure." She turned away, powering down her equipment.

"I mean it. I'll come over in a few hours and help you with the heavy stuff."

She turned, looking at him speculatively.

"This doesn't mean we're friends, Marilyn."

For the first time since he'd met her, Marilyn directed her smile at him. It was unrestrained and natural, lighting up her eyes, transforming her face. He almost stepped back in surprise.

"That's fine, Neil, because I still don't like you."

He smiled back, extending his hand. She took it, her grip cool and firm.

Not a truce, but a step toward understanding. It was the most progress they'd made in two years.

Chapter Three

"So did you do it?"

They were sitting in Marilyn's new home. It was nice enough for transitional housing but he couldn't see her staying here long. Aside from the size of the place, there were college students and temp residents on either side of her unit.

She'd ordered pizza, and they were sitting on her furniture. They hadn't arranged the furniture yet, but she'd rented anti-grav discs to move it around easily. He'd helped her muscle her stuff out of the freight elevator into the new place. He'd leave the rearranging to her. Just because he was gay didn't mean he liked home decorating. His own place was spare, almost barren.

Out of her suit and with her hair in a ponytail, she looked ridiculously young. She was sitting cross-legged, her long, loose skirt pulled down over her knees, bare feet peeking out. While she kept her fingernails clean and unpainted, her toenails were pink. Neil wondered what else she kept hidden under that cold façade. He'd have never imagined her sitting cross-legged in a flowered sundress, eating pizza and drinking beer.

"I didn't do anything, really. I just told him I'd be away the rest of the weekend. I think he got the point." She licked a bit of pizza sauce from her thumb. "What about you and Jase?"

He hadn't seen the other man since that morning. "Still in a holding pattern. I think he knows I'm at the end."

"So we're both assuming that our partner knows it's over." She shook her head in disgust. "Aren't we a pair? Talk about passive break-ups."

He had to laugh. She'd hit the nail on the head. "How 'bout we swap? I tell Dale and you tell Jase."

She snorted inelegantly. "Better yet, Neil, you and I should just move in together and tell them to fuck off."

"Actually, that's not such a bad..." He broke off. "No, it would be a disaster, wouldn't it?"

She laughed, and this time it sounded natural, comfortable. "It was a joke, Neil. I'm sure it'll only take us ten minutes at work to start hating each other again."

He looked at her for a long moment, long enough to make her uncomfortable. "I don't really hate you, Mari. Just something..."

"...rubs you wrong about me. I know."

"Weird, eh?"

She stretched her legs out onto an ottoman, and once again, he found himself looking at her slender feet, the delicate pink toenails. Her feet were pretty.

"You know what's really weird, Mari?"

She lifted a brow in question.

"We're finishing each other's sentences."

"Well, there's a scary thought."

"Obviously, we're spending too much time together. I think I'm glad you're taking the day off tomorrow."

"Gee, thanks, partner," she said dryly. "Finished?" He nodded and watched her as she gathered their dishes, taking the leftovers back to the kitchen. "Another beer?"

"Sure, what the hell. I'm walking home anyway."

He was already tipped over into buzzed, might as well get blitzed on her dime. She came back, bottles in hand. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. She'd had more than one herself. Of course, she wouldn't have to deal with a hangover at work in the morning.

* * *

"Listen, thanks, you've been grand, Neil. Made the whole thing pretty much painless."

They'd spent the remainder of the evening knocking back brews and joking about work and people they knew. Neil knew that the happy glow he was wearing wasn't just the alcohol. It was enjoying an evening of pressure-free companionship.

No sex, no mind games. For the first time, Neil realized that he carried more stress at home than he did at their combative workplace.

She walked him to the door. In her bare feet, she wasn't as tall as he was accustomed to her being. Still tall for a woman, but now she wasn't eye to eye with him.

"I'll see you Monday then. Call me if you need anything else moved... unless it's really heavy. And call Dale. End it for good."

She crossed her arms. He itched to make her drop them, to stop covering up. To just be herself, because when she was being herself, she wasn't so bad.

"What about you? Are you calling Jase?"

"Nah, he lives on his boat when he's not at my place. I'll drop by tomorrow after work. I owe him..." He broke off and cleared his throat. "He's a damaged man, Marilyn. I need to end it in person."

"You can't be responsible for him forever, Neil. He's fighting demons, and I really don't think you can help." She felt bad for him then. She'd loved Dale, but for her own self-preservation, she needed to move on. It hurt but she'd deal with it. Neil, on the other hand, was leaving behind the wreckage of another person's life.

"Neil, do you want to know what scares me most about the divorce?" Her voice was so soft that it was nearly a whisper. "I might have lost my Imperative mate because of Dale. I'll never know, but I think I did."

"God, Mari, don't say things like that!" The very words sent a chill down his skin. His family didn't mate through the Imperative, but some of his friends had, and the idea of missing the Imperative... it meant an incomplete life, at best. Shallow relationships, no satisfaction through sex. Loneliness.

Impulsively, he reached out and held her, pulling her into a tight hug. Up close like this she smelled soft, she felt soft. He'd never have guessed. Slowly, she relaxed against him, resting her forehead against the base of his throat.

She looked up just as he looked down, and their lips were so close that they brushed.

They froze.

"Thank... you..." As she spoke, her lips brushed his, and as though pulled by an invisible force, he lowered his head just a fraction. Their lips met. He moved just the slightest bit, feeling her body flex against his. Her lips parted, and he tasted just the slightest taste of her mouth...

She gasped and he broke away, looking down at startled blue eyes.

What to say? "Mari... I'm... I'm..." Sorry. Sorry was the word that was supposed to come out, but it didn't. Even now, several feet of distance between them, Neil felt the soft give of her lips, the taste and feel of her mouth. His hand rose to his lips. They tingled.

"Monday... I'll see you Monday, Neil." She swallowed hard. He couldn't help watching the movement in her slender throat. "Thank you for helping me. Be careful going home."

He nodded, still at a loss for words. And when they came, they were so damn pathetic. "Good night, then." He heard her door close behind him as he turned and walked away.

Chapter Four

Okay, so how many beers had she had last night? Marilyn rolled over in her bed, grimacing at the light that leaked through the cheap blinds. Her new place. Her fresh start on life.

Ironical that it had started with a kiss from Neil. Weird. Just... weird. Disturbingly weird, in fact. Drunk as she'd been, she'd lain awake for hours, replaying every moment of that kiss.

He'd seemed as affected as she, but it was probably just the shock of touching a woman so intimately. He'd probably gone home and gargled.

Marilyn checked the clock. She had an appointment with her Realtor in less than an hour. A cleaning service would prepare her condo for showing. It would go on the market as soon as it passed inspection. In the meantime, she needed to begin looking for a more permanent place to live.

She sat up and clutched her head with a groan. It wasn't just the headache; it was the dizziness, the ringing in her ears. She braced herself on the wall as she made her way into the bathroom. Under the steaming water of the shower, she leaned against the tile, letting the water pelt away her stiffness. She opened her mouth and let it run over her parched lips.

Once out, she auto dried instead of using the towel. Her hair remained slightly damp, and she left it loose to dry.

Naked, she padded back into her room, turning to stare at herself in the mirror.

Too tall, too thin. Breasts that would be proportionate to a woman much shorter than she was. Everything about her body was wrong. During their last fight, Dale had told her sex with her was like fucking a teenage boy.

Maybe that's why Neil had kissed her. She looked like a boy. She had to laugh at the thought. Her first post-marriage kiss was from a gay man!

Her face was oval and frankly, she thought she was attractive. A strong jaw balanced high cheekbones and an intelligent forehead. Her pale blonde hair was a good color, but on the fine side. Her lips weren't full, they weren't thin, they just... were. Blue eyes, of course, and ivory skin that tanned dark in the summer, if she wasn't careful. A slender, aristocratic nose and a slight cleft in her chin. Even to her own eye, she looked cool and unapproachable, like old money.

She stepped toward the poorly placed mirror and slid the closet door open, choosing her outfit for the day. When she bent over to slip into a pair of loose pants, the dizziness overwhelmed her again. She landed on her butt.

And then the doorbell rang.

"Shit." She really didn't need a bra, so she slipped a chunky knit sweater over her head and scrambled to her feet. Hopefully, the soft pink sweater boosted her pale cheeks a bit. "Coming!"

"You wish!" The call no doubt alerted every one of her neighbors to Gabrielle's presence. The Realtor knocked. "Come on, Marilyn, we've got places to go!"

Marilyn jerked the door open and her friend nearly spilled inside. She looked around in disgust. "Well, this is just sweet, Marilyn. Love what you've done with the place!"

Mari rolled her eyes. There were unpacked boxes and misplaced furniture all over the room. A half dozen empty bottles littered the coffee table. Gaby picked one up, tossing it end over end.

"So did you have a good time? Is he still here?" She peeked past Marilyn, trying to catch a look at the bedroom.

"It was Neil. He helped me move."

"Ewww... Strike the thought." Gaby looked around the place, as though expecting him to jump out from behind a box. "I can't believe he'd take his head out of his ass long enough to do something nice."

"Well, it sort of surprised me too." Marilyn scooped up the empties and carried them to the kitchen. "Listen, Gaby, I'm feeling pretty off this morning. How many places are we going to see?"

"As many as you like, sweets." Gaby had followed her into the tiny kitchen, idly opening the door of the refrigerator unit. "Nothing here but old pizza. I'll take you out for an early lunch, if you want." She swung the door closed and leaned back against the counter.

Gaby was small, curvy and luscious. Marilyn felt like an Amazon next to her friend. She leaned back on the counter opposite.

She rubbed her temples. Her ears were ringing. "I think I've caught something. I'm dizzy and my ears are buzzing." She shook her head again, and in a moment, the sensation faded away.

Gaby frowned. "How's your stomach? Nauseous at all?"

Marilyn considered. "No. Actually, I'm a little hungry."

"Well, you probably aren't pregnant then."

She snorted in laughter. She'd been celibate since before she and Dale had split. "No, I probably just caught something. Neil and I..." An image of that kiss rushed her brain, causing her chest to tighten, her skin to go warm.

"Marilyn, are you all right?"

She pulled a shaky breath, not wanting to admit to her friend that she'd just had a sexual rush of such intensity, she'd nearly gone down. "I'm okay. Just... dizzy."

"So, you were saying you and Neil...?"

"Ahh... we work in such close quarters, I might have picked up something from him."

Gaby took her by the arm, walking her into the living room. "Well, let's be thankful his personality isn't contagious. Or maybe it's the way you get all bitchy at him sometimes."

Marilyn felt herself go warm again, and once more, her ears began to buzz. She shook her head. They had kissed. If he had something contagious...

"What?"

She looked at Gaby in puzzlement. "What do you mean, what?"

Gabrielle stared at her for a long moment, her dark brown eyes speculative. "Something happened between you and Neil."

Marilyn shook her head, not about to admit that he'd kissed her. Or that she'd kissed him back. They had been drunk. Goofy. "Gaby, I drank too much and now I'm paying for it. That's all."

"No. I don't think so. Did you sleep with him?"

"Gaby!"

"Well?"

Marilyn scooted away from her friend. "That's just too weird. He's gay. And he's in a relationship."

"Was. I heard last night that Jase is playing the field again. Busted up emotionally, drinking hard, but hitting the scene."

"The scene?" Did she want to know about this? Gaby flirted around with some stuff that Marilyn thought was just a little too odd.

"He's a pain junkie. Leanne said he was at the Whip last night, left with Flora."

"Flora? But he's gay."

"Nah, back before he hooked up with Neil, he was just a slut. He'd go with pretty much anyone. At least, anyone who'd be willing to hurt him."

Marilyn blinked in surprise. "Okay... that's just disturbing, Gaby."

Gabrielle shrugged as though she saw this all the time. "So, back to you and Neil and 'he's gay' and you telling me what happened last night after you drank all that beer."

Marilyn leaned forward, elbows on her knees, head in her hands. "We talked. He was trying to break up with Jase. I'm trying to close the door on Dale. We made a bargain to do what we needed to do."

"And?"

"And we accidentally kissed. That's all."

Gabrielle burst into laughter. "Accidentally kissed? Marilyn, honey, things like that don't happen by accident!"

"They do to me! Gaby, he's *gay*! He's in love with Jase!"

"He's a man with a thing hanging between his legs, just looking for someplace nice and warm and tight! Gay my ass! You're so silly, Marilyn!" Gaby became serious. "What about Dale?"

"What about him?"

Gabrielle pulled a small handheld computer from her pocket and began rapidly entering information. "When you kissed Neil, did you think of Dale?"

Marilyn shook her head. "No... No, I didn't think of him at all."

"What about today? Is Dale on your mind? Are you missing him?"

"No."

Gaby met her eyes, a serious expression on her face. "So you are now emotionally free. No baggage?"

Marilyn knew her eyes must be huge in shock. It was the truth. Yesterday, she'd been heart-heavy, missing Dale. Today, he was barely worth a thought.

"Dizzy? A buzzing in your ears? Sudden bouts of horniness?"

"Gaby!"

"Well?"

"Well, yes. I suppose. Maybe it's a late-season flu?" Nowadays, people rarely got sick. She took a deep breath, worried about what might be wrong.

Gaby studied the screen on her computer before looking at Marilyn with a smug expression on her face. "Well, I'd say take two aspirin and get your butt to the City Gardens tomorrow morning. You have a bad case of the Imperative."

* * *

Neil rubbed burning eyes and powered down for the day. It wasn't even noon and he was wiped. Odd, he usually snapped back from a hangover, but this time he wasn't doing so well. The ringing in his ears was driving him to distraction. The empty

chair across from his disturbed him as well. He might as well take the rest of the day off.

What in hell had happened last night? From the time he'd sprouted short hairs, he'd never felt sexual attraction to a woman. To suddenly find himself kissing Marilyn, of all people... that was just strange. The fact that he had lain awake for hours, his hand on tenting the sheet? Now that had been disturbing. The heavy ache in his heart that always came with thoughts of Jase had lifted. His body protested, but his heart felt light and unencumbered for the first time in years.

In fact, once he walked out of the office and into the sunshine, his feet turned automatically toward the harbor, down toward the smaller boats. His heart beat a little faster, his head was spinning, but his purpose was clear.

He didn't have to go far. Jason was on a bench near the pier, looking out to sea, almost as though he'd been expecting Neil to come down the path. Jason could be a little spooky that way.

Neil stood for several moments, looking at the man who'd dominated so much of his existence for the past four years. Jase was golden and beautiful sitting there in the sun. His overlong hair rippled and flowed in the breeze. His golden skin glowed. Neil knew exactly how his face looked there under the sun, blue eyes that were exactly the color of the ocean, his smile so rare and precious. For years, Neil had lived to see that smile, to know that he'd put it on Jason's face.

The feelings were still there, but so was a sense of release. The love he felt for Jase was warm and a bit sad. He grieved for the other man and his unspoken demons. Neil just couldn't understand why Jase looked like sunshine, yet was so full of darkness.

"Hey." He settled on the bench next to Jase. His heart dropped just the tiniest bit when he saw the faint bruise that spread across the other man's cheek. He reached up and stroked it.

Jase turned away, looking out to the ocean. Neil sat quietly, sensing that Jason had something to say, and needed the time to say it.

"You've been my safe harbor, you know."

Neil followed his gaze, seeing white sails out on the ocean. Sometimes Jase would take his sailboat and drift for hours out there on the waves.

"You're the only person who gives me what I need without really damaging me. You've taken good care of me."

Neil nodded, finally looking at Jase fully.

"I'm all wrong, Neil. I've been pulling you along that path all this time. I need you, but I can feel you trying to escape."

Neil swallowed hard and nodded. "It hurts me, Jase. More than physically, it's hurting my soul. It's been killing me to see you hurting so much."

"This is my journey, Neil. Not yours. Not anymore." He turned back to the water. "You came here to break up with me, and I'm breaking up with you instead. Does that make it easier?"

"Not really." Neil rubbed his temple. The headache had receded, leaving an obnoxious buzz in its place.

"Are you all right?" Jase turned concerned eyes on him.

"Drank too much last night, and I have a bit of a hangover. I'll be fine." He looked over at Jase, not liking what he saw in the other man's eyes. It was something close to despair.

"Will we be friends, Jase? I don't want to lose you completely." Jase had been Neil's first long-term relationship. He'd had other lovers, but none that he'd felt so completely right with. The idea of letting go was frightening.

Jase gave that small smile of his. "Friends? I don't think I have friends, Neil. I used to." He shook his head, and for the first time, Neil could see how deeply disturbed the other man really was. "Maybe we can be friends... at least until you have another lover. I don't know if I want to see that."

"You were with someone last night."

"It wasn't about sex. Well, maybe it was for her, but not for me. That's the price I paid."

"Her? A woman?"

Jase gave a dry laugh. "Is it so strange to think I'd fuck a woman? I don't know that Flora really qualifies, though. Her tastes are a bit extreme. But yes, I've had relationships with women." He turned back to the bay, giving Neil his profile. His sadness was almost palpable. "I was married once."

"Married? What happened?"

"I lost her."

"I'm sorry, Jase."

The other man shrugged. "My own fault, really. But more to the point, are you all right? You look sick."

"Like I said. Hangover. My head keeps spinning."

Jase looked at him with a lifted brow. "Are your ears ringing? You want to fuck, but you don't know who?"

He looked at Jase in confusion. Suddenly, a huge grin broke out over the other man's face. Jase began to chuckle, and then to laugh out loud. He threw his arm around Neil's shoulder and hugged him tightly. "Congratulations, Neil. You'll be wanting to visit the City Garden tomorrow morning." Neil still sat, staring in confusion. Jase's laughter died down, and he looked at Neil in very real surprise. "You really don't know, do you?"

"What don't I know, Jase?"

Jase stood and stretched, reaching up to the sky. His shirt lifted a bit, and Neil winced to see purple welts snaking around his waist. She'd used a whip on him, for real.

"The Imperative, Neil. You have a mate." When he turned back to face Neil, an odd combination of happiness and loss laced his expression.

"That isn't possible. It's never come to my family before."

"Things change, Neil." His blue eyes were overly bright. If he blinked, tears would spill. "You've always been my safe place, Neil. I love you very much." He pulled

Neil to his feet, stepping in to hold him tightly. "You have the chance for happiness beyond your wildest dreams. Don't fuck it up."

He released Neil suddenly and spun away, moving down the dock just a little too fast.

Neil collapsed onto the bench, looking after Jason in shock. That couldn't be, could it? A mate? Through the Imperative?

What in hell was he supposed to do now?

* * *

"You go to the garden and wait. And stop laughing, Mari, this isn't funny." Gaby looked impatiently at Marilyn, who'd collapsed onto the sofa in a fit of giggles.

"Gaby, I just had my thirty-fifth birthday. I'm at least a decade older than every other person who'll be there! Of course I'm laughing!"

"I'm not joking, Marilyn. If you miss your partner, you'll be stuck like this till the next assembly."

Marilyn snorted into renewed laughter. "Marilyn, if you make that face, it'll stick that way!" She mimicked Gaby's husky Latino accent. Gradually, she overcame her laughter. "You know, Gabrielle, I'll end up with a guy fifteen years younger than me."

"Or a girl."

Marilyn stared at her in horror.

"Hey, it happens. That artist, Conrad Montgomery? He ended up in a threesome. I see same sex couplings all the time."

"But I'm not a lesbian, Gabrielle." She was finally calming down enough to take it seriously.

"Marilyn, this isn't about sexual orientation or choices or any of that. It's about the right person for the right person. Did you ever think that maybe this is why things didn't work with Dale? Sexually, I mean. Did you ever once have an orgasm while you were married?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Not through masturbation, sweetie."

Marilyn sat quietly, curling her long legs under her body. She abruptly thought back to that kiss and what had triggered it. "Neil kissed me... it *was* an accident, you know. But he was hugging me because I told him that I was frightened that the Imperative had passed me while I was with Dale."

And within hours of that revelation, the Imperative had hit. The moment she'd opened herself emotionally, it was simply waiting.

"I'm afraid."

"That's okay, Mari." Gaby reached out. "Do you want to skip the house-hunting today? I think it might be a good idea."

Marilyn nodded in agreement. "Seeing's how I'm going to be sharing pretty soon."

"Honey, what scares you most?"

Gaby still held her hand. It was odd but Marilyn's fears were suddenly crystal clear. Feelings she'd had for so long were suddenly opened up and understandable. "That I'm not good enough. That he... or she won't like me."

"That's impossible, you know. Your mate will be the perfect person for you. I don't know that there's ever been a divorce in Imperative mated couples. They're truly meant for one another."

"Why do you know all this?"

Gaby shrugged. "I don't know. The Imperative's not in my family, but it's always fascinated me. Think of it. A lover who won't cheat, who's your perfect match in every way. Children who are healthier and smarter than the average. There was this couple in my neighborhood, they were in their hundreds and still adored one another. When they eventually passed, they went together, in their sleep. They were together a century and never stopped loving each other. Can you imagine?"

She looked sad, and Marilyn felt bad for her. She'd been raised by Imperative mated parents. Her siblings also mated through the Imperative. She'd been the outsider in her own family. At the same time, she was willing to take responsibility for her marriage and making herself unavailable to her best possible mate.

During the early days of her marriage to Dale, she'd been happy. Whatever sacrifice she'd made had seemed justified. Now, Marilyn wondered if Dale had paid the steep price right alongside her.

"Are you getting excited, Mari? Just a little? Are you imagining who he might be, if you know him or if it's a stranger?"

"Yeah. I guess I am." She smiled and wiped at a stray tear on her cheek.

"Well, one thing we know for sure, it won't be Neil!"

The women laughed at the very thought.

Chapter Five

The City Gardens opened their gates at nine in the morning.

At eight fifty-five, Marilyn stood across the boulevard and looked at the milling crowd. Already, connections had been formed. One new couple was leaning against a shady fence, playfully kissing and touching. Another pair was trotting away, hands linked, giddy laughter on the air.

They were all so young! She didn't see anyone else her age, and though awkwardness was Marilyn's constant companion, she felt even taller, older, more obvious than usual. She stood and watched as the gates swung open and the crowd began to filter in, slowed by the sign-in process.

She'd heard they were now recording the pairings, as well as keeping track of the few that didn't make their connection. Generally, the Imperative only affected those whose natural mate was close by. Some desperate singles resorted to traveling from city to city, searching and praying for their mate.

Once the crowd had thinned at the entrance, Marilyn took a deep breath and crossed the shady street. Already, newly formed couples were lining up at the tables, ready to leave.

She should be so lucky.

Once inside, she wandered, the steady buzz in her ears a mild annoyance. She'd been told that her senses would go haywire as her mate came within her proximity. She watched the spectacle. One pair of men came together right in front of her, dismay mixed with elation as they stared at one another, and then embraced.

Opposite sex couples seemed to be racially compatible, though there were a few mixed race pairings. A pair of redheads came face-to-face, both grinning in delight, fingering one another's flaming locks.

She checked her watch. It was well after eleven, and she was growing a bit impatient. Maybe this was all wrong. Maybe this was just a big mistake. She had a virus or a sinus infection. She rose from the bench and walked deeper into the gardens, gawking at a couple who'd clearly been overcome by their excitement. They were deep in the shrubbery, making love.

Sheesh!

A group stood under the broad circle of a weeping willow, several hands clasped, clearly a group of friends, or at least acquaintances. They broke away, heading back for the gates, leaving an empty bench.

Marilyn dug into her tote bag and found her lunch. The information she'd looked up the night before warned that some people waited all day, to come prepared with food and drink. She dug out an apple and unscrewed the lid to her water.

No sooner had she bit into the crisp flesh of the apple when the buzzing in her ear changed pitch. It suddenly shifted from high and annoying to low and very annoying. Her stomach lurched, and she slowly put her water away, pitching the uneaten apple into a trash container.

It was him. Something deep down inside told her it was a man. Her belly twisted. Her sex began to weep in arousal.

God, now she understood how that couple had been unable to wait! Marilyn took a deep breath and huffed it out. Took another and repeated until she was nearly panting.

Part of her wanted to run headlong to her mate, to pitch herself into his arms. The other part warned her to run... This was forever, no turning back.

The buzz intensified. He was coming, and moving fast. Instinctively, Marilyn backed further into the shadows, pressing herself against the rough bark of the tree. Several people moved along the pathways. It could be any of them, but it wasn't. Her mate wasn't on the path. He'd cut away through the grass and the trees... She let her eyes slip closed, feeling his presence. He was so very near...

"Marilyn? Mari?" The voice scraped her awareness like fingernails on glass. Her eyes popped open, and then opened even wider. "Jeez, Marilyn, what are you doing here?"

She shook her head, trying to clear the screaming buzz that pierced her ears when she looked at Neil. His handsome face looked puzzled and slightly dismayed. Why dismayed? She shook her head again and sudden enlightenment settled over her being.

Horror.

Shock.

And a really weird, surreal happiness.

"Oh, shit, this is so not happening." She scooped her bag up from the ground and began walking, feet sinking into the slightly damp grass. The faster she walked, the louder the screaming in her head. Abruptly, she stopped and squeezed her eyes closed. In a few moments, the scream receded to a buzz once again. Good. This she could deal with. She started moving again.

"Ahh... Marilyn? You might want to open your eyes when you walk."

She cracked one lid and found herself face to face with Neil. A surge of moisture slipped into her panties, and against her will, she glanced down at the front of his immaculately fitted pants. An enormous erection pressed against his zipper. "Neil, no. This can't be."

"Tell me about it." As though unable to resist the urge, he reached out, brushing her hand. It wasn't an intimate touch, but abruptly, the shrill buzzing stopped. She sighed in relief. When she pulled her hand away, it began again. In self-preservation, she grabbed his hand.

They both sighed in relief.

"Marilyn, tell me this isn't happening."

"This isn't happening, Neil. Believe me, this is *so* not happening." Their hands dropped apart, and they lunged together, making contact.

"It's not happening."

"So why is your hard-on smashed up against me?"

"Stress."

"Funny, in the past two years, I've never seen you with an erection before. Except for that time you and Jase were making out on my patio."

"I just did that to piss you off."

"Yeah, I know."

"Guess maybe I'm going to have to stop yanking your chain."

He nudged her elbow and they began walking through the park, under the spreading branches of ancient trees. Birds flew above their heads, singing in a wild chorus. She could smell the perfume of mass plantings of roses and gardenias wafting softly on the air.

"How old are you, Neil?"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"I'm nearly a decade older than you."

"You're thirty-five. It's hardly a decade. I have to admit, when I saw all the young people milling around, I had to steel myself to come inside. Felt like a fool."

She laughed a bit. "Me too." They walked closely together, their hands brushing, careful not to clasp, yet mindful also to not lose contact.

"Is it okay if I take your hand?" She looked curiously at him. "My head's been hurting something wicked since yesterday. It doesn't hurt so bad when we touch." She felt his fingers brush hers and finally catch in the most tentative of holds.

"I broke up with Jase yesterday. Actually, he broke up with me."

"How are you with it?"

He sighed. "I worry for him. Seeing him fall apart is maybe the worst thing I've ever experienced. But he was right, he's got to walk this road himself. I can't keep carrying him."

"I'm sorry." She squeezed his hand, and their contact grew stronger. She didn't want to tell him what Gaby had said about Jase. She didn't want to add to his pain.

Funny thing was two days ago she'd have taken delight in informing him that Jase was running around with a nasty bitch domme. Now she was sheltering him from hurt.

"This is really happening, isn't it?"

Neil didn't answer, and she looked over at him. His dark eyes were overly bright. His golden brown skin was flushed. He looked everywhere but at Marilyn. Humiliation washed over her, and she bowed her head, loosening the grip she had on his hand.

Without further speech, they made a full loop of the place, finally emerging at the gates where volunteers staffed tables. The elderly woman that had signed her in beamed happily at the two of them. With a shaking hand, Marilyn signed her name. Neil signed next to hers. Marilyn Tyler and Neil Van Zandt walked out the gates together.

The woman turned to her companion. "Now aren't they just the prettiest couple you've seen today?"

Her husband leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You're much prettier."

* * *

"I feel kind of stupid."

She looked at Neil in surprise. He was the most self-confident person she knew. They walked slowly toward his home, fingers loosely entwined.

"I guess I just feel like a kid on his first date. And I'm afraid I'm going to say something that'll piss you off."

"I guess I can be a little volatile."

He looked at her with a wry expression.

"Listen, Neil, don't even try to deny that you live to provoke me!"

He laughed at that, shaking his head. "Do you like what I'm wearing?"

She looked him up and down, taking in the nicely worn blue jeans and white cotton sweater. The natural hues contrasted beautifully with his dark coloring.

"I ask because I realized the other day that when I get dressed to go to work, I always wonder if you'll like the color or the suit. Even this morning, I wondered what you'd think... and I didn't even expect to see you."

"You always look good. That's part of what pisses me off about you so much!" Her dimple was peeking out at that.

"Well, you're always beautiful, aloof and cool. Always a bit intimidating."

"I don't know if I like that, Neil."

"I liked the dress you wore the other day at your place. And your pink toenails." She smiled, and oddly, he liked that she smiled.

"Did you date much when you were young?"

"Not really. Not many gay kids in my area. None of the girls really interested me enough to hang with. I had a boyfriend by the time my senior prom came, so he went with me. What about you?"

"Yeah, I dated now and then."

"Don't tell me. Prom queen, cheerleader, all that good stuff?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I was tall and gawky. Very shy."

"And you never grew out of it."

"Gee, thanks."

"No!" He laughed, realizing he'd gone straight for her buttons. He'd have to stop that. "The shy part. You're shy. I would never have thought it!"

They'd turned down a street of neat houses, and to her surprise, Neil led her up the walk to a small house. Somehow, she'd have thought he'd live somewhere ultra-modern. This house wasn't new, but wasn't one of the older classic houses either. It was nicely landscaped, with a small, neat yard.

"I know most people go all out to greet their new partner. I'm sorry I didn't do any of that. It came sort of suddenly."

He passed his palm over the reader that disengaged the security and ushered her into his house. And he came to a dead stop. Flowers were scattered on every available surface. A bottle of champagne sat on the counter that opened to the kitchen. He

swallowed and picked up a note next to the silver ice bucket. *I know you probably didn't have time to think of any of this. Please enjoy, and I wish you the best that life can bring. Love, Jason.*

He set the note down with a slightly trembling hand.

"From Jason?"

He nodded. He hadn't thought to reprogram the security. He looked at the security panel and saw that Jase had removed himself from the access list. Neil gestured Marilyn over, had her run her hand over the pad and quickly entered her name.

"Now you can come and go as you please." He turned away, not wanting her to see his face. "Guess yesterday's move was a waste of effort. We'll have to get your stuff over here. I've got plenty of space, we can blend... you know... our stuff."

"There's no hurry, Neil. We can take this slow."

"Yeah, but how slow? I feel like I need to touch you all the time. Or at least be close."

"Good thing we work together, then." She slipped onto a stool at the counter and picked up the bottle of champagne. She didn't really feel like drinking. Marilyn looked up at where Neil stood. The look he was giving her was hungry, and she felt an answering push of desire. For Neil?

Granted, she'd always found him beyond attractive. Okay, she'd always thought he was damn hot, but still... the way he was looking at her. His deep brown hair looked slightly mussed, the waves twisted into curls. His dark eyes were hooded. For the first time, she suspected that he might be part Asian.

She let her feet slip to the floor. She stood, facing him. Mari stepped forward, resting a hand on his chest. His breath caught. Awkwardly, he moved forward, resting his hands on her waist, letting them slide to her hips.

She lifted her face to his and he caught her in an unexpected kiss. His mouth was hard, hungry, and for a moment, she resisted, unaccustomed to this much force.

"I'm sorry..." His voice was breathless, and she shook her head, stepping closer. He tried again, this time gentler, taking his time, tentatively exploring her lips, running

his fingers over her skin. Gently, his tongue probed her lips. She opened, her eyes dropping shut as he explored. He tasted; he urged her to taste him as well. Years of ingrained discomfort dropped away from Marilyn like a shed skin, and for the first time, she knew the true intimacy of a kiss.

He broke away to run his fingers through her hair, to nuzzle the soft skin under her ear. Their bodies swayed together, hips bumping, warmth joining.

Wordlessly, he led her to his bedroom, and they stood, looking at the flowers, at the unlit candles scattered around the surfaces. A small stack of books sat on a surface. Neil felt his skin flush when he realized the top book was a copy of the *Kama Sutra*. He'd never even thought about how to make love to a woman before!

Panic shot through him, and then a sense of calm.

Outside the window the sun was setting. When had it gotten so late? He didn't remember spending hours in the gardens or on the long walk home. Suddenly, he was ravenously hungry, and to his embarrassment, his stomach growled.

Marilyn looked at him with enormous eyes, laughter brimming. "Neil, maybe we should get dinner? I'm not quite ready... in my head. My body's ready but my brain..." She shrugged and he couldn't help laughing.

They hadn't even made it out of their clothes, so Neil took her hand, pulling her along into the kitchen. Jase had thought of everything. There was a good variety of Chinese take-out, waiting to be heated.

They worked quietly, side by side, and with plates filled, moved into his dining room. Neil looked around, wondering if there was enough space for a family.

A family? Where in hell had that come from? Never in his life had he considered children, and suddenly, he had a mate and the possibility of children! Panic swept through him for a moment.

"Neil?"

"Just a reaction. To us... this..."

She nodded. "It might be a mistake, Neil. I mean, seriously, you and me? I know how strange it is to me. I can't imagine..."

"What?"

"Your lover decorated your house, left us food. Your *male* lover, Neil. And you... you told me it doesn't run in your family."

He played with his food for a moment, dragging his fork through the chow mein on his plate. "It is what it is, Marilyn. It'll... it can be good."

"Why aren't we falling all over each other? Why are we here eating and not in bed?"

"That'll happen." He wasn't sure how. He had no clue how to please a woman. "I know when we kiss... it's overwhelming, Marilyn."

Their eyes met and held for a long, searing moment. In a flash, he was out of his chair, pulling her to her feet. The kiss was long and hard and hungry, and this time, clothing began to fall away. He peppered hard kisses on her jaw, her neck, and he pulled away her sweater, hands suddenly filled with her soft breasts.

"Oh, God." He'd never felt anything like this before, and then she was pulling at his clothing. His sweater fell to the floor even as her loose trousers slipped from her legs.

Somehow they made it to the bedroom. It was fully dark now but neither was able to muster the presence of mind, or the desire, to light a candle or turn on a light. She fell to the bed, Neil on top of her, ruthlessly pulling off her panties, his own shoes and jeans.

He pushed her to the top of the bed, overwhelmed by softness; soft skin, soft muscle, soft hair. He ran his hands over her body, rough and hard, hands clasping her small breasts, listening to her gasp as he bent down, tasted her nipples. A hand dropped between her legs and Marilyn opened gladly, more than ready to take him.

His hand groped, a bit clumsy. Finally a finger slipped within her folds, probing, dipping into her wet channel. Neil pushed himself up, away from her breast, and watched his hand, looked at what he was doing. Her hips thrust against his hand, as though silently urging him on, and her hand dropped to his cock, stroking firmly, with

an expert touch. She squeezed, her thumb catching a pearl of pre-come, spreading it over his cock head.

Unable to wait, Neil shifted into position, letting her take his cock, sliding it into her wet, glistening folds.

And then he was inside her body.

He froze atop her. Marilyn pumped her hips, trying to urge him into movement. He was large, as large as she'd suspected, judging by her covert glimpses of him in the past. He'd been nearly shaking in eagerness, sweat blooming over his skin, his muscles taut and rigid. His cock was so hard, so hot she'd been unable to wait.

And now he hovered there, inches above her body, buried deep within her channel.

"Neil?" She shifted her hips, trying to provoke him to movement. She shivered in frustration. This was the most wildly arousing moment of her life. He'd been rough, and it had felt good, so incredibly good. He'd been awkward, but that wasn't unusual. Some men she'd been with had been much more so.

He was hard inside of her, but suddenly, she felt a sense of disconnection. Isolation.

"Neil?"

He blinked in the darkness, and looked down at her. To her dismay, he backed out, sliding to a kneeling position. "I can't."

Nausea bloomed. The sweat on her skin suddenly chilled, and the little bit she'd eaten threatened to come back up. Marilyn carefully scooted up in the bed, cautious to not brush his skin, to not make any contact at all. She slid off the bed, glancing at Neil.

He still knelt, eyes closed, cock jutting from his body. "I'm sorry, Mari, don't leave... please... I just..."

She fished her clothing from the floor, piece by piece, following the trail to the door.

"Mari..." He'd followed her to the living room. He was naked, and Marilyn thought she'd never seen such a beautiful body before. He was tanned and muscled, the

result of hours on a rowing team. His cock was still full and hard, jutting from a nest of dark curls. His long legs were muscular and as perfect as she'd ever seen.

"That's okay, Neil. I do understand, really." She pulled her sweater over her head and quickly tied the drawstring on her pants. She picked up her shoes, not bothering to put them on. "I'll go home now. If it's too hard to be apart, I'll just... maybe take your spare room. I'm not really interested in relationships, but maybe you and Jase..."

Her gaze swept the room and she spotted her tote. She scooped it from the floor.

"Marilyn, it's not what you..." The door shut behind her. "...think." He squeezed his eyes closed and turned back to the bedroom. Neil's cock ached unbearably, and he fell face first onto the neatly made bed.

The pressure of the mattress on his cock was overwhelming. He thrust once, twice, imagining that he was back inside that incredible, wet, tight passage. Once more and he shuddered in climax. The climax he'd been trying to delay when he'd pulled out of her body. He'd been completely overwhelmed by the foreign nature of the act, the unfamiliar curves and planes of a female body.

He'd found himself lost in an incipient climax before he'd even thrust into her once. His brain had shut down completely, unable to process what the hell was happening.

And then she was gone.

Neil rolled to his back. The buzzing in his head had returned. His stomach gripped with pain. He rolled to his feet and rushed to the bathroom, just in time to make it to the toilet before being sick.

Chapter Six

In the mornings, she left for the office before Neil did, so she headed home a couple hours earlier. Oddly, their work didn't suffer. It seemed to benefit by the long, quiet hours they put in together. They shared little discussion beyond the status of their projects and the progress of an assignment.

When Neil came home from work, she'd be outside running or whatever the hell it was she did for exercise. They'd slowly moved her stuff to his house. They'd even been able to move some of her furniture out of storage. The formerly empty house was now cozy and welcoming. Well, excepting Neil's spartanly equipped bedroom.

Neil felt oddly conflicted. On the one hand, he was content; the hours spent in her company brought an odd serenity. At the same time, he was being torn apart. His need for her was disturbingly intense, keeping him awake at night. Her unhappiness was palpable and fed into his own.

She was out for her evening run, and Neil had worked out at the gym on his way home. He didn't have practice for a couple more days, and no upcoming races to train for. He knocked around the empty house. Part of him itched to seek out Jase, but not for sex. His need for the other man had dwindled in the face of his growing sexual obsession with Marilyn. He just wanted to talk, to hear another man's take on the situation. Jason was wise, in his own peculiar way. But talking to Jase would clearly be the wrong thing to do.

He flopped down on the luxurious sofa that had come with his new mate and contemplated his communication unit. "Call Duncan Sinclair." Within seconds, a voice came over the line, and Neil slipped the unit into his ear. "Hey, Dunc, it's Neil."

"Hey, Neil, it's been a long time! I hear you've been leading a busy life lately, new mate and all..."

Neil stroked a forefinger over the nubby fabric of the sofa, wondering how to answer.

"Neil, hold one sec... Get me that, would you?" In the background, he heard a thump, voices raised, and then the sounds abruptly muffled as Duncan switched to his earpiece. "That's better. They're kicking up such a racket..." He grunted. "Hey... watch it!" He sighed, the sound of his breath swishing in Neil's ear.

"Dunc, what's going on? Or do I want to know?"

Duncan gave a husky laugh. "They're fighting. It ended up on the floor."

"God, I'm sorry..."

"No!" More laughter. Obviously, Neil had misread the situation. "It's just the usual dominance battle. Every so often, they just have to prove who wears the pants."

Both of Duncan's mates were artists, Con a sculptor and painter, Marina a dancer and choreographer. Duncan was the creamy center of their spicy cookie.

"So who's winning?"

There was a brief pause. "At the moment, it would be Con... No, wait, Marina just flipped him. Word of advice, Neil, don't ever leg wrestle a ballerina!"

Neil shook his head in amazement. "So what in hell are you doing during all this? Fixing a sandwich or something?"

"Nah, I'm the prize. They've got me tied to the bed."

Neil just sat for a moment, caught between stunned amazement and hilarity. Hilarity won out, and he began laughing. "So they've got you all trussed up like a pig? You're talking, so I assume you don't have an apple in your mouth!"

"Naw, but they do have some... ah... looks like whipped cream... and that looks like strawberries over there..."

"TMI, Duncan!"

That husky laugh came over the line again. "So, Neil, listen, since I'm tied up at the moment, and you've clearly got something to talk about, how 'bout we meet for lunch tomorrow? The Thai place by your office?"

Duncan suddenly let out a hiss, and Neil figured it was probably high time to end the call. "Uh... yeah, Dunc, noon okay?"

"Yeah... listen... gotta go... tomorrow... Oh... Jesussss..."

The line disconnected and Neil lay back on the sofa, laughing and thoroughly aroused. He looked down at his pants, where his cock was tenting the linen. At least something was looking up!

Neil let out a long sigh that drifted into a groan. An agonized groan. Every minute of every day he was hard. When she was nearby, he was hard and weeping, the Imperative singing a seductive melody. And while Neil was suffering blue balls, Mari was cool as a frosted window. He could see in, just a little now and then, but enough to tell him that she was hurting.

Of course she was hurting; she was his mate! Whatever he was feeling, she felt as well. Neil knew it was up to him to fix this.

At night, through the walls, he could sometimes hear her crying softly in her sleep. Other times, he heard the squeak of the bedsprings as she made love with an invisible partner. He'd listen, feeling like a voyeur, hand on his cock, timing his movements to hers. He could close his eyes, feel the rhythm of her movement, recall the wet clasp of her channel around his cock. When she cried out in orgasm, he joined her. They'd never made love, not really, but they always came together.

Neil rose from the sofa, picked his shoes up from the floor and headed for his bedroom. As usual, her door was closed, and he paused outside, picturing her in there, unclothed, unashamed. Beautiful. His hand trembled just slightly as he touched the doorknob, cracking the door open.

No alarms went off; no barking dogs. Feeling slightly bolder, he pushed the door open and stepped in. Her soft perfume reached out to embrace him. His skin pebbled, and without thinking, Neil unbuttoned his shirt and slid out of his trousers until he stood naked, surrounded by the trappings of Marilyn's life.

Her bed was neatly made, but slightly rumpled. She'd taken a nap after work. Her clothes were put away, but her high heels lay askew on the floor by the closet. Such tiny imperfections, chinks in her armor.

Her bedding was a mélange of pastels, green and rose and blue. He'd assumed she'd prefer something cooler, more structured. The pieced quilt was old and ragged, clearly a cherished possession. Maybe something handed down from a grandmother. It was something that brought her comfort.

Photos scattered the surface of her dresser. Hidden toward the back of the collection was a shot of them together at a company dinner. She'd cropped it down from a larger photo. Seeing it created a warm glow in his belly.

That warmth was a harmonious companion to the warm glow that was smoldering elsewhere.

Gingerly, he sat on the edge of her bed, finally laying back, head on her pillow, smelling the fragrances that all combined to compose Marilyn. Her perfume, the shampoo she used on her hair. The intimate scent of her body rose from the bedding as his body warmed the exact spot where she'd rested earlier.

Neil rubbed his chest, pinching his nipples, imagining Marilyn beside him, her hands on his body. Her touch was light and gentle, and where her hands led, she followed with her lips, her tongue. Down the flat plane of his belly his hand trailed, and then hers, and then the tickling warmth of her mouth.

Around the head of his cock, down his shaft, she licked, her tongue taking long, wet strokes. Again and again, until his cock was rigid and tense with need. She went lower, digging in behind his balls, tickling, inhaling his musk.

Do you like this?

"Oh, God, yes, Mari! Don't stop!" His head arched back. His heels dug into the soft fabric of the bedding.

She followed that delicate line that led upward, dividing his testicles, up his cock, right to the head. Her wet, clever tongue dipped into his weeping slit just for a brief, incredible moment. His hips thrust, her mouth opened, and she swallowed him

down. When she pulled back, he felt the faintest scrape of her teeth, the cool tickle of her breath on his wet skin.

Down again, further, and she held, pulling her lips tight, sucking so hard he thought his eyes would cross. Another release, then another swallow; this time her nose touched the skin of his groin. He felt the convulsive spasm of her throat as she relaxed through her gag reflex. Her hand clasped his balls, pulling them tight, hard enough that the skin was taut over the fragile orbs.

His hips bucked. She plunged with him, and Neil cried out as he came, tight, hard spasms forcing the seed from his body. His warm semen spattered on the skin of his belly, his chest; his hands were slick with the stuff. He rubbed the seed over his skin, soothingly, gently, imagining the hands of someone else touching him with love.

His eyes opened to the darkness of Mari's empty room and once again Neil sighed. The sigh led to a moan of grief.

Before the tears started, he gathered his clothing and left her room.

* * *

Maybe she should have brought a bicycle. Marilyn's heart simply wasn't into running this afternoon. She couldn't find a rhythm and ended up winded long before she should be. She dropped to a walk, stopping to refill her water bottle at a spigot on the strand. Even her walking pace began to lag. Pretty soon she meandered down to the beach, heading out to the sand to watch the sun set. That was one of the perks of living here in Harbor City. Clean, clear and the evening view was impeccable.

She'd spent countless hours of her life here on the beach, swimming and playing volleyball, sometimes whale watching, or just unwinding. To the north, surfers were beginning to straggle in. The waves weren't up today, but the boogie boarders were still having a good time in close to shore.

"Rumor has it you're my replacement."

She hadn't even heard him arrive. Jase was standing next to her. His legs were tanned and muscular, golden hair glinting in the fading light. He didn't look at her, but

sat gracefully at her side. "Strike that. You're his Imperative mate. That's quite a lot different than what our relationship was all about. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

As always, she caught her breath at how handsome Jase Anders was. It wasn't simply the golden hair and brilliant blue eyes, but his bearing and expression, that incredible bone structure. But those eyes were haunted.

"I'm sorry, Jase, for...well..."

"Don't." He glanced at her and looked away. She'd long ago noticed that Jase rarely sustained eye contact. "The Imperative only comes to those who are ready. I'm actually not at all surprised that it was you. After all, it was always you."

"What do you mean?"

He smiled, giving her a brief glimpse at what he must have been like before his soul had been crushed. "He'd come home from work, complaining about you being a bitch, or cutting him out of a project that he wanted. He'd leave in the morning making plans on how to get your nose out of joint. Or he'd talk about some really magnificent layout that you designed. He was always bringing work home with him, pointing out a phrase or a paragraph that impressed him."

He shrugged. "I knew it a while back. It was always you. Not me."

She shook her head. "Jase, Neil is gay. In all the time I've known him, he's never been attracted to me. Even now..." She broke off, and then continued. "I know they say Nature doesn't make mistakes, but he's still got incredibly conflicted feelings about you. And me."

"He's always been a caregiver. He feels responsible for my problems. Neil never could understand that there's nothing he could do to keep my head above water." He looked away, gazing out at the sunset. "Now, Marilyn, all that intensity, all that caring, will focus on you."

"No. It won't. He isn't attracted to me at all. He couldn't even... he couldn't even complete the act. We tried, it was a disaster."

He looked at her then, brow raised. "Neil's never been with a woman before. This hit him so fast he never had time to wonder, to build those fantasies. Think about it, Marilyn. All his life, he's seen himself a certain way. He's seen his future with another man. If they were to have children, it would be adoption. Knowing Neil, he's never given a thought to children, and I guarantee, that's now crossed his mind and shaken his foundation."

He sighed. "Now, all of a sudden he's having intense sexual feelings for a woman. That's never, ever crossed his mind before. And to top it off, it's the woman he's had a long-term, passionate love/hate relationship with. Of course he's conflicted, Marilyn. Aren't you?"

She nodded. "I'm older than he is." He rolled his eyes. "I'm not feminine or sexy."

"Tell me another one, Marilyn." She didn't respond. "Look. Everyone's ideal of beautiful or sexy is different. You are tall, elegant and willowy. I promise that those petite curvy girls chew glass when they look at you. It's human nature to want to be what you aren't."

"You're handsome. Talented. I heard you at a piano once. Someone like Neil loves you. Why do you hate yourself so much?"

"Off topic, Marilyn."

"Okay. You have a pretty good understanding of the Imperative, yet you aren't mated. Does it run in your family?"

He turned away. Obviously, she'd said the wrong thing. She was ready to rise and walk away when his hand came out to stop her. "You think I'm handsome?" She nodded. "I broke every mirror I owned. To me, Jason Anders is a monstrosity."

Her stomach twisted at the dark, desolate tone of his voice. She'd heard whispers about him, gossip about his penchant for pain, his reputation as a slut. He'd seemed settled and happy with Neil, but she'd been wrong about that.

"What happened?"

"She died. And the baby." He fell silent. Marilyn could hear his breathing in the darkness. "You don't understand, Marilyn. The Imperative makes you part of another person. I couldn't... I can't *exist* with that part of me gone."

His eyes were dry, yet his voice pulsed with pain. Grief that sounded as fresh as new.

"Jase, death is a part of life. Other Imperative mated pairs, sometimes they lose a partner early. They survive."

"Yeah, but they don't usually cause the death of their mate, now do they?"

She looked at him in surprise. Anger glowed in his eyes. The setting sun cast red light off the ocean, highlighting his quiet fury.

"I wanted to sail that day. I'd done an overhaul on the boat. She didn't feel well, but it was my day off and she wanted to be with me." He'd curled in on himself, the pain of his confession crippling him. "We were out there, about an hour out when she cramped. I wanted just a few more minutes. Then she bled. She pleaded with me... save her... save the baby..."

"I tried to sail the boat, but my hands were slippery with her blood. And I'd try to help her and we'd get off course. I called for help..." He sat, holding his hands out, looking at them through the red haze of sunset. It looked as though the blood still stained his hands. "It was so fast. So damned, fucking fast."

She spoke through a tight throat. "I'm sorry, Jason. I really am. But it was out of your control."

He shook his head. He'd heard it all before but it really didn't matter. She was gone; the baby boy she'd carried was gone. "I'm alone."

"You're not." She looped her hand through his arm. He'd been with Neil four years. How long had he been carrying this inside?

"I signed up for the assisted suicide program. They rejected me."

"God, Jase." Tears burned her eyes. To her horror, her lips twisted. His raw pain infected her. Yet his eyes were dry.

"Do me a favor, don't tell Neil about this. It'll hurt him too bad, at least now. Someday, maybe, when the time is right." She nodded. She didn't want to know what that meant, about the right time.

"This is why you beat yourself up. Punishment." He nodded.

Her mind scrambled, looking for words to make it better, words that would have some meaning. She came up with nothing. "I'm sorry, Jason. I'm so sorry for your pain. Neil helped, didn't he?"

He nodded. "He... I made him hurt me. It had to be him. He didn't damage me. There's another crime against my soul. Forcing a gentle person to violence. I think I chose him out of self-preservation." She had no answer to that either. She could only hold his hand, squeeze it tight.

"Neil offered me a small bit of peace over the years. I'll always be grateful for that."

"But you've lost that now."

"Yeah. But I'd lost that before you and the Imperative came along." He dropped her hand and rose to his feet, offering her a hand up. She dusted sand off her clothing, and then they turned, heading back to the strand.

"Give him time, Marilyn. Let him get used to the idea of being with a woman. You've got to remember your body is different. Let him get used to it. He'll start craving you all the time. But he needs a little time to start seeing a woman in a sexual light."

"This is just weird, Jase. A gay man mated to a woman?"

Under the streetlights, she could see his grin. "There's no straight or gay in the Imperative. There are just mates." He looked meaningfully at her. "Perfect mates, Marilyn. It's nothing less than perfection."

He'd walked her to the corner of Neil's... her street. She looked up at his shadowed face and nodded.

When she arrived at her home, she turned, hand resting on the security pad. She glanced up before entering, and Jase was still there at the end of the street, watching until she stepped safely into the house.

* * *

The house was quiet... still.

Marilyn didn't bother with the lights. She'd lived here long enough to know her way around in the darkness. She glanced at the kitchen, passing on a late supper, passing on a glass of wine before bed.

It wouldn't help.

She paused outside Neil's closed door, wishing she had the courage to enter, to crawl into bed beside him and just feel his arms around her body. She wanted to hear him whisper in her ear that things would be all right, they could try again.

She stroked the cool wood of the door and stepped back down the hall to her own room. In the darkness, she could almost see him here, smell his body, feel his breath. She stripped, carrying her clothing to the bathroom, stepping into routine. Shower first, then wash her face, brush her teeth. Mari left the bathroom and lay down on her bed, on the side nearest the door.

The old quilt whispered to her in the darkness, of generation after generation joined in love and harmony. The old quilt had been made from fragments of the clothing her ancestors had worn, carrying the very essence of their long ago existence.

Mari's mother would have a fit if she knew the old quilt was actually being used, but right now, Marilyn needed the strength of those long ago women. She needed the strength of the thousands of stitches that made up the fine old piece.

She stroked one hand over the quilt top, the other over her belly, closing her eyes, feeling Neil's touch instead of her own. One would think that his skin would be soft and pampered, but his palms were tough and callused from the oars. His hands were like iron; that had surprised her. His body was hard and tough as well.

He was lying over her body, his lips and his hands brushing her skin. Without breaking the illusion, Marilyn dug into her drawer, reached to the back and found the

soft, velvety dildo. She was embarrassed that she even owned the thing, but achingly grateful that she did.

She rolled to her side, feeling him behind her body, his hands brushing her breasts, teasing her nipples. He held her long and tight, soothing that deep, melancholy feeling that always seemed to live inside her chest.

He rolled her gently to her back, his lips brushing hers, fingers stroking the tender flesh of her jaw, down her neck. His mouth moved to her breasts, kissing in slow, wet circles until finally closing over her aching, pointed nipples.

She gasped. He lightly caught the tender flesh between his teeth, gently, but with the threat of pain.

His fingers stroked her waist, her belly, coming to rest between the lips of her vulva. *Do you want me to touch you here?*

"Oh yes..." Her answer came on a sigh. She parted her legs, allowing him space. She felt the mattress dip. His warmth left her body as he moved between her thighs.

His warm mouth enclosed her pussy, tasting, sucking, nibbling. He knew exactly where to touch, how hard, how much she needed him. He grunted, shifting, pulling her long, slender legs up over his shoulders. His tongue worked quickly, ferreting out her clit, circling, and then laving, again and again till she was dizzy with need.

"Neil, please!"

Please what? More? He licked her, wriggling his tongue deep into her channel.

"Please... come inside! I want to feel you when I come!"

She felt his smile against her skin as he gently kissed her inner thighs, working his way up to her belly. He nipped, chuckling as she jerked against his body.

When he was fully atop her body, Neil paused, looking down into her eyes. He said nothing. He only looked long and deep before leaning down to kiss her. She'd never known passion before, not until his kiss.

Her eyes slipped closed, unable to bear the intensity in his eyes. The tip of his cock nudged. She arched her back, thrust her hips. With every push, she met him repeatedly until his cock had wedged itself deeply into her body.

Are you all right?

She nodded, opening her eyes, looking up at him. He pulled back and then thrust again, beginning that tempo that belonged only to Neil and Marilyn. He drew back, the ridge of his cockhead bumping past the tight, muscular ring of her vagina, and then invading, pressing back in against her strong muscles.

How did he know how good that felt?

She brought up her knees, wrapped her arms around his body, embracing him with every bit of herself. He moved smooth and hard, with just the right amount of force. Every stroke came a bit faster than the last.

Finally, she felt the orgasm build. Her hips arched against his, the blood pounded in her head, and her heart raced. Marilyn opened her eyes and looked into his face. Neil's eyes were tightly shut, intense focus on his handsome face. As though feeling her, he looked, meeting her eyes. *Come for me, Mari. I want to see...*

And she came, thrust after thrust driving her higher, her body bucking from the bed, her legs wrapped tightly around his hips and thighs.

The force of her climax brought Neil's on. She watched in fascinated awe as his face contorted as though in pain. His head dropped and his hips pistoned into her body. He froze, his seed spilling into her, spilling out, wet, slick and silky.

His body held there above her for a few moments, and then he collapsed, his weight coming down in a comforting embrace. *I'll never let you go, Mari. We'll make everything right.*

"Do you promise? Please, Neil, promise!"

I promise, love. I promise.

Marilyn opened her eyes to darkness, slipped the dildo from her body and lay supine, too exhausted to do anything but sleep. She sighed, and oddly, believed the words that had whispered through her mind.

Chapter Seven

"I asked for mild... Did you hear me ask for mild?"

Duncan coughed again and downed his water, his flushed skin clashing with his dark red hair. Neil grinned and forked a bite of Pad Thai into his mouth. He'd come to believe that the chef was pulling a long-standing prank on Duncan. This happened every time. He glanced up at the window to the kitchen and caught sight of an elderly Asian man, grinning at Duncan's discomfort. Moments later, the waiter brought him a bottle of beer, on the house. And a new plate of food.

"So tell me more."

"You pretty much know it all. I decided to break up with Jase. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Imperative hits and I find myself in the garden with Marilyn."

"Marilyn the Ice Queen? Marilyn the 'how can I possibly make her life more miserable' woman that you design with?"

"Uh... yeah. That would be the one."

"Sounds like it was meant to be."

"You can't possibly mean that."

Duncan tentatively tried the noodles, and once he found them safely seasoned, dug in. "All right, Neil. You and I hang together every month or so, and even I know about Marilyn. So obviously, she's been a huge part of your existence. But neither of you have been available. Your brain hadn't processed it as anger, but don't you think maybe you were angry at her? For being with someone other than you?"

Neil stared in shock, fork suspended in the air.

"And don't you think maybe she resented you the same way? Your inner selves recognized each other as mates, but it wasn't possible."

"Until that night I helped her move. And we made a pact to move on from our partners..."

And inexplicably, he'd been moved to kiss her. "Duncan, I'm gay. I've known since my teens that I'm gay. I've never been attracted to women before."

"And in all honesty, how attracted to men have you been? Wasn't Jase your first long-term relationship?"

"Yes, but I love... loved him."

"Why? He's so damned wrapped up in the drama of his life... It's a terrible thing for me to say, Neil, but how could he love you when he hates himself so completely?"

Now Neil carefully set down his fork, appetite gone.

"He needed you and you needed to be needed. I don't deny that there was love there, but not... I don't know. Not good love, anyway. Jason is so totally screwed up, he doesn't know love from pain anymore."

They were silent for a few moments while Duncan ate.

Neil pondered his plate. "I'm gay."

"No such thing. Not when the Imperative's involved. I never, ever looked at a man until Conrad. And other men don't do it for me at all. If I sneak a look, it's at a woman. I'm not gay, I'm not straight."

"You're bisexual then."

"No, Neil, you're missing the point. I'm Imperative mated. Sexual orientation means nothing within the Imperative." He let Neil think about that for a few moments. "Neil, did you ever think that maybe the reason you avoided women was because even though you didn't know her, Marilyn was nearby?"

Neil had gone white in shock. When the server came by and began to box his food, he didn't even notice. "Duncan... I tried... I tried to make love with her. It was pretty bad."

"In what way?"

Neil went from white to flushed with embarrassment. "I got a bit overwhelmed. I got inside her and just had to stop. I was going to come... I couldn't stop myself."

Duncan's laugh was husky with amusement. "Maybe you should have just let it happen. She'd have probably been flattered! And there are other ways you could have finished her."

"Duncan... gay..." He waved his hand in the air. "I have no clue about women."

"Then I suggest you learn. Fast."

"Jase left some books."

"Then read them. Better yet, read them together. Tell her what the problem is, Neil. And go slow. Don't worry about it happening all at once. Baby steps. Touch one night, maybe masturbate for each other. Or practice going down... Whatever seems fun."

"Fun."

"Yes, Neil, fun. There's always room for the passion and the love and the drama later. Learn to have fun first." He took a last swallow of his beer. "The three of us have a blast. In the beginning with me and Con, we had some issues in bed; who was dominant, that sort of thing. It wasn't fighting, and once I relaxed, let him take control, we caught fire. Then when we found Marina, it kicked up again, especially between those two. But Con and I had learned a lot by then."

"You're a submissive?"

Duncan grinned. "Not a textbook type sub. It's fun to play the game sometimes. And sometimes half their joy comes from the battle. Sometimes they get so carried away, they get started without me."

"While you're tied up."

"Sometimes. But they're hot to watch. And no matter who wins, we all win. Especially me." He waggled an arched brow lewdly, and Neil couldn't help grinning.

"Just remember, her body's different. Some women like rough, but even then, they aren't prepared for how rough a man can be. I'm always a bit rougher when it's me and Con."

Neil sat staring vacantly out the window, belatedly noticing that Duncan had picked up the check. He started to protest then realized it would be futile. He'd catch it next time.

Together, they walked outside. Duncan automatically turned to look downtown where Con's masterpieces gleamed in the sun. Pride and love gleamed brightly from his face.

"Those people love me, Neil. It never fails to amaze me." Bright blue eyes turned back and met Neil's gaze. "It's your turn. You deserve it, Neil, and she deserves it too."

Neil blinked, watching as Duncan strode away, a tall, strong figure. He'd known Duncan for years and had watched in envy as his friend blossomed within the Imperative. He stood on the sidewalk, smiled up at the sun, and suddenly, he knew exactly what to do.

* * *

Oh God, he was pissed.

Marilyn stifled a wince as Neil prowled into their office, automatically engaging the privacy shades on the windows.

He didn't look at her as he flopped in his chair, glaring at his bank of computers. Every screen bore a page with an article or advertising copy. She created and drafted, he refined and polished. They really were a brilliant design team.

"Nice of you to tell me, Mari."

"I'm sorry. I just think we're together all the time. If I transferred to another division..."

"Well, that would be all well and good, but management doesn't see it that way. You and I have 'til tomorrow to come to a solution, or I look for somewhere else to hang my hat."

"What?"

"Listen carefully, Mari. Me and you or I'm fired."

She stared, aghast. "But, Neil, I only asked for a new assignment. I didn't give an ultimatum or anything like that... I just told them..." She broke off, coloring guiltily.

"Yes?" He raised a brow in question.

"I just told them I wasn't happy with my current assignment. That I thought a change would be good."

He tried to be angry, but at the dismayed tone of her voice, he let it go. Instead, he glanced at the smoked windows. Neil hit the button that locked the door. He stood, arms folded, looking down at her. His cock was hard. It always was when he was around her. At night, he lay in bed replaying sex with Jase, with former partners, running old fantasies through his head, but always, handsome faces and hard bodies morphed to willowy, long limbs and pink toenails and silky blonde hair.

"What are you doing?"

"Coming up with a solution." He stalked around his desk, bearing down on where she sat. Marilyn started to rise, but he quickly pinned her in the leather chair, hands to either side of her head.

"And sitting on top of me is a solution?" Her voice had grown breathless and whispery. The slightly panicked tone brought a smile to his face. He braced a knee on either side of her thighs.

"Team building."

"Oh... team building." For just a moment, a dimple flashed in her cheek. Neil hit the buttons that lowered the arms of her chair. As soon as the coast was clear, he straddled her lap, letting his weight settle on her thighs. His erection was not to be missed.

"Hello, Ms. Tyler. Shall we start with an ice breaker?" He slowly moved forward, aiming for her mouth. As he drew close, she averted her head slightly. He followed, moving in to her lips then veering to her jaw at the very last possible moment. His lips brushed her silky skin, drinking in her soft textures, her sweet scent. Just like the other times, Neil felt every vestige of control slip away. He quickly forgot whatever it was he had planned.

"Neil, I think..." She gasped as his tongue skated into her ear, "...I think if we're going to do anything... we need to maybe change position..."

He smiled against the skin of her throat, reaching up to unbutton the neck of her suit.

"We're doing exactly what I want to do. Miss Marilyn, are you considering sex in the office, with your coworker?" He tilted his head, nipping lightly under her chin. "How unprofessional of you!" That surprised a chuckle from her. He leaned back, looking into her bright blue eyes.

"If you aren't initiating sex, Mr. Van Zandt, what exactly are you doing?"

"I told you, we're team building. Collins told me to fix it or pack up." He leaned back and dropped a kiss on her lips. "I really, really don't want to lose my job, Miss Marilyn."

He returned to her suit, swiftly undoing the buttons, spreading her jacket to reveal lacy white undergarments, a silk camisole without a bra. He sighed and leaned forward, tentatively nudging at her breast, licking at a diamond hard nipple through the fabric. As it grew damp, the fabric grew increasingly sheer.

"You're sort of like a package, all full of surprises, waiting for me to unwrap you."

She laid her head back, enjoying his mouth at her breast. She brought her hand up to his hair and stroked gently, running fingers through his loose waves. She looked down at her pale skin against the dark, gold-tipped curls, amazed at how soft it was. She let her other hand rest on his thigh, feeling his muscles tight and hard under the fine linen of his trousers. Her hand strayed to his erection. She circled and gripped, rubbing his length. She slipped her hand further down, testing the weight of his balls. God, they felt good in her hand!

"No fair, Miss Mari..." His voice was choked. "You're going to make me go off right here, and I'll be a mess."

She smiled. A damp spot had formed on his trousers. She glanced down and saw that it was disguised by the black fabric of his pants. "Would that be so bad?"

"That's why I stopped last time."

Her hand froze. She tilted her head back, looking into his dark eyes. "Why?" She sounded confused.

"I stopped because I couldn't hold it... I was too stunned by my reaction... to the whole feeling. It's different, you know. I didn't... wasn't prepared."

"You stopped because you were coming?" He nodded, ducked his head back to her breast, partly to hide his embarrassment. "You shouldn't have stopped. You should have just let go. I'd have understood."

He leaned back and smiled, still looking embarrassed. "Well, you know, premature ejaculation just isn't high on my list of things... you know... that I'm proud of."

She quickly diverted him from the conversation by returning her attention to his cock, deftly unbuckling his belt, unzipping his slacks. His breath inhaled sharply when she drew out his heavy staff, letting it rest on the cool fabric of her skirt. She stroked it, her touch light, skilled and so very, very effective.

"Mari... seriously..." His hips jerked as she pressed him tighter to her belly, lifting up the camisole to rest his heavy length against her skin. The silk of the cami draped over his cock, making him nearly mindless with the sensation.

"Help me take off my jacket..." She leaned forward and let go of his shaft, struggling out of her clothing. Once free of the suit top and camisole, she lay back further in the chair, draping the silk of the cami over his cock, tucking it down to nestle under his balls. They were still skin to skin, but the silk whispered against the heat of his shaft. It kissed him in places that were accustomed to rough handling.

He lifted up slightly on his knees, hands braced on the back of the chair, leaning in for a kiss. With one hand running long strokes over his silk-wrapped cock, Marilyn shifted the other to the back of his neck, holding him in place as their mouths tangled and explored. His hips were beginning to thrust into her palm. He had to pull back, to catch himself once more, to try to regain control.

"Don't. This time, just follow your body." He nodded, absurdly grateful that he didn't have anything to prove, that he didn't need to hold on to his climax or put up a

front. Neil could simply drink in the sensations that were rushing over him: soft skin, the slip of silk, the whisper of her voice in his ear.

She gripped him tighter. He leaned back, away from her body, still clasping the chair for balance. He couldn't look away from Mari. Her hair was tousled, her cheeks flushed. The nipples on her sweet, perfect breasts were rosy and hard as diamonds. He ducked back down to her lips, kissing her again, sucking her lower lip into his mouth, nipping and pulling, smiling as he felt her body grow warm with arousal.

"I can't believe we're doing this!" Her eyes were laughing, her cheeks pink. Suddenly, Neil felt "it" click into place, whatever that sensation was. There was nothing in the world more beautiful, more perfect than Marilyn with that smile on her face.

Her face suddenly went sober. She met his eyes. "Did you feel that?" He nodded, slowing his pace. "Like... everything is suddenly right?"

"It is. Everything is perfect." He stroked her face, feeling loose strands of her fine blonde hair slip through his fingers. Her hand was speeding up on his cock. He felt the sudden rush of heat, of tension, that flooded his body before he came.

"You're almost there..." she whispered, and he nodded, letting his head drop to that sweet space between her neck and shoulder. Her hips were rocking slightly with his. He felt his own breath puff back against his face as he panted, small groans beginning to break from his throat.

Her free hand slipped down lower, cupping his balls, pressing behind them, finally breaking him and sending him over the edge. His back arched outward, and his hips jettied forward as his seed spilled, caught up in the folds of silk that she'd wrapped him in.

"Oh, God, Mari!" He gasped and shook, turning his head to kiss her again and again, face, jaw, mouth... Finally catching her lips, eating away at her as though he were a starving man and she were ambrosia.

As he slipped free of the spasms that gripped his body, Neil slumped forward onto her shoulder, feeling her arms wrap around his body, holding him, stroking his back. His heart gradually slowed. His breathing steadied. She held him until finally he

straightened, looking ruefully at the semen-filled silk of her camisole. She'd been right. It had worked like a dream. Gingerly, he pulled it loose, and Marilyn took the garment, gently wiping the spilled semen from the skin of his penis. She carefully rearranged his clothing, putting him back in order.

His tie hadn't even loosened.

"Here... Stand."

He slipped back, standing, a bit shaky. Marilyn reached for her jacket, but he stopped her, pulling her into his arms, holding her as tightly to his body as he possibly could. He cursed the fabric of his shirt. Neil wanted to feel skin against skin. He wanted to be in bed, windows wide open, feeling the ocean breeze against their naked bodies. "Let's go home."

She nodded in agreement, allowing him to help her back into her jacket. He loosened the pins from her hair, letting it fall around her shoulders. "I like it loose. It's so pretty."

She stepped back into his arms, letting her cheek rest against his shoulder. It felt like home.

There was a sharp rap at the door. The handle shook. "Are you two fighting again? Van Zandt? Tyler?"

Neil rolled his eyes and sighed, letting her loose. She crossed to the door and disengaged the privacy settings, opening the door to their boss's angry face. He glanced suspiciously around the room, eyes settling on Neil. Marilyn glanced over in time to see him shifting something behind his back... her camisole!

"No fighting, sir. But we have decided to take some time together out of the office, maybe do some team-building."

"Is this true, Van Zandt?"

"Yes, we've been talking, and I really think Mari and I can work things out. We've been working together for over two years. Neither of us wants to throw that away. I think we're making progress."

"You need me to send you to some seminars? There's a good one up in Ashland... I'd been thinking about making you guys go for quite a while now. You really are a good team. I'd hate to see either of you walk."

She shot Neil a look. That didn't sound like the story he'd told her! He had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Look, sir, I think we can probably work through things ourselves, but maybe we can talk about this again on Monday?" Without dropping the hand behind his back, Neil began to usher their boss into the other room. "I think Marilyn and I will start with a long walk together. Maybe do some brainstorming..."

"That sounds like a good plan, Van Zandt! Take the rest of the day, if you need it."

"Thank you, sir, we will."

"Monday, though. On Monday I want both of you in my office at nine sharp."

They stood side-by-side, nodding their heads in unison. He looked suspiciously from one to the other. "Why do I get the feeling that something else is going on here? Something that has nothing to do with work?"

They looked at each other, then back at Collins. He stared back and shook his head. "Monday."

"Yes, sir." They spoke in unison, giving one another surprised looks. The door swung shut, and they let out simultaneous sighs. Neil turned to hug her then remembered the privacy setting was down. He grinned, looked down at the crumpled garment in his hand. She laughed, returned to her desk, and tossed him a small bag.

Without another word, they powered down for the weekend, and resisting the urge to hold hands, slipped away to the sunny streets of Harbor City.

Chapter Eight

"So how'd you get so talented with your hands?"

They'd stripped naked and were lying on their sides, facing one another. Neil was trailing his hand idly over her skin, following the dip of her waist, the flare of her hip.

"I was married for a few years, Neil. To a man, if you remember."

"Oh, yeah. Him."

"Yes, him."

"What was his name again? Dan? Dave?"

"Dale." She grinned, stretching out an arm as he traced its length, from shoulder to elbow, down to her fingers. Touching was nice, very, very nice. She wanted him. She was wet with need after their office tryst, but now that his initial urgency was banked, the slow pace they were now moving at was blissful.

"Can you do as well with your mouth?"

She lay back, flexing into a wanton display of gentle curves. "Better."

He sighed happily then rolled away, off the bed, crossing to the stack of books on the table. He returned, sitting cross-legged, sorting through the books.

"Neil? What are you doing?"

"Studying." He focused on a page then flipped to the back of the book, peering at the index. "There must be something here... ah..." He turned to her triumphantly.

"How to perform cunnilingus on a woman."

She stared for a long moment, before snorting in laughter. "Is it illustrated?"

He flipped through the pages. "Yes, but all it shows is his head between her legs. Not too helpful."

She sat up and peered at the book over his shoulder. "You're right, that isn't very detailed, is it?"

"No. I'm thinking perhaps I simply need more hands-on experience." He shut the book and set it aside, rolling back to face Marilyn. She was sitting, back to the wall. His bed was bare bones; a frame and a mattress. In fact, his entire room was pretty bare. At the moment though, that was irrelevant.

Neil grasped her ankle, pulling her down off the pillow till she was flat on her back, head cushioned by the pillow. She grinned. "So what are you planning to do with that foot? Was that in the instructions?"

"As a matter of fact, it was. Only it said to start at the top. I tend to do the opposite of what I'm told."

In fact, Neil was planning on doing something he'd been obsessing over for quite some time now. He propped her foot on his bare thigh, massaging, rubbing her instep, flashing his white smile as she groaned in ecstasy. He rotated her ankle, massaged her slender calf, and then slowly, ran his tongue over the arch of her foot, watching the amazement in her eyes as he swirled his tongue around her big toe, pulling it into his mouth.

"Oh... Neil... I think I just had an orgasm..."

He let her toe slide free. "I love your pink toenails."

"I promise, Neil, if you keep doing that, I'll keep getting pedicures."

"Promise?"

"On my, oh... oh... honor..."

Her hips shifted, bucked a little, and he knew this was an unexpected turn on for her. Gently, he set the foot back down and repeated with the other foot, moving up her leg, kissing, licking, nibbling the back of her knee, the insides of her thighs.

He nudged her legs apart and settled on his knees, looking for the first time ever at the mystery of a woman's vulva.

She was pink under her fine blonde hair, flushed with blood, slightly shimmery with her own juices. He gently stroked her inner thigh, down to where it joined her

labia. Back to her bottom, feeling her soft skin, the gentle fragrance of her perfume as it warmed on her own scent.

She obligingly opened wider, allowing him to see the petals of her inner labia. He ran trembling fingers along her sex, gently opening her with fingers that felt large and clumsy.

"And it fits?" He'd opened her enough to find the entrance to her vagina. It looked impossibly small.

"You were in there, remember?"

"Oh God, yes, I remember." He drew a deep breath, incredibly grateful that he'd climaxed at the office. He was painfully aroused. He would never have lasted if he'd come at her this way without having sated himself first.

"Your clit?" His voice sounded husky, almost like that of a teen. His throat was tight.

Her hand came down. She parted her sex, showing her most hidden treasure. It was so small! He knew that the tiny glans of her clit was in effect very similar to his penis, but damn! How could he pleasure her when it was so small and hidden? As though in answer to his bewilderment, Marilyn began stroking in small circles, dipping occasionally into herself, wetting her fingers.

Tentatively, he lowered his head, tasting, finding that it wasn't unpleasant, in fact, quite the opposite. She slid her hand out of the way, resting it in his hair, stroking and murmuring encouragement. He learned quickly to not come down too hard, that she liked to be stroked with the flat of his tongue. She loved when he added fingers, guiding him straight to the elusive G-spot, teaching him how she liked to be stroked, fingered.

Boldly, he slipped back to her anus, smiling as her eyes went wide. But to her credit, she put her trust in him, following his instructions as he introduced her to a bit of gentle anal play.

It took time, time and finesse, but once he caught on, Neil loved that he was able to bring her up, hold her at a peak of arousal, and then back her down again. He explored, his tongue poking into her every nook and cranny.

"Neil, soon... please soon..."

"Please? You said please?"

"Please, baby..."

He returned to her clit, gently stroking fingers into her vagina, following the rhythm of her hips as she rocked against his hand, his face. Her breathing came quicker, her thighs tensed, her back arched off the mattress. At the last moment, Neil pushed up on her G-spot, slipping the tip of his finger into her anus, and inwardly grinned as she came, fingers digging into his hair, hips plunging spasmodically. Her voice grew deep and she nearly growled his name as she rode it out. She slowed and then lay, panting, her muscles suddenly shifting from tense and tight to loose and relaxed.

"I totally ignored the top." Neil crawled up, lowering his head to her breast, circling his tongue around her erect nipple. Her hand came up and cradled his head. The wet tongue soothed rather than aroused.

She lay, heart gradually slowing, her breath calming. "Bullshit if that was your first time with a woman."

"Scout's honest truth." He made that age-old gesture, holding up two fingers.

"You were never a Scout."

"Yeah, I was. Male bonding and all that, you know."

"You still have the uniform?"

"Yeah, I do, it's..." He raised his head and looked at her suspiciously. "Just what are you thinking?"

"I lied about not being a cheerleader. I was my senior year."

"Oh, baby..." He crawled up and straddled her, his cock heavy and aroused. It rested on her belly like a heavy snake. "Wanna touch it?"

"That?"

He nodded. "Mmm hmm."

"You're saying you did me, so now I do you?"

"Yup."

"I did you at the office." Her hands came up and she began to stroke his length. "Remember, a couple hours back?"

"Can't quite remember. You might need to remind me." Her hand slid under his balls, a finger pressing firmly on his perineum. "Oh, Mari..."

"Scoot back." He followed her instruction. "Further... there..." She freed her legs and draped them up over his hips. "I think our team-building session has come to the main issue that we need to resolve."

She reached down, grasped his cock, guiding it into her pussy as he leaned over her body. "Stroke me with the tip..."

He dragged his cockhead into her juices, his heart rate elevating as he felt her wet heat envelop him. When he was slicked up and ready, they quietly worked together, guiding him to the gate of her body. Tentatively, he pressed forward, feeling resistance.

"Keep going." Her voice was husky with arousal. He loved it.

He tried again, slipping in a little further. Following his instinct, he pulled back, pushed in once more with a bit more force. Suddenly he was in, surrounded by white heat, and as before, his blood rushed, his heart started slamming in his chest. If it didn't feel so damn good, he'd think it was a panic attack.

"Come down to me."

Missionary. How very ordinary of them! But it was the same position that Jase had favored when he felt loving and gentle. He lowered his body, bracing on his arms, looking down into her impossibly sapphire blue eyes. They were dark now. Arousal deepened the color, tightened the planes of her face. As they began to thrust, finding the rhythm and movement that was unique to Mari and Neil, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed. He raised a bit, moved down to kiss and nuzzle her throat, running his tongue through the delicate shell of her ear.

It was right. It was so goddamned perfect and right with her. It wasn't male or female, it was Mari and Neil.

Now that he'd regained his self-control, Neil pulled himself upright, keeping the rhythm steady for her. He remembered positions from the books, positions that had appealed to his sense of adventure.

Neil brought her legs up high, to his shoulders, delighted that she was strong and flexible enough to experiment. He tried another, pushing her knees to her chest, opening her completely to his penetration.

"What do you like?"

"Move back..."

He pulled out, feeling the sudden chill of air on his wet cock. She turned away from him, offering her back. Oh God. She lowered herself, knees tucked under her chest, head on her arms. Neil covered her, penetrating deeply, feeling the difference in the position. Every time he stroked into her body, his cockhead bumped over her G-spot and reached the end of her vagina.

"I'm hitting your cervix. Does that hurt?"

She turned her head, resting it on her arms. "It hurts at the beginning, but as we go on..." she caught a breath, "...it feels so good..."

Her back was long and white, her waist nipped in, flaring out to a heart-shaped bottom. He stroked the graceful lines of her back, watching as she moved under his touch.

"Reach around, touch me..."

He followed her instructions, looping one hand under her hips, finding her clit, applying steady pressure in counter-point to his thrusts. She grew tight. He was now more familiar with her reactions, and as her arousal grew, his did as well. She rocked back into him. Their thrusts grew wild. He slapped against her again and again. She seemed to rise even higher as they grew rougher.

His own climax was crawling up his back, tightening his buttocks, pulling his balls tight. Neil shoved aside all thoughts of his impending climax and focused on her,

changing his angle to drive in deeper, harder. He pulled up her hips, her ass canted in the air.

She began to wail, her words incoherent. With every thread of control stretched to the utmost, Neil drove into her, thrusting hard, and then holding steady as her spasms began to shake her body. She twisted, bucked under him, her channel gripping him over and over until he was blind with need.

He pulled out, frantically moving her to her back. She wrapped her legs around his hips, holding him tight as he plunged back into her body, thrusting wildly. Moaning in a voice that he didn't recognize as his own, Neil climaxed into her body, seed spilling again and again. Finally, he felt the last waves of his climax rock him, and then release him like a puppet suddenly freed of its strings.

Neil did his best not to collapse over Mari's body, but she pulled him down, wrapping him in arms and legs, holding him tight, so tight he almost couldn't breathe. They lay like that, hearts gentling, breath coming down slowly. The scent of their combined bodies was indescribable.

"Oh, Neil... you did good. So incredibly, heartbreakingly good."

"So you'll keep me around?"

"Oh yeah. Maybe forever."

"Forever sounds good. Very good."

Chapter Nine

"So what did you tell him?"

Neil had just slipped back into the office. The boss had wanted to talk with the two of them separately. He probably wanted to see if their stories matched.

"I told him we'd managed to work things out, buried the hatchet, that sort of thing."

She snorted in laughter. "That wasn't exactly a hatchet that was buried in me this morning!"

"No, Mari. Babe. That was my blade, my sword of love..." He crossed over and perched himself on her desk, positioned suggestively, so she could see the start of his erection.

"I told him it went over so well, we'd decided to get married."

"What?" She started to rise, but realized it pressed her directly against his long, lean body. "Neil, maybe you shouldn't have..."

"I give him about another thirty seconds before he hits that door." Neil glanced down at his watch, and then casually returned to his desk. "I'm thinking I'll have IT change our work stations. If we face each other, we can play footsie under the desk."

"Van Zandt!"

Right on the thirty-second mark, Collins burst into the office, face red with anger. "You mind explaining that little comment?"

The two exchanged glances. Mari went a little pink.

"If you are harassing her, I want you out of here today!"

"Sir? Ah... What exactly did Neil tell you?"

"Just that you spent the weekend fucking like rabbits, and decided to get married in a couple weeks."

"Neil!" She turned to him in shock. "Sir... That's just..." she sputtered in flustered embarrassment. "Well, that's just absurd." Neil lifted a brow. "We fucked like bunnies, and afterward, we went shopping for wedding rings. But we certainly didn't set a date!"

"You're serious?"

She nodded, a smile breaking over her face. Neil's heart raced to see how pretty she looked, how happy. Collins looked over to Neil in bewilderment.

"Imperative. It just hasn't been the right time for either of us. Once we were both single, it hit like a ton of bricks." She crossed over to Neil, reaching down to take his hand.

"A friend suggested that our combative relationship might be due to our sensing our connection, and reacting in anger."

"How long?"

Neil shrugged. "A few weeks now. We've been ironing things out. We've had a lot to sort through."

He looked from one to the other. "And you figure you're all right now? No more fights?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll fight now and then. Neil can't help himself."

He nudged her in mock annoyance.

"So, you'll be able to work together?" The two nodded solemnly. "Okay, if I see those privacy shields come up... never mind. Just forget that. I'll just assume you're fighting again." He shook his head, pausing at the door. "Do you want me to announce it?"

Neil glanced up at the curved window of their studio, noting the curious eyes all around. Obviously, their intimate pose had been noticed. "Yeah, go ahead." He sighed, smiling down at Marilyn. "But maybe wait a couple hours... let 'em gossip for a while!"

* * *

Her feet beat a steady rhythm on the pavement. Her breath came at a steady pace. It had been many weeks since Marilyn had been able to give herself over to

running this easily. At her side, Gaby kept pace. She was smaller than Mari, but in great shape.

"So... Are we going to talk, or what?"

Marilyn slowed to a walk, letting her breath, her heart settle. They continued down the strand at a steady pace. The late afternoon light was gentle. The waves rolled up to the white sand and then reluctantly retreated.

"So... It's Neil. Now give me the dish."

Marilyn's conscience pricked. She hadn't really avoided her friend this past month, but she'd been too miserable at the beginning, too blissfully wrapped up in the relationship more recently.

"Well, at first it was a nightmare come true." She unhooked her bottle from her belt and took a drink.

"And now?"

"It's weirdly, illogically perfect."

"So I guess that kiss should have tipped us off." Gaby frowned, considering the situation. "What about the whole sexuality thing? Are you two getting past that?"

"Truthfully? That fell so easily, I was shocked. We had a false start. Both of us had to dump some preconceived notions, but once we got physical, he... we both found the perfect partner."

"Neil suggested that his lack of attraction to women might have been because we grew up just a few blocks from one another. Of course he had sexual urges, and since he wasn't attracted to women, carried them out with men."

"And your animosity?"

"Simple jealousy. And looking back, I hated him, I hated Jase. Once the Imperative hit and I spent a little time with Jase, I discovered he's a rather kind, insightful person."

Gaby snorted in disgust.

"I take it the gossip about him is bad."

"Never worse. I'm amazed he can look at himself in a mirror. He's starting to give the sluts a bad name."

"He doesn't own a mirror." Gaby looked at her in confusion. They came to a stone bench facing the ocean and Marilyn grabbed the back, leaning into stretches. "His wife and unborn child died. He feels it was his fault. He told me he broke all his mirrors."

"No kidding? Wow. Guess that's why he doesn't cut his hair." Gaby followed her example, looking out over the ocean as she stretched first one leg, and then the other. "Imperative mating?"

"Yeah."

"I guess that explains why he lets himself be passed around and abused. But still..."

"I know. Others have lost their mates and survived. Usually, the Imperative wanes once the spouse is gone. But in some people, it's so profound, they never lose that sense of loss."

"So what ends up happening to them?"

Marilyn gave a deep sigh. She'd been worried enough that she'd sought out a therapist, seeing what could be done for Jason Anders. "A large percentage suicide. Some manage to pull themselves out of the depression. And once in a great while, they re-mate, always through the Imperative."

"Shit. Sounds like Mother Nature isn't finished with them."

She made it sound as though Nature was an entity, and Marilyn wasn't so certain that she wasn't. Sometimes it felt as though someone very real had been toying with her life. "Have you told Neil?"

"No, Jase asked me not to. Not until the time was right."

"God, that sounds ominous."

Marilyn couldn't help but agree with her friend.

* * *

The two women walked in silence for a while. Gaby's condo was literally on the oceanfront. They paused outside for a moment.

"Listen, Mari, do you want me to call a security escort? I hear there are a couple Wilder gangs running around. Kids, probably, but still, I'd feel more comfortable."

Marilyn briefly considered her offer. "They tend to run the other parts of town. I'll be fine. It's just a couple blocks."

"You sure?" Gaby had started toward the entrance, poised by the security pad.

"I'm sure. If I feel uncomfortable, I've got a screamer on my wrist." She always ran with the tiny electronic device. When activated, it let out a piercing noise, and also automatically notified the nearest law enforcement patrol.

"Okay, babe, then you have a good night. And by the way, I'm happy for you. And jealous."

"Jealous?" Mari smiled at the teasing tone in her friend's voice. "Jealous? I end up Imperative mated to my worst enemy?"

"Yeah, Mari, but my God... the man's got a fine ass on him!"

They laughed, the sound carrying on the wind, breaking up into the whisper of the surf and the ocean beyond.

"I'm happy for you, girl. And any jealousy is small compared to that."

"I am, Gaby. Happy. I never thought..." She broke off, unable to complete the sentiment. She stepped forward, hugged her friend tightly. And then she stepped back, waving as Gaby disappeared from her sight.

* * *

"Well, you look happy."

The sound of his voice caught her off guard. Marilyn whirled to face her ex-husband. In the sallow light of the security lamps, he looked pale and wan.

"Dale!" Belatedly, she remembered he'd moved into a complex near the beach.

"You never returned my calls, my messages. I guess that's your way of saying it's over."

For just the briefest moment, shame settled in, followed very quickly by righteous indignation. "Dale, can you please remind me, who exactly initiated our divorce?" She began walking down the strand toward her street.

"Look, Marilyn, that was a mistake. I told you..."

She walked faster. "Dale, it's too late. It was too late back when you first started to pick up the pieces."

"But you were willing to talk to me then."

"Some things have changed." She slowed, turning to face him.

"I heard you've been hanging around with that guy you work with. Neil Van Zandt."

"Yes, actually, I have."

He gave a little laugh and looked away. "So how long were you seeing him behind my back?" When he turned back, his anger had escalated, turning a handsome face ugly.

"We didn't --"

"The hell you didn't. It was always him, wasn't it?"

"It's the Imperative, Dale. He's my mate through the Imperative."

"Bullshit. You're too old."

Mari sighed and decided to end the conversation. She turned away, keeping to the strand where the lights were bright. To her dismay, he followed.

"I suppose it must be the Imperative. I can't imagine any man wanting you otherwise."

Her heart twisted into that little knot that it always curled into around Dale.

"I can. She's damn hot."

Jase. Oh God in Heaven, did she need this?

"Hey, Mari, saw you were out running tonight, thought I'd walk you home. Don't want anybody bothering you."

Dale stood, hands on his hips. "You're the boyfriend. I've seen you before."

"Ex-boyfriend. But still Mari's friend. And you're the other ex. Too bad, bud. Too bad for us both."

Mari felt absurdly grateful that Jason was at her side. His appearance had taken the wind out of her ex-husband's sails. Dale stood, looking forlorn under one of the pink lights of the strand. When they turned to leave, he didn't try to follow. And she didn't look back.

"Thanks, Jase."

"No biggie. I saw you down the strand with Gaby, thought I'd wait and see if you wanted some company home."

"Thanks. I really didn't need him following me home. I don't know why he even wanted to talk."

"He got dumped." She looked up at him, a look of surprise spreading at his satisfied smile. "Yup. Little teenie-bopper dumped him to the curb, kicked him down hard. Guy like him needs the constant approval of a woman. And he needs to feel that he's better than whoever he's with. So back to you till the next opportunity came up."

"That's sort of what I thought. But still, thanks."

"No prob."

They walked the final quarter-mile up the strand in comfortable silence. The more time she spent around Jason, the more she enjoyed him, angst and all.

"So, how're things going? For you and Neil?"

She looked up at him. Even under the unflattering lights, he looked absurdly handsome. "It's good. We're taking it slow, having fun with each other. I'm happy, Jase."

"Neil is too. I saw him the other day. He looks like he should look." She looked up in question and he grinned. "He looks like everything in his life is right. It hurts not being with him, but it makes me happy seeing him like that."

"We're getting married. Soon."

"That's good. Really good, Mari."

"Would you like to be invited?"

"I'd like that. But I won't come."

"I know. That's okay."

He swallowed hard, and even in the dark light, Mari could see an inky bruise across his throat. Someone had throttled him. He'd grown thin, and his long blonde hair was slightly unkempt looking. His chin bristled with several days' growth of beard.

"Jase, have you tried to get help?" The look he gave her didn't welcome the topic, but she forged ahead. "Therapy? Grief counseling?"

He didn't answer, so she didn't pursue the topic.

They'd reached her street. She paused a moment before leaving him at the corner. "Gaby says there're Wilder gangs running around. You be careful going home."

He laughed, his blue eyes crinkling. "They're just kids messing with people. Besides, they hang to the north neighborhoods."

"Just the same, you're out late a lot of nights. And you probably aren't in the best of shape when you leave... wherever you've been."

"I'll be fine. Now go home, give Neil a kiss for me. Just don't tell him it's from me."

Impulsively, Mari gave Jase a quick kiss on his stubbly cheek. "Be careful. And if you need us, call."

"Sure, Mari."

"I mean it!"

"So did I!"

Jase stepped back into a shadow, watching Marilyn as she walked down the street, turning up into her house. He shook his head and smiled, quickly crossing the street, heading further inland.

Tonight was a private party, swingers, drugs, leather; anything anyone could possibly want. He swallowed with the anticipation and dread of what was coming tonight. Whoever the hell he'd been with a few nights back had done a number on him, laying his back open in places, leaving him so stiff and bruised that he'd been unable to move for days.

Tonight promised more of the same.

He'd drink the hard stuff, snort some white stuff, his payoff for letting the sickos get off by ripping his body to shreds. Just thinking about it brought an odd calm to his twisted brain. Jase smiled sadly at the irony; he was a sick fuck and knew it, plain as the nose on his face. He was more screwed up than the freaks who lined up to hurt him. He couldn't bring himself to do more than look at what he'd become in sad, abstract amusement.

Jase dodged into an alley that would take a half-mile off his path. He barely noticed when the dark shadows moved, bringing him to a sudden halt. His survival instincts had long ago fled. The adrenaline that sent prickles down his arms was too late. In the back of his mind, Jason knew he was prey, and his brain didn't like it. Oddly, his mouth went dry.

"So, guys, look at the fly that just walked into the web."

He couldn't see their faces. They'd all covered themselves with knit masks, and their heads were covered with simple hats. But the voice was vaguely familiar.

"What do you know, guys, it's the slut."

He did know them. They laughed in adrenaline-laced glee. Of course they'd be someone he knew.

Wilders. But they didn't hang around here.

As though he'd anticipated Jase's question, the leader answered. "We're looking to expand our territory."

Slowly, the dark figures surrounded him, and before Jase could land a blow, a wicked pain spread over his head, blood spattered down his forehead. He landed heavily on the ground, gasping as a booted foot slammed into his ribs.

So this was his fated end. Even as he writhed in exquisite, blinding pain, the irony didn't escape him. Yet as darkness descended, as his vision sparkled and faded, Jason had the most astounding revelation of all. It brought him to his knees, fists swinging, looking desperately for a weapon, any weapon.

I don't want to die!

Chapter Ten

"Are you family?"

Neil looked in frustration at the nurse's bent head. Mari stood at his side, her hand clutching his tightly. "As far as I know, Jason has no family. I'm his... friend. They called me because I was in his records as emergency contact."

The nurse continued to scan the computer. "Ah, here you are. Yes, you are listed as Jason Anders' emergency contact and medical proxy." He glanced up at Neil, looking absurdly pleased with himself.

"Good. Now can I see him?"

"No. The doctor has to give permission first."

Neil rolled his eyes in frustration.

"But look, Dr. Simmons is just leaving!" He dodged out from behind the counter and waylaid a frazzled looking doctor. After a brief conversation, the older man turned and headed toward them.

"You're here for Mr. Anders?"

Neil nodded and the doctor gestured them to an empty room. He sat at the edge of a stripped bed, looking grim. "Well, it looks like your friend ran afoul of one of those gangs. Got himself pretty badly hurt." He opened a chart and frowned. "Aside from lacerations, contusions and so forth, he's got a half dozen broken ribs. Both wrists are broken, multiple internal injuries, concussion. He's stabilized for now, but he's going to need surgery to repair damage to his colon and anus. We'll need your signature as medical power of attorney before the cosmetic work can be attempted. He's got some nasty cuts on his face as well. The plastic surgeon's already been in for a consult."

"He was raped?" Neil's voice was a tight whisper.

"The rape exam indicated multiple penetrations. They left no significant trace evidence. They probably used condoms, and judging by the damage, foreign objects. These guys had him for quite a while, then took him to the beach and dumped him. Some joggers found him this morning." In spite of his matter-of-fact tone, the doctor's blue eyes held outrage and compassion.

Marilyn's face grew white, and Neil lowered himself into a chair.

"I was with him last night, Neil. He walked me home." Her eyes burned with painful tears.

"Well, the police will want to talk to you then. He hasn't regained consciousness enough to tell his story." The doctor let his file drop closed. "There is something else. He's got a lot of old injuries. Some are severe."

Mari glanced at Neil, who was looking like he might need a doctor soon. "He's a masochist. He seeks out physical punishment."

The man snorted in disgust. "The things some people do for sex."

"It isn't about sex. He's deeply troubled."

"Well then, if it makes you feel any better, he fought these guys. He's got a lot of defensive wounds. He didn't go down easily." The doctor gathered his paperwork and rose. "He's heavily sedated. He won't regain consciousness anytime soon."

He left the room and Marilyn collapsed onto the bed where he'd been sitting. Oddly, the doctor's words did make her feel better. Much better. He'd fought.

She'd thought maybe he'd given himself to the monsters.

* * *

They waited outside his room while a doctor changed his dressings. Neil still hadn't spoken, and when she clasped his hand, he let it slide loose. Marilyn swallowed hard at the rejection.

A tiny woman bustled from Jase's room. Her rusty red hair was in a messy knot. Oversized glasses concealed most of her face. That was the doctor? On the way out the door, she clipped the doorframe, and then bumped into a wheelchair parked at the side

of the hall. Marilyn watched in amazement, thinking it would be funny if the situation weren't so terrible.

Marilyn followed Neil into the room. He was standing several feet from the bed, just watching Jase. He looked up at Marilyn, then reached out for her hand and drew her close. "You didn't tell me you'd seen him."

"It was just for a few minutes. I was walking home from Gaby's and ran into Dale. It got a little ugly until Jase showed up and walked me home."

Neil nodded. It was a small city, and impossible to avoid running into people that you know. He didn't need a blow-by-blow of her life. "It doesn't even look like him."

Marilyn agreed. Jase was battered beyond recognition. His face was swollen and bruised. Thick gauze pads covered deep lacerations on his formerly beautiful face. A monitor was hooked to a finger, recording his vitals. As advanced as medicine had become, there was still no avoiding the catheters and lines that ran into his body like macabre vines.

The door creaked. The red-haired doctor had returned, looking perturbed. She spotted a stethoscope on the windowsill, collected it and started to leave. She paused, frowned and looked back at Jase.

"Are you the doctor?" Marilyn hoped not. The girl didn't look to be out of her teens yet.

"Yes... ah... No... I'm the intern assigned to Emergency today. I was actually in the ER when they brought him in. Just wanted to follow up, so I volunteered to do his dressings."

When she looked up and met her eyes, Marilyn was stunned at the woman's bright gray eyes, at the burning intelligence there. "You're his friends?" She looked from one to the other. "He barely made it, you know. He was in deep shock, and had lost a lot of blood."

"When will he wake up?"

She looked at Neil sadly. "His brain is badly swollen. Hopefully soon, but maybe never." She crossed to Jase, checked his pulse and glanced at his blood pressure. "He may need extensive rehab. On the other hand, he might walk home under his own power. It's up to him. And you should know, he's reacting to your presence. His pulse is up a bit. You should probably talk to him."

Neil frowned as he stared at the young doctor. She looked familiar. He glanced at her nametag. Dr. D. Sinclair.

"Are you related to Duncan Sinclair?"

She turned, a smile on her face. "He's my big brother. Do you know him?"

"Yeah, he's a friend. I'm Neil Van Zandt. This is my mate and fiancée, Marilyn Tyler."

She smiled and shook hands, dropping her chart. As she bent to pick it up, her pens, thermometers, and a tiny flashlight escaped from her pockets onto the floor. Laughing, the three chased the items.

"God, if my head wasn't attached, it'd roll off too!" She left the room on a cheerful laugh and Marilyn had to shake her head. If she'd been that disaster prone, she'd have crawled into her bed and never come out!

Once again, they were alone with Jase, just the three of them and the sounds of the medical machinery. Neil pulled a chair up to Jase's head and sat, stroking his hand. Marilyn found a chair and pulled it up next to Neil. She listened for a moment. The rate of Jase's heart grew slower. She wondered if he'd actually been responding to Neil, or if it was simply coincidence.

"I told you before, Jase, you aren't alone." Neil's voice sounded tight and painful. Marilyn sensed that he had things to say that weren't meant for her ears.

"Listen, Neil, I'm going to check around, find out who's handling the case. I don't know if I can help, but I can at least give them a time when I last saw him."

Neil nodded absently. He was holding Jason's hand, stroking his skin under the webbing of tubes. Marilyn paused at the door and looked back at her lover and his ex and didn't even have the energy to feel jealous.

* * *

By the time she returned, Neil had left and nobody on the floor had talked to him. Marilyn stood and considered her options. It was getting late, but they still had hours before darkness fell. She pushed back into Jase's room and took the chair nearest his head.

How strange, no family, no friends save her and Neil. No coworkers. What was his life all about? She stroked that same hand, and noticed that he had tough guitar calluses on the tips of his fingers. She knew he played piano as well, but had only heard him toy around.

His hair was tangled and matted with blood. They hadn't cleaned him up very well. She supposed he could be considered lucky to be unconscious through the worst of the pain. The breaks in his arms hadn't required surgery, but they must hurt. His face would heal without too much scarring. When this was all over, he'd return to the golden beauty that masked the scarred man underneath. She pushed her chair back and rose, walking to the window.

Neil would be down there somewhere, probably on the beach. She'd give him some time to work through the minefield of his emotions. Mari decided to head downstairs to the gift shop. The room was too quiet, too stale. Daisies would cheer the place up.

* * *

He was on the beach, feet bare, tie gone, and his shirt open to the waist. He'd been in the water. His linen pants were stained to the knees. Neil sat there, hair ruffling in the breeze. As the wind lifted it, the deep brown separated from the sun-gold streaks. It was amazingly beautiful. He'd probably been born with white-blond hair that had darkened almost to black. Marilyn realized that she really didn't know that much about Neil, about his background or his family. She knew him, though. She knew him well. They had forever to learn all the details.

She'd gone home and changed from her work clothes into a loose cotton dress. She slipped off her sandals when she reached the sand. Mari lowered herself next to

Neil, stretching out her legs, watching as the foamy water reached out in a futile attempt to reach her toes.

"No change?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't expect there will be for a while."

He looked out across the ocean. "He shouldn't be alone when he wakes up."

"I checked at work and they'll let us work our hours around visits. The hospital is pretty close. Gaby came by when I was there, and his former in-laws as well. They said he has family in another city, a sister, some cousins, I think. They've contacted her."

Neil shook his head. "All those years, and he had a past I had no clue about. It's like he's two people."

"In a way, he is. Sometimes I talk to him and see flashes of who he must have been before."

"Yeah. The man with the beautiful smile. I chased that smile for years. Never caught it."

Silence stretched between them, awkward and sad.

"Neil, it's okay that you still love him."

He sat for a moment, looking at a gull flying overhead, and beneath his dark glasses a tear trickled, followed by another, and then another. "It shouldn't be like this, Mari! How can I love you the way I do, and still love him? This is... God..." He trailed off, reaching up to wipe the tears away. "I walked in there, you beside me. You're my life, my future, everything that I could want or need! I walked in and saw him and my heart just crashed. What in hell is wrong with me?"

Marilyn sat quietly, waiting for the storm to pass. When he'd forced down his sobs, she looked over, reached out and took his hand. "You know, Neil, the Imperative doesn't take away our past or our feelings or our personality. You loved Jase. That didn't just vanish because I turned out to be your perfect match. If that love had suddenly vanished, you wouldn't be you."

"I expected you to hate me."

"Given our history, you probably expected me to kick sand in your face."

"There was that."

"Think, Neil. Do you want him? Do you crave his touch? Does your body need his?"

Neil sat for a long while, thinking. "Sometimes I lie in bed and fantasize. It might start with him, but it ends with you."

"You love him, but you don't lust for him."

He propped his elbows on his knees, his chin on his fist. "That's about the measure of it, I guess."

"You love him because he's your friend. In spite of your history together, he's still your friend, and that's all right, Neil. It's all right that you love him. I suppose, by the way I feel about him lying up there, I have some sort of love for him myself."

He glanced up at her. She slipped off his sunglasses. The sun was almost down, so he didn't need them anyway.

"I don't remember you being this wise."

"Maybe you didn't know me that well."

"I knew you well enough to push your buttons on a daily basis."

Marilyn leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder. "What happened when you stopped doing that?"

"I guess you mellowed out a bit."

Neil wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her closer. "You brought the wonder purse, and it looks pretty loaded. What'd you bring us?"

She pulled the overstuffed tote bag in front of them and began emptying the contents. "Blanket, food. Some wine. A change of clothes for you."

"You knew I'd end up wet and sandy."

"I knew you wouldn't want to spend the night at the hospital in your suit."

Together, they rose and spread the blanket, and Marilyn arranged the food and wine, setting up an elegant picnic for two. "You finish out the evening. I'll come in early

in the morning. We should be able to cover our shift, and Collins agreed to let us make up our lost hours on the weekend.”

“That’s good of him.”

They ate in silence, comfortable and easy. Neil lay back, resting his head on Marilyn’s lap, still and quiet as she’d ever known him to be.

“If you need to cry, Neil, that’s all right too.” He didn’t answer, but before long, his body began to shake with long, deep sobs, and tears soaked into the cotton of her dress. She stroked his hair and let him cry it out.

Chapter Eleven

"Face it, Jase. Unless you go stay with your sister, or go to a rehab hospital, you're coming home with us. We aren't taking no for an answer."

Two weeks had passed and in that time Jason Anders had found himself bullied up and down the halls by a nurse who was surely a former prison guard. He'd had substantial cosmetic surgery on his face, erasing the razor marks that had opened his cheeks. Both arms were still splinted, and he'd narrowly avoided having a kidney removed. His spleen was history, and very soon, the colostomy would be reversed.

All in all, he was doing well.

He refused to speak of the attack, telling only the police the facts, but he refused to unburden himself to friends or professionals alike. He was still weak, barely able to walk, and was just beginning to sit on a therapeutic cushion, much to his disgust.

"I'd really rather stay on the boat. That's my home. I'd feel better there."

"Food? I can't see you up and cooking for a while."

Neil sat back, letting Mari carry the argument. He glanced at his watch; he needed to get back to work soon. The two of them were still staggering their work hours. The time apart was uncomfortable. They hadn't had sex since before Jason's injury. They were always too stressed, too tired. He wondered if he'd driven another wedge between himself and Mari.

"I can have food delivered, Marilyn." The irresistible force had just met the immovable object.

"Look, they want you in a rehab facility. You want to be left alone. Staying with us for a while won't hurt anything but your pride, Jase. Just two weeks."

He rolled his head on the pillow and shot an angry look at Neil. "Is she always like this?"

"Like what? Sweet? Concerned?"

"Bossy."

"Oh, that. Yeah. But this time she's right."

"This time?" Mari turned on Neil with an arched brow.

"Okay, sweetie, you're usually right. And on that note, I'm out of here." He leaned down, kissed Marilyn on the forehead, on the mouth. "Love you, babe."

"Love you too."

"Later, Jase." Jase nodded, mustering up a slight smile.

When he was gone the room went silent. Marilyn looked around. She'd initially kept flowers all over the room, cheering the place up. They'd been replaced by others. She didn't know the names on the cards. People from his other life. The life before. She wanted to ask, but didn't. "How long since you've been outside?"

"I haven't." His voice sounded dry and tight.

Marilyn ducked into the hall and returned with a wheelchair. "It's gorgeous out today. The fall storms are coming soon. We need to catch the light while we can."

"I can walk."

"Yes, Jason, but they won't let you." Inside she smiled. He could barely make it to the door without assistance.

He swung gingerly from the bed, swaying unsteadily for a few minutes, before settling on the chair. Marilyn unlocked the wheels and headed out the door, toward a lift. They went up to the roof, where a garden grew and a small kiosk sold drinks and snacks. Marilyn parked his chair at a table with an ocean view.

For the first time since his recovery had begun, Jason took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. Marilyn left for a few moments, returning to the table with juice for him, tea for herself. "We live in a beautiful world, don't we, Jason?"

"It is. I grew up in a larger city. The first time I came to Harbor, I knew it was my home."

She didn't want to pry so she waited to see if he'd expand on his past. He didn't. "Are you still thinking of it? Suicide?"

"Every minute of every day."

"The police said you fought."

He didn't answer. There was movement to the side. Someone had settled in at a small table on the other side of a huge potted plant, and the smell of coffee wafted over.

Jason returned his attention to the view. "I don't understand why Nature would give me so much, and then take it away. I don't understand how she could die and leave me behind!"

His eyes were bright with tears. Odd, she'd never seen tears in his eyes before. Marilyn sat quietly, amazed that he was finally breaking down, sharing his pain.

"I understand something else, Mari. Those men... people that attacked me... At one point, I'd have said I deserved that, I earned that."

"No, Jason, you didn't deserve that."

"I know," he whispered. "Nobody deserves that. Not even me." With a shaking hand, he lifted the juice to his lips, sipping carefully. "I just don't know why I didn't die when she did."

"Maybe She isn't finished with you."

"She? Nature? The Imperative? You talk like it's a person."

Marilyn smiled. "Sometimes I think it is. I believe that Nature is a living, breathing entity. Maybe not a person like you or me, but nevertheless, intelligent. I sure feel like someone's been messing with me."

"Of course Nature would be a woman."

Marilyn laughed. "You were right, all those weeks ago. She doesn't make mistakes. It isn't worth the fight. When I quit denying that Neil and I were mates, it became perfect."

He turned away again. Over the weeks, the bruises had faded to yellow. They were almost gone. The swelling was down and the stitches had absorbed into the skin, leaving only a faint trace of scars. In time, those would fade as well. There would be no outward marks of the trauma he'd suffered.

"He loves you, Jase."

"He's in love with you."

"That's true, but I told him, and I'll tell you, the Imperative doesn't change who you are. It doesn't change what you are. Neil's love for you is very deep and personal. It goes beyond the love of your body, and down to the love of your soul."

Jason looked at her, confusion in his blue eyes.

"He's your friend, Jason. He'll always love you, no matter what you do, who you are. You don't need to have a romantic relationship to love." She reached out and clasped his hand, holding it tightly. "We're your friends, and we won't let you go on alone anymore."

She thought for a moment that he'd break down, cry as Neil had, but Jason had many long years of practice at locking down his emotions, hiding behind that wall of self-hatred. He sighed deeply, wincing only slightly against the broken ribs.

"Jason, if Nature were sitting here, right now, what would you ask for?"

Air burst from his lungs in a harsh laugh.

"I'm serious, Jase. If you could ask Her for anything, what would it be?"

He stopped laughing and sat for a moment, looking at Marilyn. "If that damned bitch Nature were sitting here right now, what would I ask for? Peace. I just want peace."

He reached out and took her other hand, holding tight. She knew exactly what he meant by "peace."

Neither noticed the woman in the gray suit as she rose from the next table, returning to the building.

Chapter Twelve

Working late was just brutal. Marilyn waved at the security escort and slapped her hand on the palm reader. She'd promised Neil she wouldn't walk home without an escort. She could have taken a cab, but in truth, she needed the walk home to unwind from the day.

Extended time with Jason was hard on the soul.

Most of the house lights were off. Neil was probably in bed sound asleep. The stress was telling on him as well. She headed to the kitchen for a glass of wine, and stopped when she found a bottle of champagne on ice, and a bowl of strawberries and cream.

"Mmm... Kinky..." She grinned, swiping a finger into the bowl. Obviously, sleep wasn't on Neil's mind tonight. She slipped out of her shoes and tiptoed down the hall, carrying the champagne under one arm, the fruit in her free hand. The door was slightly ajar, and when she entered, the room was filled with the light and fragrance of dozens of candles.

Neil had purchased a new bed. In place of his basic, no frills box spring stood a gigantic, four-poster draped with yards and yards of translucent white chiffon. Matching pieces balanced the room with dark, warm wood.

"You said you didn't like decorating."

"I don't. Buying a bed isn't decorating, it's furnishing."

"But you did a brilliant job decorating the bed." She barely suppressed a smile, setting down the tray and bottle. He'd already set out a pair of glasses.

She turned back to the bed where Neil lay sprawled naked, his wrists and ankles looped in silken bonds. She'd never been into bondage before, but seeing him tied and naked... She smiled, dipped her finger into the cream and sucked it slowly, licking

every trace of sweetness from her skin. To her delight, his cock grew heavy and stiff on his belly.

She set the bowl aside and contemplated her next move. She reached up, slowly letting her hair loose, and then turned to the closet, undressing, hanging her clothing up neatly. In her stockings and underwear, she turned back to Neil. She slipped off her panties, and then her bra, leaving only a simple white garter belt that held up her stockings. She'd started wearing them when she discovered Neil's fascination with the old-fashioned garments. She reached for the bowl of cream and crawled onto the bed.

Dragging one finger through the cream, she slowly brought it to his mouth, painting his lower lip. His tongue darted out to taste, and she shook her head. Instead, she leaned down, dragging her tongue over his mouth, tasting, eating while he gasped.

"You put yourself here, completely and totally in my hands. So you have to play by my rules."

"My God. I always knew you were a control fiend."

"Of course you did. Why else did you arrange such a sweet present?"

As though she had all the time in the world, Marilyn painted his body, alternating the juice of the berries with the cream, occasionally tipping champagne over his belly, and with agonizing deliberation, over his groin, watching in fascination as the wine fizzed and bubbled in his pubic hair. He squirmed in agonized pleasure, and unable to resist, Mari bent down, licking the wine away, her tongue trailing up his body where the champagne met the strawberry juice.

He groaned.

She returned to his groin, again spilling champagne over his cock, watching as it sparkled its way down to his balls, and once more, she carefully, lovingly cleaned him up.

"Mari, whatever you do, do it soon!"

His cock was straining, hard and dark, pre-come slowly trickling down onto his belly. The agony of being unable to move, to touch himself, was swept away as her mouth encased him. Neil craned his head, watching her pale hair over his dark body.

He caught occasional glimpses of her pink tongue as she swirled it over his cockhead. "Oh shit... Oh damn, Mari!"

It was happening again, total loss of control, his orgasm bearing down on him. He couldn't hear. The roaring of blood drowned out all sound. She knew exactly what she was doing to him. Her hand joined her mouth, and with a hard pull on his testicles, she tipped him over the edge. No, she shoved him over. His back arched. He grabbed at the silk bonds and braced himself against it. He tried to pull away, to not shove himself down her throat, but Mari resisted, swallowing him down, holding and releasing, letting him spill into her mouth, over and over again.

"Ahhh..." The cry broke from his throat. His chest heaved. His heart slammed inside his chest. Mari left his groin and moved up to his side, letting his hands loose so he could hold on to her. He buried his head into her breasts, still wrung out from that mind-blasting climax.

"God, Mari, why did you bring me like that? Not to complain... but damn!"

"Now it's out of the way. We can play as much as we want."

He wanted to roll her to her back, to slide into her body, to fuck her until she came with his name on her lips. He wanted to wrap himself up in her soft strength, to bury himself in her soft, warm pussy. Right now, he could only lay there, strawberry juice and cream and champagne slowly growing sticky on his skin. She stroked his hair gently, letting him come down from the orgasm.

How well she understood the male body. How well she understood him.

These past days of struggling with himself over his feelings for Jase had been agonizing, spiritually and emotionally. But it had forced him to come to terms with his feelings for both Jason and Marilyn. He loved them both. But he was in love with Mari. Two years of fighting and contention had masked his very real, growing fascination and then obsession with her.

He remembered all those mornings when he'd dressed to impress her, growing to know her, learning her likes and dislikes well enough to manipulate her into aggravation, into fury, into amazed laughter. He remembered the satisfaction he'd

harbored when she and Dale fought, and the fury he felt when he discovered that he'd hurt Mari.

It was as though an adolescent crush had blossomed into reluctant admiration, and then love. The surrender that night he'd kissed her had opened him to the Imperative. Even without the kick from Mother Nature, he'd have gotten there eventually. They'd have probably mucked it up into an impossible tangle, but that night, they'd set their feet on the path. "I love you, Mari."

She smiled and leaned down, kissing his forehead.

"I mean it, Mari, I love you. I'm *in love* with you. Even before the Imperative. Why do you think I gave you such a hard time?"

"Because at heart you're an obnoxious teen?"

"No. No, Mari." He rose, kneeling beside her, looking down at the willowy creature stretched out on the bed next to him. "I was struck dumb the first time I saw you. You were so beautiful that I got hard right then and there, and it scared me to death."

"Because you're gay."

"No, Mari, because I'd never felt anything like that. I loved Jason, he was my first love. I thought he was my soul-mate, Mari. And then I saw you and what I felt for Jason just didn't match up. It shook me to my very depths. And I couldn't have you."

"Dale."

"Yeah, Dale." He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing each finger one by one. She lowered her other hand to his chest, fingers trailing over his firm, smooth skin.

"You're beautiful, you're brilliant, and I'm sorry for all the times I made you angry."

"And I'm sorry for all the times I went off at you. I was just too ready to be angry."

"Why?"

She laughed slightly, stroking his cheek. "Because one day, the boss brings in a beautiful, brilliant young man and introduces him to me as my partner. I was married,

you were in a relationship, and seemed to dislike me. And I'd fallen for you faster than I could process. I thought I loved Dale, I really did. That day I saw him on the beach, I realized how empty I'd been for so long. I went home that night and crawled in bed with you, and knew that I was really, truly home."

"So you love me?"

"No, I'm saying I'm *in love* with you. It was always you."

He smiled. His smile spread to a laugh, tears trickling out of the corner of his eyes.

"Neil?"

He wiped his eyes and reached over to the bedside table. He picked up a small velvet pouch that held their wedding rings. He opened the pouch and slid a ring out, one she hadn't seen before. It was a beautiful sapphire. The blue of the stone glowed even in the dim light of the room.

"I saw this today, in an antique store. The stone reminds me of you, the way your eyes glow so dark when you're angry, and the way they sparkle when you're happy." He took her hand and opened it, setting the ring on her palm. "When I got it home, I found an inscription."

She held the ring up, angling it to the light. Inside, in faded, flowing script, it was there. She drew a deep breath and held the ring out to Neil, allowing him to slide it onto her left hand. It fit perfectly.

"*Always you.*"

They spoke in unison, and laughed.

Saving You

Belinda McBride

In the future, we don't choose our mates. Nature chooses for us. Nature doesn't make mistakes. And if you don't pay attention to Nature's Imperative, you suffer.

All he wanted was peace. Eternal peace.

After the death of his Imperative mate, Jason Anders threw himself into a lifestyle of sexual excess and self-punishment. Just when he thought he'd hit rock bottom, Jase was nearly killed in a brutal attack.

Nature listened to Jason's plea for peace, and gave him what he asked for. But Nature's version of peace wasn't exactly what Jase expected.

When Dr. Dove Sinclair stumbled into his life, Jase began to suspect that within her arms he might find the will to live. And when he looked into the haunting eyes of a mysterious masked man, Jason realized that Nature wasn't finished screwing with his life.

Sometimes Nature doesn't play fair. But at least she's willing to give Jason a second chance.

The Biological Imperative

The Imperative is a mysterious biological phenomenon that has evolved within a small percentage of the human population. The Imperative triggers an individual to seek out their perfect partner, whether male or female. In some very rare cases, threesomes are formed. It is virtually impossible to deny the force of the Imperative.

Scientists believe that genetically matched partners are compelled to seek one another at prime sexual and emotional maturity.

The rest of the population believes that the Imperative is simply Mother Nature's way of fucking with their lives.

Prologue

Jason Anders lay face down in the fine sand of the Harbor City beach. Home was less than a quarter-mile away. The elegant sailing yacht rocked gently at the harbor. But it might as well be miles distant.

Through eyes that were almost swollen shut, he could just glimpse the flag of the *Gaia* catching dawn's first rays. He tried to lift his head, but it was strangely heavy. Sand was caked in his mouth, up his nose and into the long slashes that were carved into his face. He remembered receiving those slashes. He didn't want to remember.

Oddly, he couldn't feel anything else, just the stinging in his eyes, the throbbing of his face, and the gritty feel of sand in his mouth.

With a monumental effort, he lifted his lids. This time he made out the dark shadows of the incoming tide. If he didn't bleed to death, he'd drown very soon. Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? He'd been chasing death for years, and Death had finally caught him.

Why was he so afraid?

Once again, his eyes slipped closed. He grew heavy and numb, and Jase knew that he was close, so very close to the end.

When he heard distant voices, he was almost disappointed.

* * *

"So is this how you want it to be?"

He rolled to his side, pushing himself to a sitting position. The voice was familiar and welcome, yet filled him with a sense of awe, dread and painful joy. Jase wiped the sand away from his face, surprised that there was no blood on his hand. He glanced over at her as she settled to his side.

She was oddly luminescent, and her image wavered as his eyes filled with tears. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and never let her go. The Imperative flared to vivid, throbbing life inside him. Over the years, it had grown dull, like an ache deep inside. Now, once again it was sharp and bright.

"Miriam."

Odd, he'd never before noticed how much his friend Marilyn looked like her. White blonde hair floated on the ocean breeze. Her dark brown eyes were expressive and compassionate. He'd never seen eyes like hers before. There was a whole world of life and love and passion in those eyes.

She reached out and stroked a long strand of hair from his brow. "You always kept it short before. I like this." Her hand traveled down his smooth cheek, tracing his lips with her finger. "You look like something wild, something untamed."

Her eyes slid past his face, looking behind him. "You're a mess, you know."

He followed her glance and saw himself on the sand, naked, beaten, and to all appearances, quite dead. He hoped Neil and Marilyn didn't have to identify his body. His heart ached when he looked at that ruined shell of who he'd been.

"That isn't what I mean."

He turned and looked at her in confusion.

"Jase, *you* are a mess. Not the body, but the soul. You've taken the man I love and abused him terribly."

Jase shook his head in denial. "I deserve... I should have saved you."

"No, Jase, there was no saving me. Not that time."

Images of pain and blood seared through his brain. The baby coming too soon, too far from shore to reach help in time. The sight of Miriam's beautiful face going slack with death, even as he held her in his arms...

"I can't live without you, Miriam, I can't..." His throat was tight. The overwhelming joy that had been filling him mixed with fear. That fear clutched at his heart, froze the blood in his veins. "Please tell me you came for me, Miriam! Please!" He shifted, meaning to get on his knees and beg. "Please!"

She looked steadily at him, her dark eyes hot with emotion. "I'm sorry, Jase. I'd save you if I could." She looked over her shoulder, as though listening to a voice in the distance. "Think of this as a crossing in time. Time is such a strange thing, Jase." She cupped his face in her hand, leaning forward, pressing her lips to his. "I can't save you this time, Jase. You owe it to me to save yourself. Fight!"

He tried to reach out and grasp her, to hold her, but she receded from his touch.

"Do you hear me, Jase? Fight!"

* * *

"Fight, damn it!"

The voice wasn't Miriam's. It wasn't soft or gentle, but rough and angry. "Fight, Jason!"

There was a slam to his chest, and in horror, Jase believed that the assault had started again, but through swollen eyelids, he saw figures, lights and frantic activity. A face swam into view, gray eyes behind huge black-framed glasses. A halo of vivid red surrounded her face.

"Do you hear me, Jason? I'm fighting for you. Can you fight for me?" She looked away, obviously not expecting an answer.

"Okay, his cardiac rhythm is steady. Nancy, get a surgical suite prepared. Call in Dr. Howe, we've got to stop this internal bleeding. Call in Dr. Ping for a consult on his face. And get me some coffee!"

She turned back to him, and somehow, Jase managed to open his eyes... or at least, one eye.

"Hey, you with me?" She reached up and stroked blood-matted hair back from his face. "I'll get you through this, Jason Anders, I promise. Do you believe me?"

Jase spoke, or at least, he tried to speak. His lips moved, but he could see from the look on her face that she didn't understand. She leaned closer and through the smell of blood and disinfectant, the fragrance of lavender tickled his nose, bracing and fresh, cutting right through the stench of his body.

"I can't hear you, Jason." She bent forward, strands of her hair brushing his cheek. Jase drew a breath, gathering his strength. He poured everything into those last two words.

"Save me."

Chapter One

Nervously, Dr. Dove Sinclair smoothed the front of her skirt, hoping she hadn't picked up any stray stains between here and the clinic where she'd been observing a group therapy session. She was required to dress in a slightly more business-like manner here in the Mental Services division. In the ER, she could get by in scrubs. That suited her just fine. She and suits just didn't get along.

Pulling in a deep breath, she knocked on Dr. Sakti Patel's door, praying for a bit of serendipity as she entered the room. She did fine, until she noticed Dr. Malachai Drew at the window. That moment of distraction cost her dearly. The heel of her pump tripped her up and she barely caught herself on the door handle.

Dr. Patel was the head of Mental Services here at the hospital. Dr. Drew was the senior psychologist on staff. They were Imperative mated, and worked closely within the department.

"Dr. Sinclair, please take a seat." Dr. Patel smiled warmly, and once Dove firmly anchored her butt in the chair, Dr. Drew took a seat beside her. In the ER, she took some good-natured ribbing over her tendency to crash into things. Here, they were just... kind. And cautious.

Their compassion made her even more uneasy, resulting in increased catastrophic occurrences. Between the clothing, the quiet atmosphere, and the elaborate kindness of the Mental Services staff, Dove had never felt so out of her element. She was a child of chaos, the middle child in a large family, and the only girl, to boot.

She pushed the glasses up her short nose and looked from one to the other, waiting for them to begin. Instead, the silence stretched until Dove began to fidget with her pen. Abruptly, she returned it to the pocket of her lab coat. She really didn't need to add an ink stain to her wardrobe.

"Is this about the lack of empathy thing again?" she blurted. Dove felt her cheeks go hot with mortification. That had been between her and her shift supervisor, and she didn't think it had gone onto her record.

"Lack of...?" Dr. Patel glanced questioningly over at her husband. He simply lifted a shoulder.

"No, this isn't a disciplinary meeting, Doctor. We simply want to see how your first week here in Mental Services has been. Also, it's time that we assign you a client."

"A client?" She swallowed hard. Psych wasn't her field. She'd assumed her involvement would be of a scientific nature. "I don't have any background in counseling, Dr. Patel."

Dr. Patel smiled gently. "Actually, you won't be involved in therapy, but you will be working one-on-one with a client. Perhaps Dr. Drew can tell you more?" She looked pointedly at the other psychologist.

"Dr. Sinclair, are you familiar with our Assisted Suicide program?"

Dove shook her head. Her heart plummeted to her stomach. She didn't think she wanted to know more.

"Primarily, it was designed for terminally ill patients with chronic pain or quality of life issues. It's a means of giving an otherwise powerless individual some control over their own life and death." Dove nodded. She knew that much about the program already. "We also have a small group of individuals with other issues. These are the clients we rarely allow into the program -- physically healthy persons with insurmountable problems."

Dr. Drew paused and looked over at Dr. Patel. There was a great deal of unspoken communication going on between these two. Imperative mates almost seemed to communicate on a psychic level. Dove's heart twisted just a little in envy. The Imperative had visited most of her brothers, but her gut told Dove that it had passed her by. She'd known that for years now. The Imperative wanted perfection, not tiny, clumsy women with defective vision and questionable social skills.

"We are very careful not to approve clients who are depressed or grieving. They must undergo a waiting period and extensive counseling to ensure that they are not in a temporary cycle. Your client was widowed almost nine years ago. He applied to the program five years ago. He has completed his required waiting period. He still wishes to move forward."

"Why?" She looked from one to the other. "He's healthy, he isn't mentally ill. Why is his quality of life so poor?"

"Dove, this man lost his Imperative mate."

"Oh." Dove looked at Dr. Drew and then down at her own hands. "My mother was devastated when my father died, but the Imperative gradually faded. She lives a good life now." But when it had first happened, her mother's grief had been fearsome, all consuming. Her children had been very afraid for her.

"Sometimes, in a very small percentage of the population, the Imperative doesn't release the mate who's been left behind. The survivor is trapped with their separation anxiety and grief. Plus there are extenuating circumstances. He feels responsible for her death." He shifted uncomfortably. "They were sailing. His wife was midway through her pregnancy and went into early labor. She bled out and died before assistance arrived."

The skin on her arms pebbled. She swallowed the sympathy that pulled tears to her eyes. To endure almost a decade of the grief that her mother had suffered for only months? Frankly, his wish to die was understandable. Years of that would destroy the will to live. She slipped off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, looking up at a blurry Dr. Patel. "What am I to do with him?"

"Every member of the program has a mentor. You will accompany him to counseling sessions, though you won't participate. You will also do home and safety checks. Dr. Drew will have a schedule created for you."

He rose, glancing at the clock. "I have an appointment now, but please come to my office after lunch. I'll go over the case in depth with you, Dr. Sinclair."

She watched as he dropped a kiss on Dr. Patel's forehead and left the office. As the door silently closed, Dove turned back to Dr. Patel. She was a classic beauty, at home in either business wear or in the elegant saris that she favored.

"Dove, as you know, Dr. Drew advocates for the patients. It's his job to carry out the wishes of his clients. As the administrator of the program, I have a different job." For a moment, Dr. Patel's black eyes held an otherworldly light that slowly faded, giving Dove the chills. Her lightly accented voice was soft, but precise. "My job is to advocate for life. As a physician, and as a therapist, I must admit that this man is in desperate straits. However, I prefer to believe there is hope for him."

Dr. Patel booted up the patient's records and activated the screen in front of Dove. She quickly scanned the data, noting that the man's name was missing. However, his story was familiar. Slowly, recognition began to crawl into her mind. She fought tears, blinking rapidly.

"He's finished with life. However, I don't think life is finished with him."

"Dr. Patel, this man was one of my ER admits."

The other woman sat back in her chair, looking speculatively at Dr. Sinclair. "And as an ER physician, what was your evaluation of his mental state?"

When a patient came to Dove in the ER, they were often stripped to the bare essentials. When life and death were involved, other priorities slipped away.

"If he'd been truly suicidal, he wouldn't have fought off his attackers. When I asked if he would fight to stay alive, he said yes." Actually, with the very last of his strength, he'd asked her to save him. That moment was still too raw, too personal to share.

"At that time, did you believe that he was suicidal?"

"No. Disturbed, certainly, given the extensive prior damage to his body, but not willing to die without a fight."

Dr. Patel leaned forward and looked steadily into Dove's eyes. "Dove. What I am about to say remains between us. This is confidential."

She nodded in agreement.

"What is your priority as a doctor? When a patient comes to you in the ER, what is your primary goal?"

"To save the patient's life."

"And that is your goal with this client. Whatever it takes."

"But he's chosen to die. He's been accepted to the program."

"And we don't want him to graduate from the program." She sat back, never breaking eye contact with Dove. "Mr. Anders had no therapy or counseling following the death of his wife. He rejected crisis counseling after the attack that nearly killed him. This man hasn't given himself a chance to heal. He's refused to cooperate with the police investigating the case. He's only agreed to counseling because it's required for the program."

Dove sat up straighter in her chair, her brain going to work on the problem. Mentoring a psych client was out of her area of expertise. But saving a life? That she could do. She watched as Dr. Patel transferred the man's data to a mail file and sent it to Dove's account.

"How long do I have until he completes the program?"

"Two months. He'll be in counseling almost daily, plus workshops on end of life issues."

Dove bit her lip, gathering all the knowledge she had of this man. She remembered all the gossip she'd heard about him, the conversations she'd eavesdropped on when he'd first been admitted to the hospital. Jase Anders was well known to a certain class of people. He was the pain slut. He would allow anyone to do anything to his body, in exchange for the punishment he craved. His story had almost broken her heart. Now she had some understanding of his motives. He blamed himself for the death of his Imperative mate. It all fell into place.

Person to person, she had no clue how to deal with his problems. But doctor to patient? Dove Sinclair was a doctor. She saved lives. She wouldn't let Jase Anders go without a fight.

Chapter Two

The blaring music pounded in his ears painfully. The drink in his hand was too strong and laced with a benign opiate. He sipped and winced at the bitterness of the fluid on his tongue. Already, the stuff was threading through his system, warming his face and tickling his sex. It was tonight's house aphrodisiac.

Jase threaded his way to the kitchen, flinching at the occasional hand on his ass, the tugs at his clothing. The kitchen was empty, giving him a moment of blissful solitude. He spilled the expensive, mind-numbing beverage into the sink and then rinsed the glass. There were other drinks sitting in a crowded mass on the counter, but none appealed. He was thirsty. The need for a buzz wasn't pounding at him tonight.

Jason opened the freezer and found ice, and then filled his glass from the faucet. For a moment he rubbed the cool glass on his forehead, relishing the feel of moisture on his face.

He'd just endured the most hellish hour down in the dungeon, at the mercy of an old friend. Flora's tastes were quite specific where Jase was concerned. She beat him, she fucked him, and then she walked away. She respected his limits, once he'd finally gotten around to realizing that he did indeed have limits.

But tonight had been different.

After she'd ridden him to her climax, he'd rolled away, slipping the condom from his rapidly wilting cock, not wanting her to see that he hadn't come. Flora had lain behind him, tracing his back with almost gentle fingertips. "How did you get this scar?"

Which one? he'd wondered. He carried so many.

Jase had twisted, looking at the faint, smooth line that nearly circled his waist.

"You gave me that one, before..." Before the attack. Before his twisted psyche had taken another turn for the worse.

She moved away from him, sitting up. When she spoke, her voice was harsh. "I did that?" Forcefully, Flora pushed him to his belly, her long black hair tracing over his skin. Jase flinched as her hand passed close to his face. Her stillness betrayed... something. Guilt?

"I... Why didn't you go to the doctor? You could still get it removed."

Yes, nowadays medicine could remove scars, making a person look good as new. But some scars shouldn't be invisible. Already, Jase carried too many invisible scars.

He hadn't answered Flora, and she slid out of the bed, watching him as she pulled her leather pants back on. Once again, she'd pulled her Femme Homme persona on like a cloak of power, dark, dangerous and beautiful. Jase had smiled, knowing that Flora had seen something that disturbed her greatly. Something about herself.

"I won't be needing you anymore."

"I know." He'd rolled over and sat up, not even bothering to hide his body. He and Flora had been feeding one another's sickness for months now, and oddly, he felt a bit sad that this was the end. He'd actually grown to like her.

"I don't think..." She swallowed hard, a sick look riding her beautiful features. Like him, Flora didn't hide her identity, she was that self-confident. "I didn't think I was really hurting you." She dropped her head. "That's a lie, isn't it?"

"Yes." He'd spoken softly, seeing that Flora was at a turning point that she hadn't foreseen.

"You don't like this anymore."

No, he didn't. Tonight the pain had simply been pain. It hadn't masked the screaming agony in his brain. It hadn't calmed his spirit. He ached over his ribs. Tomorrow there would be bruising.

"Then why, Jase?"

He shrugged, not having an answer to that question. Flora held his gaze for a long moment, and then she was gone. Another person had vanished from Jason Anders' life.

* * *

"Here you are!"

He opened his eyes. The latex-clad couple that stood before him were almost nightmarishly beautiful. Her blonde hair flowed to slender shoulders, the mask that hid her features anchored the hair back from her face. Full, cosmetically enhanced lips were painted the red of a tomato, and her blue eyes were darkened with airbrushed shadow.

Jase ran his eyes appraisingly down her body. She wore tight black shorts and a black lace bra. Other than her spike-heeled boots, she wore little else. Her companion matched, only his neck was circled by a studded collar with a loop for a leash. He wore an open vest revealing ringed nipples. Long, muscular legs were brown and naked, and his feet were bare. The mask he wore was similar to hers, pushing his black hair into a flowing mane. Full, sensual lips were tinted grayish blue, and a devilish goatee capped his chin. A slender mustache reached down to meet it. His kohl-smudged eyes were dark and beautiful. Those eyes caused a twist somewhere deep in Jase's soul.

"Hello, Lady Selene. John."

Assumed names, of course, but in spite of the masks and false names, Jase recognized the couple. She was an accountant with a small firm in the city. He wasn't completely sure about the man, but recognition tickled at the back of Jason's mind. He swallowed hard, pushing back the ever-ready panic that swamped him when he encountered a familiar stranger.

Selene liked to whip her subs till they bled, and then she masturbated as her current male ass-fucked the sub. She liked to hold their leashes, controlling the sex. He didn't know which of the three of them was more whack. Probably him, since he allowed it. He'd never been with this new pet. He probably never would.

"We'd like time with you tonight, slut."

Normally, the offer would have sent chills of anticipation racing along his skin, paired with a sick lurch of the gut. Tonight, only the sick feeling was there.

"I'm tied up for the evening, Lady."

This was the third offer he'd turned down tonight. He'd gone with Flora only through habit.

Anger sparked in Selene's eyes, and her hand gripped convulsively on the handle of her whip. She wasn't very good with her whip. The exquisite sting of Flora's blacksnake was a kiss compared to Selene's crude lashes.

John stood poised and ready to force the issue. Jase sipped his water, making full eye contact, letting her know he wasn't playing.

"What about if we leave out the punishment? Just fuck?" She ran a glistening pink tongue over those red lips.

He stifled a shudder. He didn't need to look to know that John's cock was brutally erect inside those latex shorts. While he was completely submissive to his current partner, the other man had been lusting after Jason for months. The feeling had been mutual.

Unfortunately for them both, Jase had been unable to tolerate a cock up his ass since the attack. He hadn't had a climax since his break-up with Neil. Just getting an erection was problematic these days.

And now? Seeking punishment seemed to be habit rather than compulsion. Now he was oddly peaceful, probably healthier than he'd been in nearly a decade. Even the heavy, ever-present pall of grief seemed to have dulled. There was finally a light at the end of the tunnel of his dark life. "Sorry, guys, I'm busy."

Lady Selene shrugged and turned away, John's melting dark eyes fixed him with a hot, needful gaze. Reluctantly, he followed his mistress from the small kitchen. Jase let out a breath that felt like it had been trapped in his lungs for hours.

Just six months ago, he'd have gone with them, and he'd have enjoyed it. John had been haunting Jason's dreams, firing his lust. But that had been *before*.

Jase followed them back to the party, propping himself against the doorjamb as he watched the milling crowd. Black was the predominant color choice, leather the favored textile. As far as he could see, Jase was the only person unmasked. He wore faded blue jeans and a simple cotton shirt that hung open. His feet were bare, and his hair cascaded past his shoulders in long, loose waves. It was his job to be easily

identifiable. He was the party favor, the pain slut. He didn't care who knew him. None of these people would come to his funeral.

A hand rested on his ass, sliding down to cup his balls. He shivered a bit at the sensation. The hand tightened, squeezing mercilessly. "Hey, slut."

He gritted his teeth against the pain. "Hey, Magpie."

"Margaret, Lady Margaret, to you." Her chin was up, her eyes angry. "Jase, can I talk to you? In private?"

He shrugged and followed her back into the kitchen. Margaret wasn't the homeowner, but she organized the parties. Her little soirees were the hottest ticket around. Drugs and alcohol flowed freely, the sex was casual and abundant. And she always provided the party favors.

"I'm getting some complaints that you aren't playing."

"I'm not an employee, Margaret. I get invited like everyone else."

"Well, maybe we need to stop sending invitations."

He shrugged and sipped his water. Two months, what was the big deal? In two months, he would be unavailable on a permanent basis. Idly, he rubbed his forearm where the bones had been broken not so long ago.

"Oh, the injuries... are they still painful?" To her credit, Margaret was one of the few from the party circuit who'd visited him in the hospital. Flora had come by as well. Most weren't aware of the extent of his injuries. Only Neil and Mari knew that, and the doctors, of course.

"Yeah, Maggie, I'm still in pain. I tried... but not yet."

"Maybe you shouldn't have come."

There was no maybe. Jase definitely shouldn't have come. He looked out into the large house at the crowd. They were dancing, drinking, a few were fucking against walls, in semi-private corners. The designer opiate in the drinks lowered inhibitions while raising libido.

He felt as though he were seeing it all through the eyes of a stranger.

What would she think?

The question had never occurred to him before, and it sent chills down his spine. Miriam's face suddenly loomed in his mind, and every nerve in his body screamed in shame. Dizziness washed over him momentarily.

"Look, Jase, why don't you head up to one of the bedrooms, take some time out. That'll make it look like you're busy."

Her voice broke into his abstraction like a bell ringing in the distance. Not a bad idea. His head hurt from the noise, and his eyes and nose burned from the smoke in the air.

"Up the stairs. The bedrooms are to the left, just look for an empty sign."

She left him with a pat on the ass. He clenched his jaw with unaccustomed irritation. As Jase slowly ascended the stairs, the smoke and heat of the room followed him. At the second floor landing, he turned back and looked down at the crowd. Several people were crowded around a woman who was straddling the back of a naked man. He wore only a mask, a slave collar and an anal plug with a tail. He had a bridle clenched between his teeth.

Jase had never pursued humiliation, only pain. Abuse. His playmates took him in private. The games they played were much darker than what he was watching downstairs. Jason's playmates liked to dance with death. Only social constraints and fear of the law had kept a few from inflicting permanent damage on Jason's willing body. Flora was far from the worst of the lot.

He wandered down the hall, looking at the doors. Maggie brought little hanging signs that indicated if the room was vacant or occupied. Not everybody liked to do their fucking in public.

He reached the end of the corridor before finding an empty room. With a sigh of relief, he slipped into the darkened space, turning the sign and shutting the door behind him. The silence soaked into his skin like water on a hot day. He was already without shoes, so Jase crossed to the bed and flopped down, only to bolt back up when he landed on a warm body. A woman's shriek sent him across the room.

"Sorry! Sorry!" He brought up the lights on the dimmer, revealing a very female form on the bed.

"Oh... oh my God! That's okay... I'd just drifted off..."

She was fumbling with her mask, securing it to her face. Most didn't care so much once they were in private. This one really didn't want him to recognize her. She scooted up into a sitting position, her legs crossed.

"Love the outfit."

"Oh..." She pulled self-consciously at the skirts. He really did love it. While everyone else was tricked out in black fetish gear, she wore a laced-up corset made of brown distressed leather. Her skirt was leather to the waist and hips, voluminous folds of fabric and ruffles cascading from underneath.

"You're dressed as a pirate!"

"Or a wench." She smiled reluctantly. The brown of the leather looked good with the vivid red of her hair, which was pulled up into a sleek tail at the crown of her head. "My... friend told me it was a costume party."

"Ah." He stifled a smile. A lamb among wolves, then. "I guess this isn't what you were expecting."

She gave an ironic little laugh. "There was an old song, a really old song about a guy who went to a party his mother told him not to go to."

"Twentieth century. The Three Dog Night."

"Yeah. That's pretty much how I feel." She looked at him speculatively. "Why are you hiding out?"

Jase found a chair and pulled it closer to the bed. He sat, long legs stretched out and propped on the mattress. "Just not in the mood. I was getting tired of having my ass grabbed."

"You too? Jeez! I felt like I had a sign around my neck! I swear my bottom is bruised!"

"Well, you are wearing a sign of sorts." She looked at him in question. "The collar."

"Deb... my friend gave it to me." Her hands flew to the brown leather band that circled her slender throat. She wasn't a large woman, but her breasts swelled invitingly over the leather bodice. The leather collar played up the fragile appearance of her neck.

"It's got a loop for a leash."

"A leash? Like a dog collar?" Behind the mask, her eyes went wide. In this light, he couldn't tell what color they were.

"That advertises you as an available submissive."

"Oh, damn!"

"Maybe your friend isn't as good a friend as you think."

Her cheeks went red with embarrassment. He could literally see the color bloom on her skin as it traveled from her face, to her neck, to her bosom. For the first time in months, Jase felt his cock grow heavy with interest.

Once again, he let his gaze wander. She was small, but shapely, with a tiny waist and rounded hips. Again his eyes settled on her breasts. He stretched out a bare foot and ran it along her leg. Her skin felt warm and smooth. Her bare foot was small and slender. She went still but didn't retreat.

"Why did you come tonight?" His voice was soft, and a bit husky. Seductive.

Her lips parted. They were bare of make-up, pink and soft. They were the pink of a seashell, the pink that dances over the ocean at dusk. "I haven't been out in a long time."

"Lonely?"

"Yeah, I suppose I am." Her smile was a bit sad. She looked a bit like he felt.

They sat in companionable silence for a time. Jase sipped his water, feeling cold beads of sweat running down the glass onto his hand.

"Is that water?"

He nodded.

"Could I... Whatever was in my drink..."

He moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Handing the glass to her, he watched in fascination as she swallowed. He shook his head, wondering what the hell was going

on. Jase felt like his senses were suddenly overly acute. She leaned forward, handing the glass back. Their hands touched, and they both froze.

* * *

Dove had been floored when she'd woken up to a warm body settling over hers. Without her glasses, she couldn't see well, but when the lights came up, she could tell that the warm body was tall and slender, attached to a pleasing face with an abundant fall of hair. Blonde, wavy hair.

He didn't have a mask on, and wore street clothing rather than the elaborate and shocking costumes that the other party-goers were sporting. He smelled good, like soap and ocean and whatever his clothing had been laundered in.

He was barefoot. She liked that.

But he didn't fit, and she couldn't quite figure out what he was doing at this party, in this room. She looked at the glass where their hands had frozen and was overwhelmed by the sudden urge to touch him, to get closer, to become intimate with this stranger.

She hadn't been quite honest with him. Her friend had pressured her to come, and had misrepresented the nature of the party, but Dove had been curious once she'd entered the house. The smells of vice hung heavy on the air, and the behavior she'd observed was certainly exhibitionist. While it was shocking, it was also fascinating. But when hands started touching, pulling at her, Dove grew overwhelmed. Debra had vanished, leaving her alone and feeling desperately out of place.

She could have called a cab, but that would mean leaving the safety of the bedroom. Dove had fallen asleep wondering what the hell to do next.

Now, she was again wondering what to do. The cool surface of the glass contrasted with the warmth of his hand. She glanced up at him. This close she could see the sculpted contours of his face. He was shockingly handsome, though perhaps his face was a bit too lean, his expression a bit too sad.

"Why did you come tonight?" She threw his question right back at him.

"Habit, I suppose. I haven't been out in awhile either."

That broke the spell, though he remained close, sitting on the edge of the bed. He sat in profile to her, his long hair dropping to mask his face. He then glanced her direction.

"Loneliness." His voice was so soft, she almost didn't hear the word.

He reached out almost unthinkingly and ran his fingertips along the length of her shin. Her sex gripped, but at the same time, it felt comforting. Good. Her nipples drew tight and her lips tingled in a strange fashion.

"I find myself overwhelmed by a need to kiss you."

It was a confession. Again, he looked at her. This close, she could see brilliant blue eyes and full, sensual lips. She wondered what he looked like when he smiled. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, and then stopped, seeing his eyes falling to her mouth. "I..." She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. "Yes... I feel that too." Her own confession. She should be afraid of the situation, of her reaction. But she wasn't.

He twisted on the bed, turning to face her on his knees. He didn't move eagerly, or aggressively, simply with deliberate intent. A hand settled on her bare shoulder, pressing her back into the soft pillow. He followed her down, his lips meeting hers gently, lingering for a moment, and then pulling away. His hair fell down like a curtain around her face. "Do I know you?"

She looked up at him. His eyes were familiar, but she couldn't place him. She shook her head, wondering at her own behavior. Again, he lowered his head and kissed her longer this time, deeper, urging her lips to part before exploring, tasting.

Her heart raced, and for the first time in Dove's life, her body heated with arousal. When he broke the kiss, she gasped a bit. Her hand caught the back of his neck. She pulled him back down, and he lowered his body over hers. She felt his heart race, felt the swelling of his erection. Part of her brain called out for common sense, but her body overruled that tiny voice.

His hands came to her face, fingers tracing lightly over the edges of her mask, but he didn't try to take it off. Instead, he stared into her eyes for a long moment. He

returned to her lips, kissing, exploring, leaving her mouth to nip at her jaw, to nuzzle at her ear. Dove was shocked to hear a groan break from her body.

"Baby, this is my stopping point." He rose up on his elbows, breath coming fast. This close, she could see his face clearly. So beautiful. "I've got to stop now, if I stop at all."

"Don't stop." Whose voice was coming from her mouth? But then she said it again. "Don't stop."

He paused for a moment. She brought her hand to his cheek, stroking the fine, tanned skin. She ran the pad of her thumb over his lips, tracing the shape before cradling his face in her hand. He kissed her again.

* * *

Jase couldn't think straight. He couldn't recall ever seeing gray eyes so deep and tender, but he knew her. He *knew* her! Her touch was gentle, silken, completely lacking the hard edges, the pain he usually needed for arousal. Under him, her body was soft, willing. Her breasts swelled from the top of the bodice. It took little effort to slide them free of the confines of the leather. He brushed the peach-colored nipples with the tip of his finger, watching them crinkle into arousal. He bent to taste, fluttering his tongue over the surface, and then pulling the nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. Her body arched, twisted, her hips thrusting up toward his. Arousal twisted through his body, his balls grew tight, and his cock grew even harder.

What was wrong with him? He paused for a moment, collecting himself. The better part of Jason urged him to stop, that he wasn't worthy of joy, not even the fleeting pleasure of sex with a stranger. The primal part urged him on, begged him to bury himself in her soft depths, driving her to climax again and again. Need won out over conscience.

With trembling hands, he unlaced the skirt, pulling it down her hips, enjoying the image of her pale body clad only in the brown leather corset and simple cotton panties. He glanced at her face. While she was masked, every thought, every emotion showed clearly. Her lips were parted and swollen, her face tense with arousal.

He slipped the panties down, looking at her fiery curls. She was glistening with arousal, calling his body onward. Crazy! This was crazy! He hadn't wanted anyone like this in ages! He hadn't wanted a woman since...

He put the thought aside. This wasn't the time to go backwards. Jase shifted until he knelt at her side, running his hands gently over her belly, down her thighs. When he prompted, she willingly parted her legs, giving him room to touch. He gently parted her labia, trailing his fingers through her slick tissues. Her thighs grew tight and tense, and Jase moved again, this time settling between her thighs, lowering his face to her sex.

At the first touch of his mouth to her pussy, she gasped, clutching his hair, winding it around her fists. He braced for the inevitable yank, but it didn't come. Instead she stroked, running her fingers through the length as though it were fine silk. He tongued her, and she massaged his temples. He circled her clit, stabbed into her depths, and still, she rode him carefully. Gently. He was stunned by his reaction.

"Baby, I can't hold on..."

She coaxed him up her body. He straddled her waist as she unfastened the lower buttons on his shirt. As he slipped out of his shirt, she unfastened the buttons on his jeans. Funny that he should suddenly notice how loose they'd grown. He'd lost weight in the hospital, and maybe even more since then. When had he last looked at himself? Jase didn't even own a mirror.

For the first time in months, he noticed that his belly was no longer flat. It caved a bit, his hipbones and ribs showing through his skin. He was still fit, still muscular, but he'd bypassed lean and was now thin.

His swollen cock swung loose from his pants, and in fascination, he watched as she fisted him, running her hand firmly along his length, her thumb finding and stroking his most sensitive spots. She cupped his testicles, rolling them, testing their weight before leaning forward and licking. He shuddered. It was strange... so very strange to feel this way.

Jase shifted back between her legs, untangling himself from his jeans, rising up on his knees. She looked wanton and yet innocent, wild and gentle. Jase fisted his cock. He slotted the head into her entrance, shivering as her warmth surrounded him. Rocking gently, he worked his way into her tight body, and then moved forward, covering her, coming down almost face to face.

He kissed her, and as their lips brushed, he thrust. She met him with a surge, bringing him home. Slowly, she undulated, her back arching, eyes dropping shut.

“Oh God, yes...” Her voice was soft and hoarse with passion. Her arms wrapped around his waist, holding him close.

He pulled back and surged forward once more, and with every thrust he sank deeper until finally, he'd reached the end of her passage, snug and warm and gloriously wet. The frantic urgency had mellowed into something deep and compelling, holding him as close to her body as possible. He wanted to sink inside of her, to pull her into himself.

Instead, Jase wrapped his arms around her and rolled them to their sides. He couldn't move as freely, couldn't sink quite so far into her depths, but the intimacy was blinding. She stroked his chest, ran her hands down his waist and around to his buttocks. He couldn't move, didn't want to move. Jase just wanted to stay here, buried in this stranger's warm, comforting body. He wanted her arms around him, holding him close, filling him with peace.

She reached up, pushing the hair back from his face. She tucked it behind his shoulder before pulling his head down for a kiss. She explored his mouth, stroking her tongue alongside his, pulling back to nip his bottom lip before sucking on it lightly.

What his brain wanted and his body needed were two separate things. Involuntarily, his hips began to swivel into hers. She pulled herself close, her head tucked under his chin. Her leg hiked up onto his hip, pulling him deeper into her channel, until desire roared through him.

For years, Jase had been bottom, never taking the lead during sex. Tonight, he rolled her to her back, mounted her body, looking down at this sweet little bit of serendipity that he'd stumbled upon.

With every thrust into her body, her breasts jiggled over the top of the corset. She rolled her head to the side, bit her lip and moaned. He kissed her softly, catching the sound, letting it mingle with his own.

Her body arched into his sharply, quickly. She climaxed around him, her channel fluttering and rolling along his cock. Jase held steady, watching her for his cue. When she crested, he went still, letting her plunge down on him hard, holding him in an iron grip.

She panted, eyes shut, lips parted. "Oh my goodness."

He felt her belly heaving under his. She'd pulled him down to her body, and he only just managed to keep his weight from collapsing over her. He didn't fight her hold, giving her the time she needed to recover.

"Ready?"

She nodded. "Can you help me get this thing off?"

Jason reluctantly pulled out of her body, helping her to her knees. He examined the corset, finding that it clasped at her side. Quickly, he'd freed her body, and there she knelt, naked and pale and soft. She was cute as a button in her kinky leather mask.

Jase gave a playful growl and buried his face in her shoulder, nipping, sucking at her skin. He loved it when she shivered, clasping his arm for balance.

"The mask next?"

Her hand flew to the leather that concealed the upper part of her face. Oddly, he didn't recognize her. Jase knew most of the partiers downstairs. He didn't know her. But he felt like he should.

"Sorry... I want... have to keep it." She sounded absurdly apologetic and he laughed. Of course she wouldn't want Jase to know who she really was. Truthfully, he might end up following her home like a stray mongrel, starving for a gentle touch.

That was something he hadn't wanted in so very long.

"Make love to me. Please." His whisper was painful in his throat. Even as the words escaped, he regretted them. He'd regret this interlude so very much when it ended.

* * *

Holy. Shit.

"John" didn't think he could take much more of this.

Selene had told him to wait in the end room. She wanted to give Jase another try for some one-on-one action. Lady Margaret had agreed to help get Jase upstairs. He'd ducked into the bathroom when the wrong person came in, and had been biding his time, waiting for the chance to escape.

Instead, his intended target came in and promptly began boffing the girl!

The plan had been for Selene to start some action with Jase. "John" would then enter the picture for a cozy threesome. It rankled his conscience that he'd agreed in the first place. It seared his mind that his cock had gone hard as stone at the very idea of finally being with Jason Anders.

It terrified him. He'd never been with a man before, and John was very frightened at what this meant. What frightened him more was the raging physical reaction he'd had to the redhead, and to their lovemaking. His fists clenched at his side, fighting the desire to glide into the room and insert himself squarely between the two.

He wanted to taste Jason's mouth after he'd kissed the girl. He wanted to go down on her, eat her, and then share her sweet juices with the other man.

Instead, he was trapped in a dark bathroom, peering through the crack in the door. And as soon as they were finished, one or the other would catch him in here.

Somehow, that excited him more.

They were on their knees facing one another. The woman stroked his face gently, as gently as he could wish for Jase. Over the past year that he'd watched the other man, he'd learned to separate the tortured soul from the façade. He knew Jase craved physical suffering in order to muffle his spiritual pain. He wasn't sick, he wasn't a slut.

He was in pain that was so severe that the only way to combat that agony was with another pain.

Selene would have wanted him to hurt Jason. He didn't think he could do that. And from the looks of it, Jason's new lover was no different.

Her hands were gentle on his body. He ached when Jason flinched, expecting a pull on his hair or a slap on the face. Instead, she stroked and caressed him with care. She touched him like a lover.

"Mount him," he whispered softly.

She moved closer to Jase. He grasped her bottom so that she straddled his thighs. He lifted her slightly, and John could see both their faces as he penetrated her body. He spread his knees, giving her a better position, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She rode him.

John's hands trembled just a bit as he slipped his pants open, pulling out his aching cock. He was already wet with arousal. A little spit slicked him up. He stroked in time to their movements, reaching in to pull up his balls, tugging them a bit as the pressure built. He'd be behind her, sliding his cock along her bottom, bumping, stroking into Jase as they moved in synchronized rhythm. If she was willing, he'd enter her ass, moving into that snug passage, feeling Jase's cock tight against his own...

He stifled his gasp, breathed through the climax that was building in his groin, his back. He felt his belly go tight, and even as John squeezed the root of his cock in a desperate attempt to hold back, she was bucking, thrusting down hard on Jase, and he was matching her, a low, keening groan building in his chest.

As his climax grasped him in its vise-like grip, John watched the couple as they climaxed together, and he thought they were beautiful.

* * *

"Oh..."

Jase went tight, then loose, spasms rolling through his entire body, feeling the silk of his semen mingling with the liquid heat of her body. He lost all strength, all

ability to hold himself upright, so he remained where he'd finished, draped over her body, head buried on her shoulder. Tremors shook him like a leaf, and as tears involuntarily leaked from his burning eyes, she tightened her hold, keeping him in place.

Jase laughed then, maybe the first real laugh he'd had in years, but even as it broke from his body, sadness quickly took its place. He wrapped his arms around her, burying his face into her skin, unwilling to let loose of the fleeting sense of happiness she'd delivered to him.

"Gotta lie down... just for a minute."

At his words, she moved back, parting their bodies. She was shaking as much as he. They collapsed onto the mattress, heads landing on the pillow only by accident. They didn't speak. Jase didn't think he could hear past the pounding of his heart.

"Are you all right?" Her whisper was soft in his ear. She lay in his arms, their limbs twined tightly, sweat cooling on flushed skin.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you, babe."

It felt odd, lying there in the dimly lit room, a strange woman in his arms, offering him so much comfort and ease. She gave a little sigh, and he could feel her drifting off to sleep.

"Baby, I won't be here when you wake up."

"I know."

"This meant... so very much to me."

She nodded, her skin smooth against his shoulder. She kissed his cheek and he smiled, letting himself drift away. It had meant something to her as well.

Chapter Three

"Dr. Sinclair?"

She glanced up from her computer with a bit of annoyance. In the ER, she grabbed meals and breaks when she could. Dove cherished the novelty of taking her lunch whenever she wanted. And the luxury of an actual eight-hour day was unprecedented!

"There's a man here to see you. He says that he's a detective."

Behind the clerk's shoulder, Dove caught sight of a tall, dark figure. Her heart fluttered and her innate clumsiness suddenly manifested as her elbow smacked into a vase of flowers on the desktop.

She occasionally spoke with police in the ER, but having a detective seek her out was unusual. In fact, she knew only one detective. Dove nodded at the clerk, setting her partly eaten sandwich to the side. The clerk stepped back, allowing the man to enter.

"Hello, Detective Jain."

"Dr. Sinclair."

The silence between the two stretched out, and Dove's mind went blank. It always did around this man. Desperately, she tried to pull it together. "You were investigating the attack on Jason Anders. Have you made any progress with that?"

He gracefully lowered himself into the chair across from her tiny desk, and she flushed at her lack of manners. Dove automatically ducked her head defensively as she generally did around handsome men. Detective Jain certainly fit the description of a handsome male. Maybe he went beyond that.

His hair was inky black. His eyes were dark and expressive, heavily outlined by ridiculously long, thick lashes. His nose arched slightly, accenting lips that were

sensually curved. In the months since she'd last seen him, he'd grown a distinctive mustache and goatee. His hair was longer, waving back from his face past his collar.

Her eyes sought to look anywhere but at his face, and so she looked at his hands, long and gracefully tapered. He was broad and muscular, and much too large for this tiny room. He wore no rings so he was apparently available. She felt another wave of chagrin at the direction of her thoughts.

"There have been more attacks. Last night culminated in a fatality."

His voice was musical, lightly accented much as Dr. Patel's. He wore jeans and a white cotton shirt, a black jacket over that. Under the desk, she pinched her wrist, trying to force herself away from his looks.

"Is it an escalation in behavior, or do you think they were simply too rough with the victim?" She successfully brought her thoughts to the Wilder gangs that had been wreaking havoc in the outer fringes of the city.

"In the known attacks since Mr. Anders', this particular group has grown progressively more dangerous. I believe that they've moved from being a simple Wilder gang to intending the death of their victims."

"You're sure that it's one group in particular?"

"The DNA you pulled off of Jase... Jason... identified three separate suspects."

"Oh. Nobody told me that."

His eyes met hers, and a spark of anger flared in their depths then quickly faded. Dove had the uncomfortable sense that he was angry at her.

"None of my business, I suppose. What can I do to help?"

"I need to talk about Jason Anders again."

"You could probably get more information from Mr. Anders himself. I treated him in the ER and followed up once or twice."

"You are treating him now."

"No... I'm just..." She broke off, aware of how close she was to violating Jase's confidentiality. "In all honesty, I haven't seen him since he was here in the hospital last year."

The detective looked at her with disbelief clear in his dark eyes. "I was given to understand that you will be Jason Anders' attending physician. As you're now in Mental Services, I assumed that you are treating him in therapy."

"I don't know who told you that, but any information about Jason Anders' current treatment is confidential. I can talk to you about the morning he was in the ER, but his involvement here is unrelated."

She felt the heat of anger rising up her spine. His tone was disrespectful, bordering on rude. Whatever the reason for his attitude, she didn't need it.

Abruptly, Dove stood, ready to escort him from the office. He sighed deeply, clearly tamping down his own temper.

"Anything I say to you about Jason's current treatment would be a breach of ethics, Detective Jain. I'll talk to you about the attack."

"Is it within your ethics to fuck your patient?"

"What?" The word shot out of her mouth like poison. "I've never even met Jason, beyond when he was in a coma. How dare you?"

"He was seen with an attractive redhead at a party last week. That redhead was you."

Dove's eyes widened. How on Earth had she been recognized? And Jason Anders? That was Jason? Matted, bloody hair and electric blue eyes...

"Oh my God." Dove dropped back into her chair, shocked and numb.

"You didn't know?"

She shook her head, belatedly remembering to be embarrassed. She'd had sex with a complete stranger. She'd gone to the party, been duped and tricked and made to feel like an idiot. Her drink had been spiked, and then she'd had sex with a stranger. Not just any stranger, but her patient.

"How could you not recognize him?" Detective Jain was looking at her with a skeptical look on his face. "Jase Anders isn't really hard to miss."

"I'm legally blind. I didn't have my glasses with me."

He lifted a brow skeptically.

"Look, Detective Jain, you didn't see him those first couple weeks. He was a mess, nearly unrecognizable."

"I saw the photos, read the report."

"But you didn't see him. His face... both cheeks were split wide open. His entire face swelled until it was difficult to see that he was even human." Seeing that he wasn't convinced, Dove turned to her keyboard and opened a coded file. She activated the screen at his side of the desk. "Did you see these?" It was a sequence of tight close-ups of Jase's face and body. He'd no doubt seen the images on a print-out or as thumbnails in a report. These were life-size and in full color. He hissed and looked away. Jain had gone sickly pale under his honey-colored skin.

"That's what he looked like the first time I met him. The second time..." She cleared her throat nervously. "At the party, I couldn't really see anything beyond blurred figures. If he walked into my office right now, I wouldn't recognize him." She ran a finger over the screen before closing the file. "How did you know? About the party?"

"I was there as well."

"But nobody saw us together!"

He glanced down at the floor, looking uncomfortable.

"You *watched*?"

"No... It wasn't like that! I was waiting for someone... I ducked into the bathroom when you came in."

Dove dropped her head to the desk, thumping it gently on the laminate surface. After she'd thoroughly beaten away her mortified embarrassment, she dropped her head onto a fist. "Why were you there anyway?" Without looking, she scraped her sandwich into the trash. Her appetite had fled.

"Working this case. Why were you there?"

"I don't get out much."

"And when you do, you go to sex parties?"

Dove lifted her very heavy head, dragging the glasses from her face. "It was a practical joke. My... friend told me it was a costume party. We got there, she guided me in, got me a drink and vanished on me."

"The drinks were spiked."

"Uhh... yeah. I figured that out when I found myself having sex with a stranger."

"I'm sorry."

Funny thing, he sounded like he meant it. However, in reality, she wasn't sorry at all. Well, she was sorry she was going to have to face Jason Anders very soon and pray he didn't recognize her. She rubbed an eye with the heel of her hand. He wasn't her first, but every time Dove found herself in bed with someone, she was always convinced it would be her last time. Lovers were few and far between. Actual relationships were even more rare.

But that night had been a fantasy come to life. And she'd been convinced it would never come back to haunt her. She could dream of her lover time and again, never experiencing the pain and heartache that attended a commitment.

"Look, Detective Jain, we need to reach common ground here. I can't violate his confidentiality. You need information. Why don't you just ask Jason?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and Dove suddenly realized that he'd told her more than he should. "You were working... undercover?"

He nodded, skin darkened with... embarrassment?

"Okay... and you think Jase has more information that he hasn't shared?"

"Yes. Your own report suggested that he lied. He said he 'allowed' them to attack, yet he had defensive wounds. Jase is known as a pain slut. I've always wondered if he had a limit. Obviously, he does."

She prickled at the offhand remark, and then took a deep breath to calm herself. In spite of the ugly words, stress carried on Jain's voice. He cared, and he was afraid.

"Detective, there is usually a deep, underlying reason when a person manifests this sort of behavior."

"He was self-destructive long before the attack. In fact, from what I've seen, he's begun to behave in a more conservative fashion since the attack."

"Well, that's because..." She broke off, sealing her runaway lips. What was it about this man that triggered her to say too much?

"Because what?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't say."

He sat back and scrutinized Dove. She quailed slightly under that hot, dark gaze. She forced herself to relax, sitting back, meeting his eyes.

"So you were an ER physician, but you're now in Mental Services. Jason Anders was your patient then, and he's now your patient once more. Can I assume you're behind this assignment?"

"No!"

"Did he request you?"

"No! I think we're finished here, Detective!" She stood up, circling the desk to escort Detective Jain to the door. As she rounded the desk, Dove caught her hip on the sharp corner, bumping her inbox and spilling papers to the floor. She hopped, stifling a curse against the pain.

Before she could move, Jain was up, gathering papers, putting a steadying hand on her arm. He was warm, and her arm tingled at his touch. Dove stood frozen for a moment before looking at the tall man. He held a paper, and was frowning as he scanned it. "Stop that!" She snatched the paper away. It tore slightly before he released it.

He looked at her in horror. "Suicide? You're helping Jason Anders kill himself?"

She swallowed hard, surprised at the stunned expression on his face. Jain dropped the fragment of paper as though it were hot and repulsive.

"How could you." He was white and sick looking. "You're a doctor. How could you condone this?"

"I don't condone this, Detective. My boss called me to her office. She told me I'm to mentor an assisted suicide client." Her voice was tight and shaky. "I'm a doctor,

Detective Jain. I busted my ass to keep this man alive, and now they tell me I'm supposed to hold his hand as he kills himself. How do you think I feel about this?"

She threw the papers back into the inbox, stalking the narrow depth of the office. "I *save* lives, Detective." Dove whirled around, looking at the man in her office. "I think we've both said enough. I think you should leave now."

Detective Jain took one step backwards, and then another, the look of horror never leaving his face. He reached behind his back, searching for the door handle. Without ever looking away, he backed out of the room, leaving the office feeling lighter, larger.

For long moments after he left, Dove stood very still, and when she returned to her desk, her legs trembled and quaked.

But she didn't cry.

Chapter Four

Arav Jain strode rapidly down the hall, his strides nearly keeping pace with the beat of his heart. Without looking, he found the non-denominational chapel. He entered and lowered himself to a pew, leaning forward to rest his head on the bench in front of him.

Suicide.

Jason Anders wanted to die. Abrupt nausea welled up in his belly, and Arav took deep breaths, forcing the sensation away. He pillowed his forehead against his arms, allowing his body to relax, to recover from the shock. He pushed aside the denial and looked critically at the situation.

In the past year that he'd watched Jase on the circuits, the man had screamed of pain and sadness. The darkness in his blue eyes belied the smile that he so often wore. From the moment he'd first looked into Jason's eyes, Arav had been pulled to the man. He literally hurt for him. When Jase had broken with Neil Van Zandt, Arav had wanted to comfort him. When he'd learned of the assault, Arav had wanted to kill for him. Instead, he plunged himself deeper into the case, his guilt carrying him along.

The Wilder gangs had been Arav's first big assignment as a detective. His first failure. Every month there was another victim, and every month the attacks escalated in severity. He'd read the reports, chafed in frustration as other officers interviewed the victims. That was the part of undercover work that was just fucked. He'd like to talk to the victims, the witnesses, but he couldn't. He clenched a fist, and then released it.

The information he'd gathered was good, but not enough. It was all tied up within the party community. Every attack was carried out the night of one of Maggie's galas. She was a woman of many facets, catering to the swingers and the leather crowd,

as well as straight, above-board events. Margaret trod the delicate line of legality with her synth drugs and consensual violence.

But he didn't want to think that she was part of it. In fact, Arav was certain the attacks were hurting her business.

Jase was a vital part of the investigation, but he wasn't talking. And the little doctor? She was in the perfect position to gather information, but she wasn't talking either.

A flush of anger ran through Arav at the thought of Dr. Sinclair. Under her klutzy, befuddled exterior, she was sharp as a blade, and her burst of fury had almost seared him. She cared. Furthermore, she was almost as frustrated as he was.

Well, not quite as frustrated as Arav. She'd been lucky enough to fuck Jason Anders.

At the memory of what he'd seen back there at the party, Arav felt his cock fill painfully.

From behind the safety of his mask, he'd watched her come into the house. At first she'd been confused and then mortified. Dr. Sinclair had been adorable in her cute, leather pirate costume. He'd taken a moment to enjoy her before spotting Jase, his golden hair flowing loose around his shoulders, barefoot and fresh compared to the leather and lipstick and too-loud laughter of the crowd.

Watching the two of them in bed had split Arav down the middle. Jealousy had lodged in his stomach, lust had fogged his brain. Even now, he couldn't identify which feeling belonged where.

He'd long been in love with Jason Anders. That was a shocking truth he'd denied these past months. And the first moment Dr. Dove Sinclair had stumbled into his life, he'd wanted to catch her, to keep her from falling.

Arav straightened in the pew, looking up at the peaceful surroundings. No crosses, no symbols adorned the simple room. A stunningly beautiful stained glass panel was illuminated at the front. The windows carried similar abstract patterns in

multi-hued glass. He'd read that it was the work of Con Montgomery, the artist who did the Harbor murals.

The brother-in-law of Dr. Dove.

"I want to save them." He spoke into the empty room, wondering who might be listening. "Do you hear? I want to save them both."

"And so you shall."

Arav jerked, looking around the still empty room. The words had been clear as a bell... not in English, but another language... Hindi? A lovely feminine voice still tickled his ear.

"Detective?"

He jumped at the sound of her voice, but rather than a Hindu Goddess, he saw Dr. Sinclair hovering uncomfortably in the doorway of the chapel. She stepped into the room, her head tilted slightly, tendrils of red hair waving around her face.

"Doctor?" He gave her a moment and then turned back to the front of the room. He didn't see her, but felt her presence as she sat at the edge of the pew across from him.

This close, he could smell a light fragrance he thought might be lavender. He'd smelled it in the dim room as he crept away from the sleeping couple that night. Arav had waited downstairs. She'd been the first to wake and leave, waiting on the front drive of the house until a taxi came and picked her up. He'd been incredibly relieved that she hadn't tried to walk home alone.

Not in these times.

"I learned something I wasn't supposed to know."

Indeed she had. He'd completely blown his cover.

"And I inadvertently violated my client's confidentiality."

"Guess we're even."

He heard her sigh. She relaxed just the slightest bit, back curved against the padding of the bench, her head dropping forward. She looked sad.

"What I am doing with him violates my ethics more than telling you did."

"Sleeping with him or helping him take his own life?"

She was silent for a very long moment, and then she looked at him fully. "Did you climax while you watched us?"

"What?" He felt his cheeks grow warm.

"I asked if you climaxed while you watched."

"I heard what you said." But he didn't answer. That was response enough for Dove. She got up and sat in the pew next to Arav, for a bit more privacy, he supposed.

"Were you angry? Jealous?"

Arav kept his eyes to the front, seeking images in the abstract art.

"How long have you been in love with Jason?"

"I don't know." His confession was spoken in a hushed voice. "I only realized it a few moments ago, before you came into the room." He turned to face her. She was pale with stress, her face bare of make-up. This close, he could see that her eyes were indeed gray, without a trace of any other color save a black ring around the iris. Her lashes were darker than her hair, thick and curling. Such pretty eyes to hide under glasses. Such a truly beautiful woman hiding there in front of him.

"I..." He faltered, and started over. "Men... I've never been with a man, never wanted a man." She looked away and nodded. "The odd thing is, I've been attracted to you, as well, since the investigation opened. Seeing you together..." He felt his face heat even more, and was grateful for his dark skin. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say."

He looked at her then, taking in her profile -- the short, straight nose, the full, pouting lips. Even in its messy knot, her hair waved and curled with a life of its own. It had been straight the evening of the party. Straight and silky, it had looked much darker then. She had a slight frown on her face. When she turned to face him, they were only inches apart.

To his surprise, she leaned forward, pressing a long, lingering kiss on his mouth.

By the time she broke the kiss, his shock passed, leaving him wishing he'd prolonged the caress. But she didn't turn away. Dove looked into his eyes without flinching.

"Why do you wear these?" He reached up, took the ill-fitting glasses from her face. She blinked, and then focused on him.

"I can't see without them."

"I know, but why not correction? Nobody wears lenses these days."

"I'm phobic about things near my eyes."

He reached up and stroked the skin along her temple, circling around to her cheek. When he looked her in the eye, her gaze slid from his. So the glasses were a shield. A cover behind which to hide. Without her asking, he slipped them carefully back onto her face. He removed them again and gently pressed the arms closer together. Not an expert fitting, but they'd stay on better.

"So, we've both shared what we shouldn't have."

She'd changed gears swiftly, leaving Arav slightly confused. He nodded in agreement, realizing she was referring to their earlier conversation.

"And Detective..."

"Arav. We've kissed now. We should be on a first name basis."

She blushed. "Arav, we have a common goal."

"Keep Jason alive."

"And catch the people who hurt him."

"That is my job, Dove."

"He's my patient, I'm his advocate."

"And his lover."

"No. That happened because of drugs in our drinks. That's all."

"Dove." He reached down and clasped her hand. Her fingers felt so small. He looked down and marveled at the difference in the size and color. "Something happened between the two of you. The chemistry was unworldly." He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand. "I've observed Jase Anders enough that I know he

felt something different than he's felt in a very long time." He carefully released her hand, setting it down on her thigh. "You know his reputation?"

"Yeah. The party favor. The pain slut. He'll do anything with anyone."

"I've seen it happen to him -- whippings, beatings. The brutal treatment he chases..." He pulled a deep breath, gathering the courage to continue. "Sometimes he climaxes, and when he climaxes with the pain, only then does serenity come to his expression. And only for a fleeting moment." He reached out to Dove, turning her to face him. "With you, every minute, every second... that was a stranger to me. He was a different man, he was the man I've only glimpsed, and fell in love with." He cupped her face in his hand then, looking long into her eyes. "You're the one who can save him, Dove Sinclair."

* * *

Funny, that's pretty much what she'd told herself, before realizing how badly she'd fucked up... in a very literal sense. Dove's eyes felt raw as she looked up at Arav's handsome face. She'd always been intimidated by his good looks, and he'd confessed an attraction to her! Of course, he'd also confessed to being in love with Jase. When she set the two men side-by-side on her mental scales, they balanced. She'd known Arav longer, but in a business sense. And Jase? How much more intimate can a woman be with a man? Frantic hours in the ER, followed months later by a blissful evening in his arms.

She looked steadily at Arav Jain and smiled slowly. "We can save him, Arav. Together."

"Together." He nodded. Something told him they couldn't do it alone.

When they kissed, it was Arav who initiated the embrace. It was Dove who reached up, not allowing him to move away. Her mouth opened, inviting and warm, and Arav tasted her, his tongue delicate and skilled. He cupped her cheek, moving back slightly to look at her in question. Another soft kiss landed on her mouth.

"You are a beautiful man, Arav Jain."

The smile he gave her was wicked, causing a spike of arousal to curl into her belly. "Only because you look at me through beautiful eyes, little Dove."

One more light kiss, the third, and they'd sealed the agreement.

Chapter Five

This was the day that Jase Anders began the final stage of his journey through this life. He walked along the shoreline, feeling the foamy surf caress his bare feet. He sat down in the sand, watching the waves reach up and then fall away.

He felt relief. For the first time in months, maybe years, he could relax, not worry about being floored by a stray thought, frightened by a phantom lingering on a street corner. Guilt didn't sit on his chest like an anchor holding him to the ocean floor. Freedom beckoned.

At the same time, he grieved over little things. Every morning, he woke with the sunrise, sitting on the deck of the *Gaia* to watch the sun's rays break over the eastward horizon. He'd miss the pods of dolphins that raced the sleek boat through the waves. He'd never again make love with his mystery woman nor would he discover the unique taste of John's kisses. But those were small sacrifices to make in order to attain his goal: peace. Everlasting peace.

Sometimes he wondered if he'd carry the mélange of feelings over into the next existence. In truth, he'd much prefer this life to be his last. Jase didn't think that he had the strength to live again.

He felt the presence at his back and smiled, leaning back against a pair of strong, tanned legs.

"Thinking hard?"

"Hardly thinking." He leaned forward, letting Neil move away and sit down beside him. Time had been kind to Neil, time and the Imperative. His old lover looked good. Happy.

"What are you doing out so early?"

"Rowing practice. We're switching to mornings now that spring is almost here. Besides, it gets me in to work a little earlier."

That would be so he could spend more time with Marilyn. Their mutual antipathy had blossomed into the romance of the century, it seemed. Jase glanced over at Neil. The man fairly glowed with contentment. He could remember feeling that way, so very long ago, back in the days of Miriam and the Imperative.

"What are you doing these days?"

The question he'd been dreading, because Jase knew that he had to tell Neil. He owed him that much. Neil had single-handedly steered Jase through some of the most painful, self-destructive years of his life.

He lied.

"I'm starting counseling today." Was omission the same as a lie? He felt Neil pull a huge sigh of relief. Both Mari and Neil had tried to bring up the attack, but he'd always shut them down.

"I'm glad, Jase." The silence stretched, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"Are you seeing anyone these days?"

How did he answer that? Jase spent his days and nights fantasizing about a red-haired beauty in a mask, and about the strong, supple lines of a strange man's body. Lust was intertwined with fear in his crippled brain.

"I'm not seeing Flora anymore."

"Thank God for that!"

Jase gave an ironic laugh. He didn't need to tell Neil about Flora's moment of self-discovery. He probably wouldn't believe it. In fact, he'd be surprised if Flora managed to walk away from the lifestyle of pain. She had her own demons to sacrifice to.

"How's Mari? I haven't seen her around for a while."

"She's good... happy. In fact, she's asked about you. I know she wants you to come over for dinner soon."

The old, conditioned part of Jase rebelled, automatically refusing. He shook his head.

"No, I don't think..." Disappointment flashed over Neil's handsome face. "...I was actually planning to go sailing this weekend and meant to call you guys. We could make a day of it. Do some fishing, have dinner... whatever..."

Now where had that come from? But the happiness on his friend's face was a surprising reward. He truly cared.

"That sounds great... in fact... well, yes, we'll come. We'll bring the wine!" Neil was practically beaming as he rose to his feet, the early morning sun sparkling in his dark hair. Oddly, Jase felt only a winsome tug at his heart, no grief, no jealousy. Love, yes, but not want. When had that come about?

He rose to his feet, walking Neil up the beach to the strand. They didn't talk, and as they came to the paved path, he stopped, watching as Neil continued on his way home.

"Come by anytime you guys are ready."

"Will do. And Jase, thank you for getting help. Really."

As Neil walked away, the smile faded from Jason's face. He swallowed hard. It felt like something was lodged in his throat.

* * *

Dove spent far too long in front of her mirror.

Jase Anders was her nine o'clock this morning.

On one side of the mirror hung the silly pirate costume. On the other hung an array of outfits as different as she could possibly come up with. Of course, she could wear her lab coat, but somehow, didn't think Dr. Drew would approve. They wanted casual, comfortable. Nothing in Dove's appearance should speak of her profession.

In a sudden moment of brilliance, Dove thought of the perfect advisor. "Hey, Debra, can you give me a hand?"

Within moments, her roommate's bright blonde head peeked into the doorway. Her angelic blue eyes looked surly. It seemed odd that somebody so sweet in appearance could be so sour in reality.

"I'm seeing someone for lunch today, and I can't figure out what to wear." She stood back, waiting for Debra to work her particular sort of evil.

"It's a guy I've kinda liked for a while now..."

Ah... magic words! Debra's eyes took on a calculating gleam as her mean little brain began to work. Funny, Dove was normally a good judge of character, but she'd allowed Debra to set her up and knock her down more than once. That little game would be ending soon. While the salary of a resident wasn't grand, it was enough that Dove could manage the house payment without help. Debra had two weeks to find a new place of her own.

"Gosh, Dove, that ivory blouse is nice."

It was horrid. She'd never really cared for it, and at that moment, resolved to re-home the thing.

"But you know, I might have something you can borrow..."

She darted out of the room, returning shortly with a pale pink sweater vest that looked superb on her blonde complexion, but would illuminate Dove like an over-ripe tomato. Dove held it up over the insipid blouse and nodded. The ivory made her skin pallid, and the pink clashed with her hair.

"You think this'll look okay? I don't usually wear pink."

"It'll look great, Dove. You should wear pastels more often." The smile she gave Dove was sweet as sugar. "You'll knock him dead."

Great, kill the man she was supposed to be saving. She returned Debra's insincere smile and hooked the outfit over the door.

She'd blow-dry her hair before leaving the house. That would have every individual strand of hair doing its own version of the Twist. He'd be so blinded by her frizz and coloring, there'd be no way he'd recognize the masked woman he'd slept with the week before.

She hoped.

When she wasn't having flashbacks of the most magnificent sex of her life, she relived those three soft kisses in the hospital chapel. How had things gotten so complicated?

* * *

"So, what's the plan, Stan?"

She blinked and brought herself to some level of coherency.

Jase had been handsome that night in the soft light and the haze of her poor vision, but nothing had prepared her for this.

He had the tanned skin that only blondes seemed to be gifted with. Long, waving hair was sun kissed, golden, and neatly tied back. Vivid blue eyes crowned a face that was simply exquisite in its harmony.

He wasn't as young as he seemed, perhaps in his early thirties. Smile lines had started around his eyes and his lids were hooded a bit from hours in the sun.

But under all that shine and luster was a pall of darkness.

She hadn't seen it that night. And yet he'd held her so desperately, so needfully. He'd fallen asleep in her arms, and hadn't stirred when she'd dressed and left the room. Even as he'd slept, she felt the weight of his need.

"Well, you have group in a half-hour, that'll be ninety minutes. Then one-on-one with Dr. Drew. I'll attend group this first time, but your sessions with Dr. Drew are private."

He nodded, sitting back in the chair, looking relaxed and easy. It was a stark contrast to the dark man who'd been in that chair the day before. Her heart raced a little at the memory of their pact.

"After that, I thought we'd have lunch, head out for a walk or something."

"And do what?" He was relaxed in appearance, but not reality.

"Hang out. Talk if you want, don't talk if you don't want to. If you'd like to go through your stuff, I can give you a hand or take notes."

He swallowed. She'd hit a raw spot. While Dove had never taken this last walk with a client before, she imagined that going through the artifacts of life would be difficult, to say the least. It slammed home the finality of his decision.

"Maybe we could do that another time."

"Sure, there's plenty of time." And time was ticking away. "We'll also want to look at your finances, get your bank accounts in order and so forth." She decided to go for another nerve. "Have you designated an heir? Or a trustee?"

He shook his head. The smile that clung to his face began to look fixed and stiff. "So you're a doctor?"

Very clever. He was going to turn the topic from himself. "Yes. I'm still a resident. I'm a generalist. This is part of my ongoing training."

"You ever work the ER?"

She froze for a moment. Had he recognized her?

"I came into the ER a couple times. I don't remember you, but that last time, I didn't really see anything."

"Well, I'm not the sort of person you'd notice."

"You'd be surprised what I notice." He grinned, deep dimples gracing his face. "I like red hair. I'd have remembered." His smile faded quickly and he glanced away. "You were there that night."

She didn't know what to say, so said nothing.

"I saw your name on the paperwork. I can't remember being there, but I remember the name. You were the attending physician."

"Yes, Jason, I was."

"So you must be royally pissed at me."

She gave him the full focus of her gaze, letting him see the fury that festered there. "I fought for your life. You fought for your life. Together, we kept you alive."

"And I'm throwing it away."

She clenched her jaw, tamping down the anger. "This isn't about me and how I feel. It's about a decision you've made and getting you through it with dignity and grace."

"Why did they choose you?" He was sitting slightly forward, anger and fear and concern dancing across his expression.

"I don't know, Jase. Maybe it's part of learning to be a better doctor. I've been told that I don't relate well to people. That I lack empathy."

She swiveled her chair away, unable to continue looking at him. "I'm not here to advise you or talk you into or out of anything. I'm here to get you through the process. That's all."

"And it's killing you."

"Yeah, Jase. It's killing me."

"You don't lack empathy, Dr. Sinclair. Not at all."

* * *

"Do you mind awfully if we don't go out today?"

She looked up and blinked. The bright light of the reading lamp cast him into shadow. Setting the text aside, Dove pushed the lamp away and brought up the office lights.

He looked awful.

Group had been hard on him. The other participants had looked at his healthy body and carefully refrained from criticism. But it had been in their eyes, even after Jason had told most of his story in halting, painful phrases.

Even heavily edited, it sounded as awful as she knew it really was. The other patients had been brutal in their questions, laying bare his raw suffering after years of widowhood. He told them about beatings he'd willingly endured, how the pain in his soul never ceased. He told them about the Wilders, but he didn't tell them everything.

It was a smart move on Jason's part, clever and manipulative. If he was considered to be suffering from the untreated emotional trauma of the attack, he'd have never been allowed into this program.

From her research into Jason Anders, she knew the masochistic, suicidal behavior wasn't new. But she also knew that he'd never acted on a death wish until after the attack. And from what Arav told her, she knew he wasn't seeking punishment anymore.

Clearly, Dr. Drew hadn't let Jason hide away in their private session. He was pale and haggard. His body looked thin to the point of emaciation. He'd hidden that through posture. "Jason, if you'd like privacy, the chapel is open. It's quiet there, and peaceful."

He stepped uncertainly into her office, pulling the chair away from her desk, moving it to the window. "It's peaceful here."

Those simple words nearly broke her carefully constructed control. Dove swallowed past the lump in her throat and opened a desk drawer, fishing out her lunch and a bottle of water. She dragged her chair to the window and sat next to him, splitting her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Wordlessly, he accepted it, eating slowly, swallowing carefully. He seemed to savor the simple fare. She wondered if it reminded him of childhood.

"I'm tired." He didn't look away from the view as he spoke.

"I know you are."

"And I want to stop hurting people."

"It seems to me that you're only hurting yourself. And that's what's hurting the people who care about you." She carefully peeled an orange, offering him half.

They ate in silence, and when they were finished, she cleaned up, returning her chair to the desk, lowering the lights again, starting back into the psychology text.

They didn't speak again for several hours.

Chapter Six

He hadn't expected it to be easy, but then, he hadn't expected it to be so very difficult.

Jason sat on the deck of the *Gaia*, staring out at the misty evening. He'd gone below deck and wandered from drawer to cabinet, picking up the detritus of his life, setting it back down. He'd carried down a box and labels, and sat deciding which bauble went to which niece or nephew. He'd long ago discarded any memories of Miriam, returning them to her family.

The boat would go to Neil and Marilyn. Neil was a competent sailor. Mari loved the ocean as well. He'd like to leave them all of his assets. His sister didn't need his money. He'd get Dove's opinion on that tomorrow. After all, he was a fairly wealthy man.

His guitar hung on the wall. He gently removed the instrument from its hook and tuned the strings, idly picking out a melody, shifting quickly from jazz to classical, his true musical love. Even during the darkest times, he'd kept this one guitar, a gift from his parents when he'd performed his first recital at the age of twelve.

Over the years, he'd owned many fine instruments, but none that he loved like this one. Abruptly, he decided he'd like to take this one with him. There was really nobody who'd want it.

It went back on the wall, and Jase surveyed the cabin. Just removing those few items emptied it of all trace of Jase Anders. For some reason, that bothered him. He was leaving no legacy. There would be little to show the world that Jason Emerson Anders had lived. Not physically, anyway.

The people he'd met today, each and every one, were leaving loved ones, a lifetime of memories, of accomplishments and love at their passing.

They had looked at Jase with shadowed concern. Oddly, they seemed to understand. He had a healthy body, a healthy mind, and a grossly damaged spirit.

But could the damage to a man's soul heal over time? Did he feel better because the end was near, or had the attack jolted him from the cycle of grief and pain he'd fallen into?

Once he'd decided that this was the path to take, Jason's life had developed an odd sense of serenity, of acceptance. He'd taken the photo of Miriam that he'd hidden away and placed it in the galley, where she'd spent so much time cooking. It hadn't been that bad.

And then last week...

He didn't know what game his little doctor was playing, but if she'd thought to hide behind unflattering clothing and ugly glasses... he lay back on the pillow and grinned.

That had been the best sex he'd had in years, and after, he'd fallen into the most peaceful slumber he could remember.

He'd awakened to find her gone.

And now that he'd found her, Jase was seriously contemplating a repeat performance.

Time in her company was oddly peaceful, particularly since she had a bit of a temper. But odd as she was, little Dr. Dove understood him. She accepted him, and though she hated his decision, she supported him.

Sleeping with her again would be cruel. He wouldn't really do it, but the memory of that night played again and again as he lay in the darkness, feeling the gentle waves rock the boat.

He lay back, gripped a hand over his cock, feeling it grow hard just at the thought of her. There was only one thing he could think of that would be better than fucking the little doctor, but that one thing didn't bear thinking of. Much as his body might want John, that dark man was dangerous in some elemental way. To his body? Perhaps. But to his soul, those fiery dark eyes held a danger that Jase couldn't address.

Over the past year, they'd barely exchanged two words, but every look, every glance told the story, and it was a story that Jase knew would never be written.

Jase kept his grip firm on his cock, rolled to his side, and fell asleep, fully clothed and fully erect.

* * *

Dove looked up and glanced at the clock when the soft knock came at the door. She peeked at the security monitor and was suddenly very grateful that Debra had chosen that night to stay out with friends. It was another party night.

She opened the door and Arav stood there, looking handsome and roguish with the night at his back. She was absurdly grateful that she'd changed into a comfortable, cute workout suit rather than the tattered tee shirt she usually slept in.

"It's late."

"Not that late," he countered. She stepped back and he entered, glancing around the spacious house.

"This is nice." It was airy and uncluttered, save for a small pile of books and papers she'd been working through.

"Thanks. I had a small inheritance back when I was in college. Decided a house would be a safe investment. The payments have been a bit of a burden though."

"Do you have a roommate? That would help."

"Ahhh... yeah. The roommate's looking for a new place."

"Good." He sat on the sofa, his smile daring her to sit next to him.

She did.

"How did it go with Jason today?"

She curled up, legs under her body. "Oh, it was hard, Arav. Very hard."

"For you or for Jase?"

She looked up at him, surprised at the concern on his hard face. As usual, she simply wanted to sit and stare at him. "For both of us. I think it took him by surprise. We ditched our afternoon plans. He just sat in my office the rest of the day."

"Doing what?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "I worked. He sat looking out the window most of the day. Then he got up and left without saying anything."

"Do you think he's changing his mind?"

She thought for a moment, her head propped back against the sofa. "He's certainly got some things to think about. I hit the hot buttons today. I offered to visit and help him sort through his possessions. He didn't like that."

"I imagine not." Arav looked around the room, his gaze sweeping the place, lingering on photos of family, a niche where she'd displayed treasured books, a piece of art. They were the things that told of who lived in this space, what they cared for. Take those things away, and the house lost the essence of who resided there.

Dove sat, staring pensively at nothing in particular. It would be difficult, giving away the evidence of your life.

"It was a hard day for you as well."

She nodded. "Yes. I think his pain was a bit contagious." She gave a sad smile and met his eyes, and suddenly Arav wanted to touch her face, to soothe the sadness away. Impulsively, he leaned over and gathered her into his arms, holding her close. This would be all, as far as he would dare to move with her. If she wanted more from him, it was her choice.

She lay still against him, head on his chest, and Arav reached up, massaging her neck, wishing he dared to release her hair. He wanted to feel it cascade down onto his skin. He wasn't quite certain how his hand came to be on the bare skin of her back, the glide of his palm interrupted only by the narrow strap of her bra. And he certainly didn't remember unhooking that bra, letting his hand slide around, stroking the tender skin at the side of her breast.

His cock was swelling, warm and heavy with arousal, and when her hand came down, stroking his length, Arav let out a shaky breath. Her hand slid between his legs, cupping his balls through his tight jeans.

He reciprocated by running his hand down her back, over her bottom, massaging her buttocks through the soft knit of her pants. Inspired, he brought his other hand to the back of her head, pulling her to him for his kiss.

And such a kiss!

She wasn't gentle and shy as she had been for Jase. Instead, she attacked his mouth with hunger, catching his mustache, pulling, and then nibbling lightly. Clearly, she'd been thinking about this, maybe as much as Arav had. She struggled up, straddled his hips and pulled her top off, catching her glasses along the way. They ended up on the floor, followed quickly by Arav's shirt.

Dove sat upright while he explored her body, hands skimming over her narrow waist and her ribcage. They hadn't turned off the lights. The golden light of the stained-glass lamps cast her in a warm glow. He could see her breasts this time, soft and round and small, the tips pebbling with arousal, with exposure to the air of the room. Arav circled her breasts, cupping them in his palms, watching her flush as he pinched her nipples. Again, he massaged softly, stroking up, letting his skin feather over their crinkled surface.

Gently, but inexorably, he pulled her down to his face, his warm breath teasing, his tongue darting out to taste, to nibble and suck while Dove squirmed on his lap, her bottom shifting against his erection. She braced herself on the back of the sofa, a hand on either side of his head.

"Take down your hair." He watched as she carefully removed pins, letting them fall to the floor, her hair twisting in thick waves around her shoulders. He pulled her down again, this time for a hard, invasive kiss. The soft fragrance of lavender surrounded him, from her hair, from her body.

Her hands buried in his hair, pulling and tugging. She ground her chest to his. The feel of skin to skin made him dizzy with the sensations. How long? How long had he wanted without any satisfaction? Arav pulled her tightly to his body, one big hand on her bottom, rocking her rhythmically into his groin, groaning as he came precariously close to coming without even removing his pants.

Obviously, his urgency translated to Dove. She clumsily struggled off his lap, bumping against the coffee table as she shimmied out of her pants. Arav fumbled at the catch of his jeans. Even when her hand joined his, getting out of his clothing was a challenge.

Again he lay back on the couch, full length this time, watching in fascination as she lowered herself atop his body, exploring with mouth and teeth and tongue. She drew near to his cock, her soft breath brushing the swollen head. When she took him into her mouth, he groaned, and mercilessly, she grasped him around the base of his cock.

"You're close." He nodded wordlessly. She gave him a good, long lick and straddled him, her hand clasping his shaft as she lowered herself, just a little at a time.

He wanted to close his eyes, to lose himself in the moment. He wanted to watch every move she made as she worked his girth into her body. She wiggled a bit, lifted and pulled him deeper into her tight, wet channel.

Arav's mouth dropped open. He panted, fighting against the climax that tightened his back, his balls, his belly. He cursed, and then with every fiber of control that he possessed, slowed his breathing, forcing himself to relax, to back off. The next time she raised, he very nearly slipped from her body. Only his cockhead remained gripped by her tight muscles, and when she rode down his shaft, he slid home, right to her very core.

She held there for a moment, hands braced on his chest, perfectly still. Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back. The look on her face tightened him again, maddening him with the need to move, to grind into her body.

She arched, her spine curved, her pelvis tilting into his. Unable to withstand the tease any longer, Arav grasped her hips hard. He'd probably leave bruises, but he needed her to move. Up and down on his shaft, hard and fast, until she collapsed over his body, belly to belly, chest to chest. She supported herself on straight arms, and he clasped the hair at the back of her scalp, tilting her head back, exposing her graceful white throat.

She began to croon her rising arousal, plunging down onto his cock. As she took him harder, he grew closer. Arav thought his heart would burst with the effort. When she completely lost her tempo, crying out, pumping onto him fast and hard, he hovered at that blissful, sparkling moment... the moment of surrender.

And he came.

He wrapped his arms around her body, pulling her down hard onto his shaft, holding himself deeply embedded, perfectly still, his body vibrating with the first tendrils of climax. Her channel clasped him again and again. She'd buried her face in his chest, her body twisting and convulsing and slick with her sweat... his sweat. He thrust into her, helpless now, completely at the mercy of his orgasm.

The seed rushed from his body in a moment of sublime relief. Spasm after spasm emptied his balls until he knew he was ejaculating dry. With one final shudder, he went loose, barely able to hold onto Dove, yet unable to let her go.

At that moment, Arav Jain knew something he'd never known before. He knew that it was possible to be in love with two people. And strange as it might be, he wasn't even afraid.

* * *

"I was rough. I'm sorry."

He fingered a pink spot on her hip. There was a whisker burn at her throat.

"It felt good. Right at that moment, it was perfect."

"Pain? You like pain during sex?"

"Not pain... not like... you know." The name went unspoken.

He sat up in the bed, her white sheets slipping down his flat, muscular belly. Dove watched him in unabashed fascination. She'd managed to rescue her glasses and now marveled at the sheer beauty of the man in her bed.

He looked devilish, and during sex, he was devilish, to just the right, exact degree she needed. Once their initial rush of lust had receded, they'd napped, waking to find more pleasure with one another.

He was more than adequate with his tongue, and with those fingers as well. He'd introduced her to the dark variety of climax that came with anal penetration, though he'd used only fingers there while he fucked her pussy. They didn't speak of what he was really preparing her for. They showered together in the darkness, exploring with hands and mouths, finally ending up sliding together on the slick floor of the huge shower, wet skin slapping against skin, skidding against the cool tile.

It had been perverse, amazing, and to her shock, she wanted more.

Not pain, not like... you know... He did know. He'd witnessed it often enough. "He doesn't get sexual pleasure from it." Arav felt defensive of Jase. Protective.

Dove leaned forward, stroking the gleaming black of his goatee. "I know he doesn't, Arav." Her fingers skimmed over his lips. The sensation caused a shiver.

"How long have I known you, Dove?" He reached out, pulled her into his arms. They had only hours before dawn, and time for her to work.

"I don't know, six months maybe? Why?"

"Because I love you."

"Yesterday you loved Jason."

He kissed her forehead. "I love Jason as well. Odd, isn't it?" He looked down at her, dark eyes gleaming. Immediately, she thought of her brother Duncan and his mates. But for her and Arav, there was no Imperative forcing the issue. Just love.

"I'm afraid to say it, but I think it's true."

"That it's odd?"

"No. It's true that I love you also."

"And you love Jason as well."

She was quiet for a moment. "No, I don't think I love Jason. He frightens me too much."

He shifted, looking at her curiously. "Why, Dove? Why are you afraid of Jase? He'd never hurt you."

He had injured Neil. She'd heard that little bit of information from Duncan, who was good friends with Jason's ex-lover. But somehow, she knew he'd never hurt her, not physically.

"I'm afraid that Jason would break my heart. In the end, I'm afraid he'll break us both." She looked up at him, and she was beautiful there in the darkness, her skin gleaming pearl white. "Arav, I'm afraid that Jason Anders has already broken my heart."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think I can save him." And she did love him, and knew damn well that Jase was too wrapped up in pain to love her back.

Well, at least she'd admitted it to herself.

She laid her head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart, feeling his strength, his innate kindness.

"You're wrong, Dove. But you're right." She lay still, waiting for him to continue. "Only Jason can save himself. It's up to us to show him a reason."

"And that is?"

"Us." He stroked her hair. "We're the reason that Jason Anders should live."

Chapter Seven

She was sore and tired. The late winter sunshine made her eyes burn. As the traffic slowed, Dove stepped into the crosswalk, only to find herself jerked backwards and to the ground.

She landed with a grunt, and with an annoyed frown, Dove fished her glasses from her lap.

"Damn it, Dove, you scared me to death!"

Jason squatted beside her, his face slightly pale. "Didn't you see that car?"

"Obviously not," she said dryly. He stood up and helped her to her feet, standing back as she brushed off her clothing. The mud wasn't going to come off so easily. She sighed, glaring down at her ruined outfit. The hose were shredded, her skirt was stained.

"Do you need to go home? To change?"

"Nah... I've got scrubs at the hospital."

Her hair had come loose, tendrils waving around her face. Jason caught himself staring at the fiery strands. Every night for the past month, he'd lain in his bed, picturing her as she had been that night at the party, naked and beautiful, pinned under his body. He ached for her, and seeing her looking so forlorn and distressed, his heart ached as badly as his cock.

The thought made him ashamed.

"Did you deal with the friend who tricked you into the party?"

They'd started down the sidewalk toward the hospital again. Lunch would probably be on the roof today. For the first time in a week, the rains had stopped. He really needed to be outside. He needed the sun.

"What?" She came to a dead stop. Jase shut his eyes and cursed at his slip.

"You knew?"

She was really magnificent in her anger, and the arousal that had waned a moment ago surged back.

"Fuck." He looked at her in embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

She stood there, flummoxed, her expression shifting wildly. Finally, she dropped her eyes to the ground. "No, I'm sorry. I should have told you that first day."

They entered the cool hallways of the hospital and stepped into an elevator, waiting until they exited to continue the conversation.

"You probably shouldn't be mentoring me."

"No, I shouldn't. If you'd like me removed..."

"No." He cut her off mid-sentence. "I don't want you to go." Even to his own ears, Jason sounded desperate and needy. He'd come to depend on her presence to move himself through these final days.

They moved rapidly down the hall toward her office. Suddenly, there was nowhere in the world he'd rather be than alone with Dr. Dove. Alone, with her in his arms...

"Dove!"

She looked to the side. Her foot caught and she tripped, heading face forward. As she fell, Jase lunged to catch her, nearly crashing into the tall man whose call had distracted her in the first place. They both bent down to help her to her feet, and their foreheads cracked sharply, sending them both reeling.

"Shit!"

"Fuck!"

Jase clasped his forehead. Damn! It was contagious! Cautiously, he and the other man got to their knees, turning to an astounded-looking Dove, who'd managed to break her own fall.

"That's twice today that I've saved you, Dr. Dove." His humor began to trickle back as he looked at the expression on her face. His humor came to a slamming halt when he saw the other man's possessive grip on her shoulder as he gently helped her

rise. Dove had gone pink with embarrassment. His heart plummeted even as his stomach twisted in jealousy. For some reason, he'd never thought she'd be seeing someone else. He'd come to think of her as his own.

"Jase, Jason Anders, this is Detective Arav Jain. He's my..." She fumbled for words, and Arav stepped into the gap.

"Dr. Sinclair and I are seeing each other."

"Oh." Jase looked from one to the other, tamping down his jealousy and disappointment. After all, he was in no position to be starting a relationship. In fact, the idea was ludicrous and reeked of hypocrisy. After all, in less than one month, he'd be out of her life forever.

Once she was steady on her feet, Dove started toward her office, the men in her wake. Jase stole a glance. The man was teasingly familiar, and incredibly sexy. He knew that if he'd run into Detective Jain before, he wouldn't have forgotten the man. Jase had a weakness for dark men.

But this dark man was nothing like Neil, or any man he'd spent time with before. Jain was exotic. His movement was fluid as a great cat, and perhaps as dangerous. The look he'd given Dove spoke of possession and heat.

"So, how long have you..."

"Four weeks."

"Seven months."

He looked at them in confusion.

"Dove and I have known one another for many months, but we started dating just a month ago."

Just after he'd had his erotic encounter with the little doctor. The thought brought an ache to some undefined area of his chest.

* * *

Holy. Stinking. Crap.

Dove unlocked her door and let the men inside. If it had seemed crowded with only one, now the room closed in on her, and she could fairly taste the testosterone on

the air. Who'd have thought a trip and fall would lead to the trappings of an erotic fantasy?

The two men were sizing one another up. She already knew Arav's feelings about Jase, though he was acting suspiciously territorial all of a sudden. And Jase? He could barely confine his gaze to one over the other. His bright blue eyes glittered with pent-up emotion.

She desperately needed to change her clothes. Did she dare to leave them alone?

"Arav, did you need to talk to me?" She prayed he'd offer to accompany her to the doctors' lounge.

"No, I'll wait here, I've been thinking..." He turned from Dove to Jase, and then back. "No, babe, it can wait."

Dove fished for an excuse to drag him along, and then gave it up. If she trusted anyone with Jase, it was Arav. They'd planned and brainstormed over the past month, and had come up with nothing. No brilliant ideas to convince Jase that life was worth taking a chance on. Maybe this was fate stepping in.

"Okay, I'll be back in a few minutes." She grabbed her purse and clipped the door on the way out, wincing and rubbing her arm. It had been a very bad day. She wondered how many new bruises she carried.

* * *

"It's her glasses."

Arav turned and looked at Jase in curiosity. Now that Dove had gone, his entire focus shifted to Jason. He felt a flush crawl up his neck. He'd been so attracted to this man for so long, and as usual, Arav lost all his words. "What's that?"

"Her glasses. Hardly anyone wears corrective lenses anymore. They're distorting her peripheral vision." Jase moved to the low window and sat on the sill, arms crossed, gazing at Arav.

"It's also a lack of confidence, I think. In her own element... in the ER, she's a different person completely."

Jase looked at the floor with a slight frown on his face. Perhaps he was remembering? Or reconnecting with that guilt he carried?

Arav pulled the chair away from her desk and sat, pensively watching Jase Anders.

The weak sun spilled in the window. His hair caught that light and made it a little brighter. He looked good, healthier than Arav had ever seen him look. His hair had been cut, leaving it looking less disheveled. His face was clean-shaved, his clothing was neat. The shadows were still there behind his eyes, but so was something else.

Arav felt a pull of suspicion. Had he seen a flash of jealousy in the other man's eyes?

"So, you're a detective."

Arav nodded, meeting the other man's eyes.

"What sort of cases do you work? Drugs? Homicide?"

"Primarily violent crime."

"There isn't much of that around here, except..." he broke off briefly, "...except the Wilders."

"There are always crimes of violence, Jason. Those Wilder gangs are high profile and spectacular. The smaller crimes are just as painful and destructive." He watched Jase steadily, wondering where the man's mind was taking him. The journey wasn't pleasant.

"Do you know about me? The Wilders?"

"Yes, Jase, I do. I don't work your case in particular, but I am familiar with what happened to you."

"You know that they raped me?" His blue eyes burned with the beginnings of anger.

"Yes, I was briefed on your injuries."

Jase snorted in disgust. "So much for privacy."

Arav did his best to hide his reaction. According to Dove, he'd never admitted to the rape, even though the evidence had been there. "Their violent behavior is escalating, Jason. They hunt more often, and there has been a death."

Jason turned his head away, giving Arav his profile. The silence was weighty and uncomfortable.

"And what is your role in the investigation... John?"

Arav sat perfectly still, his eyes never leaving Jason's averted profile. "Jain. My name is Arav Jain."

"And you party under another name."

He swallowed, suddenly aware that he now had to reveal all to Jason as well. His cover had been blown twice within a month. This wasn't good. "The attacks occur in the orbit of Margaret's parties. I've been working those parties undercover for some time now."

"You seem to enjoy your work. Does the department foot the bill for your gear, or do you use your own? By the way, those spandex shorts and boots were just hot."

Arav kept his arms folded defensively across his chest. He needed to keep his mouth shut, and let Jase vent his anger.

"How did Dove get pulled into this? Or are you undercover with her as well?"

"No!" He rose and began to pace the tiny office. "I met Dr. Sinclair after your attack. I questioned her about the night you came into the ER. Since I was undercover on the case, I couldn't approach you with questions. I could only watch."

"And you were always there, watching, weren't you?" Jason looked at him fully. "I believed that 'John' had feelings for me. Maybe a bit of a crush." He crossed his arms angrily.

"I find out that I had sex with my doctor, and the man who I was attracted to is the detective on my case. And he's now sleeping with my doctor! This is just fucked, Detective."

"You have no idea just how fucked it is." Arav slumped back into the chair, uncertain what to say. He wasn't leaving, that was for sure. It looked like Jason wasn't planning to go anywhere either. He was bristling in anger.

"We are not manipulating you, Jason. Dove did not know what sort of party she was going to. It was only coincidence that I recognized her shortly afterwards."

Jason looked out the window, not turning to speak. "Did she deal with the roommate?"

"Yes, the woman moved out of the house a few days ago."

"Good. Who was it?"

"I only know her as Debra. She's a regular on the circuit, but I don't think we've met."

"Do you know why I'm here? With Dr. Sinclair?"

"I know that Dove works in the Assisted Suicide program, and I know that you are her client."

"Sorta speaks for itself, doesn't it?" Jason swung back to face Arav. Whatever he meant to say was interrupted as Dove entered, wearing a pair of medical green scrubs and tennis shoes. She looked nervously from one man to the other.

"Dove, I have some news to share, and since it concerns Jason..." he glanced at the other man, and then back at Dove, "...he should hear it as well."

Dove stared at him steadily. Her complexion went pale.

"He recognized me from the parties."

She looked over at Jase, a fearful, guilty expression on her face. Instinctively, Arav rose and took her in his arms, giving her a brief hug, ignoring the anger on Jason's face. He was no therapist, but in Arav's opinion, anger was good. Jase had been wallowing in guilt for so long, he'd lost that magnificent survival mechanism: anger. He'd seen it flare to life briefly when Jase had mentioned the rape. Now he saw it as he held Dove in his arms.

Arav almost wished that Dove hadn't returned when she had. Whether it was the result of therapy or anger, Jase had very nearly unburdened himself.

He stepped out into the hall and snagged an extra chair, and set it at the end of her desk, so the three were in a rough circle.

"Why am I involved in what you were going to tell Dove?" Jase had his arms crossed over his chest. His anger radiated like a bright light.

"When you came in to the ER that morning, Dove collected specimens from your body, your clothing as well."

Jase blanched slightly, and his gaze dropped. Humiliation and shame played across his face. "No one's ever talked to me about this."

"From what I heard, you weren't receptive."

Jase sighed, and the sound made Arav feel heavy and sad.

"Anyhow, there was no semen, but Dr. Sinclair did pull several samples from your body. Those samples were not your DNA."

Bright blue eyes rose to meet his. "Some of them used objects to rape me." Jason couldn't meet Dove's eyes. Pain and humiliation etched his face.

"That's how we know you fought, Jase. You injured them, more than one, actually." Arav looked over at Dove. She seemed to sense that Jase needed to know that he'd done his best.

"We found blood from two other individuals and DNA from a third. The lab has been processing them slowly. We don't know who they are yet, but I just found out something very interesting."

"What would that be?"

"Women. There were women in the Wilder gang that attacked you."

* * *

Women? Women had done this to him? Dove sat back in her chair, stunned out of speech. She looked at Jase in concern. He'd gone white as a sheet. If she was right, this was probably the first time he'd ever spoken of the attack, beyond the initial interviews by the police.

"I remember voices. They weren't all men." He cleared his throat, and automatically, Dove reached into her drawer, pulling out a bottle of water for him. He opened the lid and drank gratefully.

"I knew... they were going to rape me when they got me down, started stripping my clothes off. I just kept fighting. I kept hoping they'd knock me unconscious so I wouldn't have to feel what they were doing." His hands rubbed together nervously, over and over again. "But I felt it... all of it. They laughed. Someone knew me, said I was the pain slut, so I should love what they were doing."

He stopped speaking for a time. His eyes looked sad, far away. "In all the years after Miriam's death, I thought I deserved punishment, but never that. Nobody deserves that."

"So will you help me on this case?" Arav looked directly at Jason, challenging him. Challenging him to fight back, to reclaim his existence.

"Why do you care?"

"Because this is my case, Jason. Because they've killed now, and they'll do it again if they aren't stopped. I care because they've driven you to suicide, and if you really carry out this foolish plan of yours, they'll have killed you as well."

"I was heading down this path long ago. As Dove knows, I applied to the program five years ago."

"And in the past year that I've known you, watched you, it wasn't until the attack that you moved in this direction, Jase. Did you ever seek counseling after your wife's death?"

Jason stared stonily at the detective.

"Did you, Jase? Did you get rape counseling after the attack? Or did you simply mask the trauma, and use your wife's death as an excuse for running out on life, when in reality it was the horror of what happened to you last summer?"

"Fuck you, Jain." He stood so abruptly his chair fell over backwards, and Dove jumped as it crashed onto the floor.

"Do you believe this too?" His eyes were white hot and grief stricken.

"Yeah, actually, I do, Jason."

He stood there, looking lost for a moment, turning away. When he reached the door, he turned back. "I'll ask Dr. Drew..."

Whatever he meant to say was drowned in a sudden rush of sound. Dove's pager went off, followed by Jain's. Her phone was ringing, and down the hall, voices raised in sudden alarm.

"Sinclair here." Jain had turned away, speaking quietly on his small phone. Jason stood, frozen in the sudden rush.

"I'll be there." Dove rang off and stood, meeting Jain's eyes. As one, they turned to look at Jason.

"How are you with first aid?"

He looked at her in confusion, but she'd already grabbed her heavy medical bag and was moving without a trace of her signature clumsiness.

"There's been a bus accident just down the street. All available hands are needed. Jase, if you can take directions and not faint at the sight of blood, I can use you."

Arav was already heading down the hall at a run. In the distance, they could hear the wail of sirens. Fire units were responding.

They took the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, and beat it to the ground level.

Chapter Eight

Jase stood at the window, shade pulled back. His anxiety was palpable, and just a bit contagious. Arav sighed and turned back to the kitchen, putting away the last of the dishes.

Jase had barely eaten, and they'd exchanged only a few words in the past hour.

"You don't think she'll try to walk?"

"No, she's very careful at night, Jase. She's the disaster coordinator for the hospital. I imagine she won't be home till after midnight."

He hadn't really wanted to take Jason home to the empty boat, not after his hours at the site of the accident. As a police officer, Arav was somewhat desensitized to blood and pain, but it had been a rude shock to Jason. Without asking, he'd brought the other man to Dove's house. She wouldn't mind, and Arav was uneasily aware that he and Jase had some unfinished business.

"Is there food left for Dove?"

"Yes, I made a plate for her." She'd probably be too tired to eat, though. Arav poured coffee and took it into the living room where Jason paced anxiously. He settled into the comfortable sofa, content for the moment to sit and watch the other man fret.

"Are you upset about the accident, or about the conversation we were having?" Oddly, now that all the hidden emotions and agendas were coming to light, Arav was ready to talk openly with Jase. It was too late to take it all back anyway.

"You really are, aren't you? Attracted to me?" Jason pulled the curtains closed, but stayed at the window, waiting for Arav's answer.

"Yes, I am."

"Why wait so long to say anything?" He made no attempt to close the distance between them, though he eyed the cup of coffee on the low table in front of Arav.

Arav sighed and thought about what to say. There was so much, and his path to this place had been so complicated.

"First, you were with a companion. And your behavior was clearly disturbed, Jase. I was drawn to you, but you were unavailable both literally and emotionally."

Jason nodded his head jerkily, and carefully, he moved to pick up the coffee cup, returning to the window. He reminded Arav of some shy, wild creature.

"You were devastated after the breakup with Neil. I was really afraid for you. Sometimes... sometimes you were unconscious after a party, and people simply walked around you like you weren't there."

"I always woke up at home."

Arav leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees.

"That was you, wasn't it?"

"In good conscience, and as a police officer, I couldn't leave you in a dangerous situation."

"Shit."

"I'm sorry..."

Jason turned away and Arav's eyes dropped back to the floor. He had no reason to apologize.

"Arav, I'm not angry at you. It just seems that no matter what I do, it ends up hurting other people."

"Only because they care about you."

"So why now? What has changed that you're willing to get involved with me?"

"You have."

He rose from the sofa and crossed the room. Jason turned away, back to the curtained window. He flicked the fabric aside. Carefully, Arav placed a hand on his shoulder, and while Jase flinched, he didn't pull away. Encouraged, Arav moved close to his back, wrapping his arms around Jason. Slowly, he began to relax into Arav's embrace. They stood like that for a long time, watching the moonlit street outside.

"I can't do this, you know..."

"Let me hold you?"

"No... sex."

"Not everything I feel for you is about sex. Besides, you've been with others since the attack. Dove."

Jason sighed, but didn't try to break away. "I'm bottom, I'm always bottom. And I can't do that anymore."

"Because of the injuries, or the trauma?"

"Both... I just can't."

"You don't have to."

Carefully, Arav turned Jason around to face him. He wasn't surprised to see that Jason's eyes were red with unshed tears, his skin white and pallid.

"You must understand, Jason, that love doesn't always fit a template. Do I feel passion for you? Yes, I do... but it doesn't have to be about who is on top if we have sex. I've never been penetrated, and I'm not certain that I want that. I'm also not certain that I want to do that to you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I don't know." Jason shook his head, letting it drop down to Arav's shoulder. By increments, their embrace grew more intimate. Arav gathered Jase up in his arms, wishing he could erase the years of self-hatred and sadness.

"You'd leave Dove for me?"

"No. I love her. Nor will she leave me for you." He stood back slightly, holding Jase at arm's length. "You must know, Jase, neither I nor Dove is crossing over to you. We are asking that you cross over to us."

"To both of you." His eyes grew large, and Arav had to smile as he felt a wave of heat emanate from Jason's body.

"Both of us."

"She's my doc..." His words were muffled as Arav kissed him gently, his lips stroking gently.

"Understand, Jason, anything that happens between us will not involve pain or violence. I do not have that in my nature."

"You could have fooled me, John."

Arav smiled wickedly, white teeth flashing from behind the black mustache. "But that is role-play. And while John might enjoy binding his partner, or sampling some erotic variety of sex, he never causes pain." He bent and trailed his tongue over Jason's lips, urging him to open once more.

This kiss wasn't so gentle, nor was it comforting. It was erotic, licentious. He coaxed, he urged Jason to play. It was seduction.

* * *

Jase felt his cock grow heavy with arousal. His heart beat a rapid tempo in his chest. He stayed very still as this dark, dangerous man ate at his mouth, breaking free to nip his jaw, his neck, down the tender skin of his throat. He steadied himself with a hand on Arav's chest, the other behind his neck, burying his fingers into silky waves of ebony hair.

Down below, he felt the urgent bulge of Arav's erection. He'd seen evidence of this man's attraction to him many times over the past year. Many times his fingers had itched to stroke, to embrace, but John... Arav... had never before crossed that line.

Those burning dark eyes were looking into his, compelling and teasingly familiar. When they kissed, the mustache and beard tickled a bit, just mildly abrasive. Arav's hands on his body were strong and slightly aggressive, but never overbearing.

He let his own wander just a bit more, dropping till he felt Arav's hard belly through the fabric of his shirt, down farther till he cupped the other man's huge, hot erection. He released the top button of Arav's jeans and slowly pulled his shirt free. Another button, and then another, and he reached the band of his underwear. Arav reached to free himself.

"Stand still." Jason's voice was sharp and edgy, revealing his anxiety. Obediently, Arav dropped his hands to his sides. Clearly, the power had to shift. It had to, or Jase didn't think he could continue.

"You don't have to do this, Jase. You can say no."

"And you'd be okay with me if I say no?"

The other man nodded. "I'm an adult, Jase. I won't pressure you into anything."

"Okay," he breathed, dropping his hand down into the tight confines of Arav's pants, stroking the thick length of his cock. He watched as Arav twisted, his back arching in pleasure. Slowly, deliberately, he withdrew his hand. "Go over to that chair and sit."

He watched Arav obediently cross the space. He turned and paused. When Jason said nothing, Arav sat, his loose shirt falling to drape his rigid shaft.

Jason slipped his shirt off and let it drop to the floor. He slipped off his sandals, and then untied and dropped his linen pants. With each item of clothing that he abandoned, he could see Arav's cock jump a bit. His own responded, feeling warm and thick, but not yet fully engorged. His fear wouldn't allow that.

Naked, he crossed the room, coming to a halt in front of Arav, who patiently awaited his instructions. Jason was uneasily aware that he wasn't trying to dominate the other man, but simply buy himself the time and space he needed to do this.

And he wanted this so very much.

At his instruction, Arav slipped out of his clothing. "Put your arms behind your back, and then sit on your hands."

Arav followed his instructions, his eyes growing wide at the simple, yet effective restraint. Jason quickly straddled his thighs. As long as Arav was unable to lean forward, he'd be unable to free himself.

"What about Dove? Should we be doing this?"

Arav's voice cut through his uncertainty. "This is about us... you and me. She understands and will want us to work through this."

Jase took a moment, looking down at the sight of their cocks resting side by side, both thick and aroused, but neither man acting on that obvious need. Arav didn't speak, leaving the scenario completely in Jason's control.

He leaned forward, nipping Arav's chin, pulling lightly at his goatee. He moved on to his mouth, kissing, taking his time, getting to know the taste and feel of the other man.

"Tell me a fantasy... something that excites you."

He worked his way down Arav's neck, sucking hard enough to bring up marks. Jason's hand smoothed over Arav's chest, his thumb circling his nipple. He tugged lightly on the golden hoop there.

"I..." Arav choked and began again. "I'm watching you and Dove... you're making love together, on a bed. I come from my hiding place and climb onto the bed with you. For a time, I sit at the end of the bed, just watching. I can see your cock pushing into her body. Her skin looks so soft and fine, and your muscles work with each thrust.

"I crawl up the bed, lay my head on the pillow and watch as you fuck her harder. She cries out, coming hard on your cock, but you keep pumping, thrusting hard, bringing her close once more... and then you cry out. Your body flexes and goes still in those final moments of climax."

Jase listened, trailing his cock over Arav's thighs, up to his belly, and down the length of Arav's rigid shaft. His pre-come left a glistening trail on the other man's skin.

"She lies under your body, and you roll to the side, but your hands never leave her skin. She didn't come that second time. She's exhausted, but still aroused and needy, and you touch her breasts, her nipples.

"I bend over and kiss her. I can taste you on her lips. I can taste the salt of your sweat on her body. She pulls my hair in her need, and by now, I'm hot... desperate. I go down on her. I can taste your seed mixed with her juices..." Arav's voice broke on a gasp.

Under his body, Jase felt Arav's cock go even harder as he told his fantasy. In truth, his was growing close himself. He braced himself with one hand and clasped their cocks together, squeezing hard, gratified to hear the other man gasp.

As he continued, Arav's voice grew unsteady, hoarse with need. He struggled a bit against the restraint of his own weight.

"I taste you and I taste her, and it makes me crazy... She's bucking against my face and I look up. You're licking and sucking her nipples. She's got one hand in your hair, and with her other, she pulls me away from her pussy.

"I move up between her legs. I drag the tip of my cock through her slit and she's so damn, fucking wet. When I slide in, I feel your come... it's like silk on my skin... and I love it because it's part of you. I'm there, I'm so close to being there!

"She cries out and you kiss her hard and deep. I pull out and sit up, you lift her and help settle her over my lap. And then you move behind her. You wrap your arms around her body just as I do. You help her ride my cock."

They were sliding together now, slick with sweat and pre-come. Arav's voice was barely coherent now. His hips bucked under Jason's body, and a fine sheen of sweat covered his skin. In abstraction, Jason saw the tiny gold hoops in his brown nipples, the fine black hair that trailed down his chest in a path straight to his pubis. Jason kept a steady tempo, his cock sliding over Arav's. He cupped a palm over their cock heads.

He felt his own climax shimmering along his nerves, his muscles growing tight. Sweat bloomed over his skin. His breath escaped in short, quick pants. Arav continued.

"And you... you're all ready again, your cock is hard and it's only been a few minutes. Her pussy is wet and hot, and you're sliding between her legs... Your cock keeps sliding past mine and it's too much..."

He gasped, unable to continue, and Jason was unable to prompt him anymore. He pumped his hips, again and then again, watching in fascination as Arav arched helplessly beneath him. His cries were followed by ropes of semen that spattered onto his dark skin. In seconds, Jason's muscles convulsed, locked, and he spilled, his seed mingling with Arav's on his flat, muscular belly.

They panted, moaned a bit, and Jason let himself down, resting his head on Arav's broad shoulder. Belatedly, he remembered that he had the other man restrained. When he could move, he slid back, helping Arav to free his arms.

He tried to think of something to say, but words simply wouldn't come. So instead, Jason lay forward once more, letting Arav bear his weight.

Chapter Nine

Jason jerked into wakefulness. Instead of being disoriented, he looked around in wonder. The bed he lay in was draped with filmy white fabric. The mattress was plush. The entire room bore Dove's signature fragrance.

He glanced down. Arav lay next to him, deeply asleep. It was strangely comforting to find himself here. Jason stretched. The novelty of waking after sex without bruises or injuries was not lost on him. His head was clear, his body felt good, and his heart...

But where was Dove? Worry tugged at him and Jase carefully slid from the bed, padding out to the living room. They'd abandoned their clothing. He sorted through the mess and found his pants. Feeling a bit more presentable, he moved into the kitchen, drawn by a faint light.

Dove was at the counter, head down, hair loose and sound asleep. There was a half-eaten plate of food in front of her. His heart twisted. She'd been too weary to make it to the bedroom.

Carefully, he bent, looped her arm around his neck and lifted her. On the way out of the room, her shoes fell off one by one. He kicked them out of the way and kept going, marveling that she didn't even stir.

When he returned to the bedroom, Arav was sitting up, hair mussed and looking worried. Immediately, he was out of bed, pulling back the covers, helping Jason get her comfortable. She moaned a bit while they undressed her. Jason noticed that Arav grew slightly aroused as they bared her skin. He grinned at Jase and winked, sliding back under the covers. Slowly, Jason followed, feeling a bit bewildered when Dove mumbled and turned into him, cuddling at his side.

Arav spooned against her back, one arm over her waist, his hand coming to rest on Jason's hip. "Go to sleep, Jason." Arav's dark eyes drifted closed.

But Jason didn't sleep. He lay awake for an hour or more, looking from one to the other. He listened to their steady breathing, and thought about what Arav had said earlier. They weren't crossing over to him, they were asking Jason to cross over to them.

They wanted him. They needed him.

Such a deep, wide river to cross.

Even with their help, Jason wasn't certain that he could do it.

* * *

Light spilled into the room, dazzling his eyes, dragging him into wakefulness. Jase started to roll away, seeking the comfort of darkness, but something anchored his chest. His arm was numb and awareness flooded his body and mind. His cock was hard as stone, clasped in a warm, gentle grip. He gasped.

"Morning." Dove had her chin propped on his chest. Her hair trailed over his belly like a silk curtain. Her grip on his shaft didn't loosen a bit. She pumped him gently and firmly. He stretched, partly from the waking, partly in bliss at her touch. Jase buried a hand in her hair, tilting her head toward his. When he pulled her up for a kiss, her grip loosened for a moment.

"Where's Arav?" Even as he asked, Jason became aware of the soft music of the shower.

"He's getting ready for work."

"And you?"

"I worked a double, so I've got the day off."

She'd started on his cock again, teasing him, playing with him, but not too fast, not too determined. He enjoyed her ministrations, running his hands through her hair, over her soft skin.

"You and Arav were together last night?"

"I'm trying, Dove."

She nodded, looking away. Trailing the fingers of one hand over his belly, she smiled gently as his muscles flinched and quivered from the contact. There was so much to say, but it was all locked up inside, tied up in his chest. At night, when he'd looked up at the filmy curtains draped on the bed frame, images had danced there. Images of Miriam, her body swollen with pregnancy. Smiles and laughter, and for the first time in ages, her ghostly face hadn't looked to him for salvation. She had looked happy. The serenity in her presence was as he'd long ago remembered.

"You guys left a mess in my living room."

He grinned sheepishly. "Maybe I did more than try."

She chuckled softly, and then twisted, her head lowering to his groin, her mouth taking the place of her hand. He groaned at the sudden soft, warm clasp of her lips. She slid up and down slowly, one hand stroking the base of his shaft, the other cupping his balls. Her tongue swirled on his cockhead, teasing and light.

He didn't hear the bathroom door open.

"Morn... ing..."

Jase dragged his eyes open to see Arav standing in the doorway, a towel around his waist, brown skin glistening and wet. His hair was slicked back, revealing the exquisite planes of his face.

Dove must have been aware of the other man's presence, though she had her back to him, her naked bottom in the air. Just imagining the view from where Arav stood brought another moan to Jason's throat.

Arav approached the bed, and then he stood, one hand resting on Dove's bottom, stroking up to her back, a hand sliding under to cup a breast. His face had gone intent with lust. His cock tented the white towel that wrapped around his waist. With a trembling hand, Jase reached out, letting the towel loose. Their eyes met in a brief, hot exchange.

He could do this... if it was about Dove, he could do this. When Arav left her side and climbed onto the bed, Jase followed him through half-opened eyes. Arav came

to a stop, kneeling at his side. Slowly, he bent over, catching Jason's lips in a slow, deep kiss.

Jase tasted the mint of toothpaste, smelled the wet fragrance of soap. His hips rocked as Dove's attention to his cock grew more persistent, breaking through his distraction with the other man.

"Dove."

She glanced up, looking at Arav.

"Mount him." Arav's voice was husky with desire. She let Jason's cock slide from her mouth, lingering briefly over his balls. Jase panted, reaching down to help her up, to straddle his hips. Jason watched in fascination as the other man steadied her. Arav clasped Jase's cock, holding it steady as she lowered herself. She took him slowly, her face a study in concentration as his thick flesh parted hers. Dove lifted and lowered, taking just a little at a time.

Jase bit his lip, fighting against the need to shove his way into her body. Her wet heat surrounded him in a lush grip and he couldn't tear his eyes away. When he did, he met Arav's hot gaze. Reaching out, he clasped the other man's cock, pumping slowly. His tempo matched Dove's, and he looked from one to the other, fighting back from the shimmering edge of climax.

Once Dove was settled, she leaned forward over his body.

"Arav?" She glanced at him, and Arav's cock grew a shade harder in Jase's hand.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes... please."

Jason tracked Arav as he moved to the bedside, opening a drawer, returning with a condom and a small container. He positioned himself behind Dove, and within moments Jase almost lost his equilibrium as Dove gasped. Through the thin membrane of her body, he felt the gliding stroke of Arav's finger.

He held perfectly still, even as Dove's sheath clasped hard. She rested her head on his chest, her body shivering.

"If it hurts... don't." His throat was raw and painful. Above him, Dove shuddered, her gray eyes meeting his, full of arousal, and a touch of apprehension.

"God... don't stop, Arav... Please... I'm okay..." She didn't look away from Jason as she spoke.

She grew tighter around Jason's shaft as Arav widened her more.

"Bear down, sweetheart." He watched her face, looking for signs that the double invasion was too much.

Behind Dove, Arav moved into her slowly. His hard, thick cock began an exquisite press against Jason, crowding into the tight back passage of her body. She moaned and Jase felt sweat bloom over her skin.

"It's tight... oh God, it's so tight..." Her voice was harsh with arousal.

"Do you need me to stop?" As usual, Arav held himself under tight control.

"No... keep going."

Within long, endless minutes, Arav had penetrated her fully. His slow thrusts were an equally blissful torture for all three. Unable to do otherwise, Jase's hips began to surge, and Arav went still, letting the other two take over all movement. He brought one foot up next to Jase's hip, bracing himself as Dove surged back onto him, then forward onto Jase. She let out a sobbing breath and Jase reached up, cupping her cheek in his hand.

She was tight, so tight that the sensation was almost painful on Jase's shaft. She was wet, and as his cock bypassed Arav's, his breath caught in his chest. So right... the sensation was so right and complete that his heart beat even faster, and some of the adrenaline that shot through his system was inspired by fear that he didn't understand.

"Open your eyes, Jase."

He did so, seeing the two faces that meant so very much to him. He shut his eyes tightly, and then opened them again. Dove was flushed with exertion, with passion. Her eyes were unfocused, her soft lips parted. He'd been afraid they'd hurt her, but there wasn't a trace of pain or fear on her face. Arav was upright, one hand on her hip, the other running up her back. Jase circled his arms around her waist, and as he began

to thrust into her harder, deeper, Arav's face went dark, his body went still. Jase thrust in, and then forced her back onto their partner's shaft, deeper, faster, reveling in his control over them both.

Dove began to keen softly. She buried her head in Jason's chest and went rigid, stiff, and then she was thrusting fast, her sheath claspings like a fist on his cock. Arav's moan told him that she'd pulled him over into climax as well. The other man stayed upright, his head thrown back, one hand convulsively claspings over Jason's where it rested on Dove's hip.

Unable to hang on any longer, Jase shuddered, arching up into Dove's hot sheath, thrusting hard. His ass clenched, his balls drew up and he cried out, holding her tightly, reaching up to clasp Arav's iron-hard arm.

In a chorus of moans and the slapping of skin on skin, they all came together in one single, mind-bending climax.

Dove slowly melted down to his body. She was warm and right against his skin. Jase could still feel Arav's cock snug against his, though they were both rapidly softening. Slowly, Arav pulled back, leaving them both. With a sigh, he collapsed onto the bed next to Jason. Dove lifted from his body and rolled to Jase's other side.

He lay sandwiched between two warm, surprisingly gentle bodies. Arav stroked his hair while Dove's small hand wandered his chest and belly. No words were spoken, but volumes were communicated in that moment.

In the brief moments before drifting off to sleep, Jase Anders became aware that somewhere, somehow, he'd made a terrible mistake. And he was afraid.

Chapter Ten

Jase was gone when they woke.

Dove looked at the empty space between them and then scooted over into Arav's arms. "I guess it was too much to hope for."

"It was a huge breakthrough, Dove. Last night, he took the lead with me, and then this morning..."

"Yeah. This morning. It was pretty amazing, wasn't it?"

"God, yes. The question is, how are you feeling? That couldn't have been gentle." He sounded worried and she grinned.

"I swear, I was made for this, Arav. Nothing has ever felt so right." She stretched, running a bare foot down his leg. "Now if we could just convince Jase."

"He knows. That's why he's gone." Arav stretched and sat up, grinning as Dove grumbled in complaint. "Work, baby. Think I should tell the lieutenant that I was late 'cause I was having a hot threesome?"

He dodged a pillow and leaned down, blowing a raspberry on her belly. Dove giggled, finally wiggling away to roll off the bed. She landed on her bottom, and then climbed to her feet, searching for her glasses.

As Arav watched her disappear into the bathroom, his heart swelled with love. No, it wasn't the Imperative, but maybe it was something better, more precious. It was love that was natural and good.

Without bothering to dress, he meandered into the kitchen and programmed the kitchen unit for coffee. As he waited, he wandered into the living room. Jase had neatly folded his clothes, leaving them on the chair they'd used the night before.

Arav pulled on his jeans and settled into the chair, laying his head back. From the corner of his eye, he caught the gleam of a brightly colored hair. Jase. He smiled and

carefully dislodged the hair. It was long, silky and the color of the sun. And it was straight, not Jason's hair after all.

He started to shake it loose, and then reconsidered. No doubt it was the former roommate... Debra. He sighed and headed back into the kitchen.

* * *

"Hey, Dove, do you want me to get the door?"

The doorbell rang once again. The chime began to sound strident.

"I've got it, hon."

He heard her footsteps and then the sound of voices. As he listened, one voice raised a bit, sounding angry. Curiously, Arav stepped into the living room, and then backpedaled, his heart racing in his chest.

"Debra, I'm sorry your new place isn't working out, but you really can't go on leaving your stuff here."

"God, Dove, it's just for a few more days! What's it going to hurt? You're hardly ever here anyway."

Dove hesitated, and Arav could sense that she was going to fold. Their argument didn't interest him, though. The identity of the roommate did. Standing there in the other room was Lady Selene, in the flesh. He didn't know if she'd recognize him, but Arav really didn't want to take that chance. His relationship with Dove was too new, too fragile to throw his sordid job in her face.

He retreated to the spare bedroom where he kept a few things for when he stayed over. He'd taken to sleeping at Dove's place most nights, but didn't want to move in on her completely. So a few of his things lived here, but he didn't invade her closet space.

As he buttoned his shirt, he caught sight of another bright blonde hair. As far as he knew, Jase had never been in this room, so the strand had to belong to Debra. Lady Selene.

He found a stray evidence bag deep in his pocket and gently worked the hair loose from the carpet, checking for a follicle. It was probably nothing, but still, that

cop's instinct was working overtime. If it was a match to the DNA they'd collected from Jase, he'd know within hours. Arav tucked the envelope into his pocket and slipped into a jacket. Time to go to work.

* * *

Carefully, Jase eyed the anchor rope, making certain the boat was securely fastened to the buoy. He was a couple miles upshore from Harbor City, just far enough to be out of reach of anyone looking for him. He'd already shut down his communications systems after checking his email. There'd been only one message. It was from Margaret, asking if he'd be at tonight's party.

Not likely.

He stripped naked and plunged into the chilly Pacific waters, diving deep and letting the blue-green of the ocean wash over his mind. He didn't want to think about or remember the events of the past day and night. He didn't want to replay the soft murmurs of love and the gentle touches.

He didn't want to remember calling the hospital, asking that Dove be removed from his case. As usual, he'd screwed up his life, dragging other people along for the ride. This crime had to be the worst yet, because he had no intention of backing down, and two very good people were going to be hurt by his decision.

After swimming long and hard, Jase pulled himself back onto the boat and lay on the rear platform, feeling the sun slowly begin to warm his body. He rolled onto his back, watching gulls wheeling through the air. If he lay here long enough, he'd be able to track the progress of the sun through the sky.

Jase closed his eyes and breathed deeply, the melody of a long ago composition running through his mind. The melody wandered, becoming something completely new and different. Harmony introduced itself, and for the first time in years, Jase was compelled to stand up, to search out paper and a pen and write out his inspiration.

He sat in the captain's chair for an hour or more, looking out over the ocean, adding notes to the mix, making the occasional adjustment to the manuscript. When he finished, he sat back, looking at the sheet of paper. It was so unfamiliar now, like trying

to decipher a foreign language. He'd written only a few bars with shaky handwriting, but the writing soothed his brain, gave expression to the confusion that reigned in his heart.

A composition like this would take weeks... months, and for once, Jase didn't have that much time on his hands. His calendar had diminished to weeks and days. He'd been blessed that Dove had entered his life, granting him a bit of the peace that he'd craved so desperately.

Dove and Arav. He could practically hear that question Marilyn had asked him all those months ago, atop the roof of the hospital. *If you could ask Nature for anything, what would it be?*

Peace.

Dove. The symbol of peace.

He suddenly rose, heading below deck to check his computer. Jase sat down and entered his search term. *Define Indian name Arav.*

Jase nearly laughed when the answer came up on the screen, blinking at him with all the innocence a computer could muster.

The Indian name Arav is Sanskrit for peaceful.

Somewhere, someone was having a cosmic laugh at Jason Anders' expense.

* * *

Arav stared at his screen, idly smoothing his goatee. He jumped at every message that dropped into his inbox. He'd already turned down Margaret's party invitation for the night. After a half-hour of consideration, he changed his mind and accepted. This party was bound to be different. It was taking place at Margaret's own home.

Arav looked down at the short-list of female suspects he'd compiled. Reluctantly, he'd put Lady Margaret at the head of the list, followed by Flora and Debra, aka Lady Selene. If he could identify even one assailant, they'd have a lock on the entire gang.

Based on his experience with Debra, she was mean and petty, but he didn't think she was smart enough, or bloodthirsty enough, to participate in a kill gang. Flora, on

the other hand, had some major fetishes for pain. She'd been laying low since she and Jase had split, but that didn't mean too much.

Margaret? Well, in truth, she'd come to be his main suspect. If she wasn't involved in the Wilder gangs, someone was making it look as though she was. Virtually every attack had occurred within walking distance of one of her events. Arav didn't believe that this was coincidence.

He checked the clock. It was late, and still no lab results. Arav sighed and rose, shutting down his equipment for the day. He'd transfer his mail to his personal accounts. That way, if any new information came through, he'd have it immediately.

Outside, the sun was sinking over the ocean. As he walked down the Strand toward his house, Arav could see the empty slip where the *Gaia* normally rested. His heart ached a little, knowing that Jase was no doubt struggling with his future.

Dove had called her boss to remove herself from Jason's case, only to find that he'd already requested a new mentor. She'd cried a bit, and he hadn't been certain what to say to make her feel better. He suspected that Jason had no plans to return to his lovers. Not yet, anyway.

As the sun dipped into the ocean, Arav walked up the path to his house, not seeing the spring flowers, or the frog that hopped from the path into the bushes.

He also didn't see the shadows that surrounded him until it was too late. There was a sudden, flashing pain to his head, and everything went black.

Chapter Eleven

"You came back."

Dove blinked tears from her eyes, standing back from the door to let Jase in. He was windblown and carried the smell of the ocean. His hair was still slightly damp from swimming.

He walked straight into her arms.

Loving Dove Sinclair was so very easy. The thought hit him like a thunderbolt, prompting him to hold her tighter. He wanted to care for her, protect her. He wanted to see laughter chase the sad shadows from her eyes.

He'd loved her from the first moment he'd turned on the lights and looked into her eyes.

This wasn't the giddy infatuation of the Imperative, but rather a deeply rooted connection, the slow awakening of his heart. He had to tell her, but first... "Where's Jain?"

She stayed cuddled against him, her face buried against his chest. Jase had the suspicion that she was crying.

"He's working. He went to one of those parties."

"Shit."

During his long day, Jase had faced some hard realities. He'd also opened his sensitive ears to the memories of that night. The words that had been snarled in his ear; the tones and inflections, notes and pitches. His other lover might be walking into the lion's den.

"Is there something wrong? Do you know something?"

Jase shook his head, pulling her tight against his body. "No, I just... it's different now, you know?"

She pulled away, looking up at his face.

"I guess I'm jealous. I don't like him being there with someone else." He wondered if she could read the lie on his face. He'd listened to his memories, and had put faces to some of those hated voices. Masked faces that he knew so well.

"Would you feel better if you went? I'd feel better if you were there watching his back."

Relief swept over him as she provided him with the excuse he needed. Fear then flooded his body, and for once, Jase wished he could also don a mask among all those familiar strangers. He was afraid they'd see the knowledge on his face, the recognition of evil. "Yeah, I'd feel a lot better. I haven't been going lately, so maybe they'll leave me alone, especially if I'm with Arav."

Still, he didn't let her go. Jase felt like she was a fixture here in his arms, a lifeline. He buried his face in her hair, knowing he should tell her, but unable to speak. She opened her mouth to say something, but he silenced her with his kiss.

And oh, how he needed her! He needed her body naked against his, the feel of her yielding flesh under his hands. Right there in the entry of her house, Jase stripped the clothing from her body, raining kisses on her face, her throat, and her sweet breasts.

He dropped to his knees before her, his tongue trailing over her belly, his fingers parting the fiery red curls that guarded her pussy. He stroked, felt the first moisture of her arousal seep from her passage. Jase bent his face to her, hands on her buttocks, pulling her close.

He loved her with everything he had, mouth and teeth, hands and body. Her breath sobbed from her chest and Jase only renewed his efforts, his tongue seeking her clit, dipping into the honey-sweet entrance of her passage.

He dipped fingers into her juices and lubed her ass, pressing gently with a single finger, pumping as he thrust and licked and sucked Dove into a single, devastating climax.

He knelt before her, the moisture of his own semen darkening the front of his pants. He'd come without a single touch. Jase rubbed his face against her belly, listening

to the sound of her breath, feeling her hands clutching his hair. Even at her most passionate, she hadn't hurt him. Without a word, he stood, supporting her weight, carrying her into the darkened bedroom.

He could still smell the fragrance of their bodies and their lovemaking. Arav's scent of sandalwood tickled his nose, reminding Jase of the party, of the danger that Arav just might be facing. Alone.

"You are so very beautiful, Dr. Dove."

"And you are very talented, Mr. Anders." In the darkness, he could see the flash of her dimples.

"I need to shower before I go. You were so completely, ravishingly hot when you came in my arms, I came with you."

"Really?" She sat up a bit, grinning as she reached down and fondled the damp spot on his pants. His cock gave a half-hearted throb. Just a little longer...

"When we come back tonight, I want you ready, Dove. We'll be in bad shape, wanting you like we do." He ran his palm over her belly, up to her rounded breasts. "You know what Jain fantasizes about? He wants me to fuck you, to come inside your body. And then he wants his turn. He wants to feel your juices mixed with my come. He wants to taste us before he slides into your wet... sweet... pussy..."

His whisper tickled her ear, and to her surprise, Dove felt renewed arousal. Her moisture slipped down her thigh.

"I could make you come again, but we'll wait this time."

"All three of us?"

He settled a gentle kiss on her lips. "All three of us. I promise."

She looked up at him for a long moment, taking in every plane and angle of his face. In the darkness, she could very nearly see the color of his eyes. "I didn't want to love you, Jason. I've fought my feelings, but it happened. I still don't want to love you."

"I know. I understand. It can't be easy, loving someone who plans to die."

"You still plan to do it?"

"Yes. No. I don't know from minute to minute, Dove. But I want to talk about it later, when we're all together. I did a lot of thinking today."

"If you go forward with it, there's no going back, Jason. If you decide not to do it, that's a decision that can be changed."

No, there would be no going back. Death was pretty damn permanent.

"What about Arav? You say you love me, and I know he loves you."

"I don't want to love him, Dove. The idea of sex with him... it frightens me."

"You had sex with Arav. You know he won't pressure you to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

"Yeah. I know."

How did he tell her? How did he tell her that something in Arav Jain's burning eyes frightened him to the core? Something in his mannerisms, his speech...

Jase had recaptured many memories today, and the memory that came with Arav Jain was one he couldn't face. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"I need to go."

She pulled him down for one more kiss. This one was hard and urgent. "Be careful. I don't know why..." She broke off, moving away from Jase, crossing to the window.

"Why what?"

"I'm just nervous."

He was too, but that was another bit of knowledge he wouldn't share. He was beyond nervous. He was frightened. Familiar voices murmured in his ear, taunting him. He'd get Jain, they'd get the hell out of there and talk. They'd talk about who attacked him. Maybe they'd talk about what they'd done to Jason Anders' body and mind.

"It won't be long. I promise."

* * *

Watching Jase walk out the door was one of those rare moments that took her breath away.

He faded into the mist of the evening like a phantom. The moisture in the coastal air dampened his hair, causing it to lay in long waves down his shoulders. He looked different, moved like another man than the one she knew. His urgency had taken down her defenses and had planted a kernel of fear in her heart.

Dove closed and locked the door, then turned to survey the house.

Arav had been distressed and distracted as well. When they'd spoken during the day, he told her he was waiting for evidence to process. Since he hadn't called back, she assumed that the information hadn't come to him yet.

He hadn't called, nor had he come by for a quick visit. She'd tried to contact him, but he hadn't answered her call. Cops and doctors made the worst lovers.

She sighed. A free day was rare in her world, and Dove didn't quite know what to do with herself. She could watch a film, or listen to music.

Dove headed to the entertainment unit that was hidden behind a wall when she passed the computer deck. It was powered up, and she decided to check for messages from the hospital.

She grabbed the unit and flopped down in her overstuffed chair. She could catch a slight fragrance, Arav's sandalwood mingling with Jason's ocean fragrance. Dove snuggled deeper into the chair and closed her eyes, imagining what they'd done together. Two beautiful men, bodies straining, groans of passion...

The twist of arousal was powerful. She gasped as her belly clenched, and she cupped her mons, hoping to relieve the erotic pressure. Once she was back under control, Dove powered up the unit, listening to the slight hum as it booted up her mail.

When the screen projected in front of her, she frowned. Arav must have used it last, and he hadn't logged out. A queue of messages from work had piled up. One unread message flashed with a red flag. Obviously, it was urgent.

Automatically, Dove searched for the logout on his mail, but her eyes were pulled back to the message with the flashing strobe. Urgent.

She sighed, reached over to the communication controls on the table next to her.

"Call Arav Jain."

There was a brief pause. "Arav Jain is not responding."

Her chest went tight. Arav wore a stealth unit when he worked; he was always available. She frowned at the message.

Lab results: 09587. Priority.

Dove took a deep cleansing breath, and then she opened the message.

Chapter Twelve

Jase almost bitch-slapped the first person that grabbed his ass that night.

The hair on his neck stood on end. The skin on his arms pebbled. Flight or fight. Every instinct told him to flee.

But not without Arav.

Eyes looked at him from behind masks. A drink was thrust into his hand. He pretended to sip, to smile, to have a good time. He shouldered his way through the throngs of people, looking for Arav, for Lady Margaret. Even Selene might be able to help him locate Arav.

The music throbbed in a heavy beat, and oddly, the tone of this party seemed darker than usual. The glittering laughter that usually carried over the music was absent.

Margaret's house was large and spacious, but still, it was crowded wall to wall with people dancing, talking, fucking and fighting. He caught a glimpse of Flora's dark head. She stood as tall as most men. He caught her eye. She glanced away dismissively.

The place had a second story, but Jase decided to check the kitchen instead. Somehow, the idea of Jain upstairs, tangling with others in an erotic tableau, bothered him to no end. He wasn't jealous... just annoyed.

Jase shook his head and called himself a liar.

In the kitchen, he found an opaque glass and filled it with water. He wanted his head clear. Hypnotic smoke wafted from ornamental smudge pots, making his nostrils sting and his eyes burn.

Lady M was going all out at her house party. That stuff was expensive as hell, spreading lust and disintegrating inhibitions.

"Slut."

Great. Just what he needed.

"Hello, Lady Selene." Actually, she was exactly what he needed, though her voice grated his ears like steel on glass. She might know where Jain had gotten off to. A man appeared at her shoulder, a behemoth in spandex, his pudgy waist rolling over his belt. Jase swallowed his nausea.

"I want you with us. Now."

"No. I have other plans tonight."

"Now!"

He sighed. "Look, I'm not the party favor tonight. I'm here looking for someone, and then I'm leaving."

The look she gave him was lethal.

"I'm off the circuit now, Selene. No more parties. I'm in a relationship."

The two didn't relax much. In fact, the tension rose even further. Her red-painted lips were tight. Anger sparked her vivid blue eyes. She wasn't quite so pretty now.

"By the way, whatever happened to John?" He glanced pointedly at the monster at her side. He knew the guy; he worked as a bouncer at a downtown bar. Mean son-of-a-bitch.

"John's here." A calculating gleam entered her eyes. "He's downstairs in Margaret's private dungeon. But you can't get in unless you come with me." She held out her hand. A luminous code-stamp appeared briefly, and then vanished.

Did he believe her? Did he have a choice? With a cautious look at her companion, Jase nodded, and then followed her from the room, down a back hallway. He knew that this was very likely the stupidest decision he'd ever made.

Selene waved her hand over a cunning little sensor, and a section of wall slid away in near silence. She nodded. Jase started down the stairs, followed by Selene. The bouncer's feet thudded heavily on the metal steps, the sound echoing in the darkness. Jase swallowed his mounting fear. In this space, he couldn't escape... couldn't even fight.

Another door barred his way. Again, Selene waved her hand and with an audible click, the door unlocked. She pushed him aside and stepped in front of him, leaving Jase alone with his guard. A moment later, she opened the door, pulling Jase by the arm.

Music throbbed through the smoke-filled room. The melody that beat in his ears nearly pulled a scream from Jason's innermost soul. It was one of his, a song he'd composed shortly before Miriam's death. The joyful anthem had been set to a dark, throbbing track, rendering it almost obscene. He took a moment and steadied himself, surveying the room.

Typical upper-class dungeon, climate controlled, all the luxuries that anyone could wish. An entertainment center projected images from fetish films. A top-notch sound system surrounded the room with music. His music. There were tables and frames, all manner of whips and electronic devices displayed on the walls. It was all mostly for show. He imagined Margaret usually held small, intimate soirees down here, entertaining her most elite clientele.

She'd been house-invaded.

Margaret herself was shackled to a wall, a gag in her mouth, her eyes wide and frightened. Across the room, Arav was suspended from a rack, his head lolling to one side. Dried blood streaked his forehead. He was naked, and Jase swallowed down his horror. Arav looked uninjured, but he couldn't really tell.

"I didn't know John was into bondage."

He decided to play the stupid card. Selene laughed, a trilling sound that shattered his nerves. He glanced around the room, looking for an exit. There was undoubtedly another way out. This whole thing was bad, very bad. The crowd mingled, and then formed in small groups around Margaret. She went stiff as hands touched her body, rudely invaded her genitals. They worked as a unit, almost hive-like in their unspoken communication.

Of course, they'd had plenty of opportunity to practice. This group of Wilders had been practicing together for over a year now. He knew every masked face,

recognized every muffled voice. There were about ten of them, and they behaved as though Jase weren't even there.

Vertigo rushed through his head, partly the smoke, but mostly the situation, the memories, hearing his own creativity flowing from the hidden speakers. It was a quartet he'd written, though this arrangement sounded dark and distorted. He started across the room, heading toward Arav. Before he came close enough to touch, hands gripped his arms.

"He's not for you, slut." It was Selene's new friend. As though disturbed by the noise, Arav's eyes opened heavily, and he looked around the room in confusion.

"Jase?"

His voice was harsh and cracked. He blinked, clearing his eyes. And at that moment, Jase saw those eyes with perfect clarity. And he knew exactly where he'd seen Arav Jain's beautiful dark eyes before.

Dizziness and nausea threatened to take him to the floor. "Don't hurt him." He turned to Selene. Oddly enough, she seemed to be the voice of the group. She'd been the first to speak when they'd attacked him all those months ago. A voice he'd conveniently suppressed.

"What'll you do in return?"

"Anything. Anything. Just don't hurt him." If they'd stripped Arav, surely they knew he was with the police. They'd know he was undercover, looking for them.

"Jase, don't!"

He didn't look at Arav, instead turning back to Selene. She stood, arms folded across her chest. She gave Arav a cold smile. "How do you think your little Dr. Dove is going to feel when you show up on her exam table, Detective? The first time I watched you fucking her, I recognized you, John."

Woman scorned. Jase wondered if that's why she'd attacked him as well. As though sensing his question, she turned back in his direction. "You were just for fun, Jase. Practice. Nothing personal."

The group had left Margaret and was gathering around Jase now, undoubtedly scenting blood. Hands fell on his body, and Jase was propelled to a table, forced to lean over it. In spite of his need to save Arav, he fought against the bonds. Behind him, he could hear Arav pulling frantically against his shackles. He heard the sound of skin on skin, wood creaking, Arav's grunt as a blow landed. Jase craned his head in time to see four men carry Arav's struggling form to the other end of the table. Even injured, he was a formidable opponent.

"You can keep each other company."

Arav was forced face down, his hands and feet secured as Jase's were. They ended up face to face, mere inches from each other.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Jase."

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Nausea welled in his stomach. The vertigo returned. *Think of this as a crossing in time.* Miriam, with her flashing brown eyes. Everything else was different, but those eyes were the same. He couldn't look away.

"Jase..." Arav swallowed hard. His head dropped to the wood of the table. "God, I'm dizzy."

"Imperative," Jase murmured.

"What?"

"I... It's the fucking Imperative, Jain!" Fucking stupid Nature really got her wires crossed this time! Jase forced himself closer to Arav. Every inch relieved the sensation just a bit. "Move closer, Arav."

The other man found enough play in his bindings that he was able to move so the skin of their cheeks brushed. Jase sighed, and the nausea receded just a bit.

A piercing scream cut through the room.

"God, they're going after Margaret!"

Jase forced himself to look. Through the mass of people, he saw Selene with her bright hair and mean blue eyes. "It's Debra. Dove's roommate."

"I know." Jain dropped his head in frustration. "I saw her today at the house. I managed to find a strand of her hair to match for DNA, but since it hadn't processed, I couldn't get an arrest warrant."

"So you came anyway?"

Arav sighed. "No, they got me first. Initially, it was payback to Dove. I guess Debra wasn't happy to get kicked out, and she's been watching the house. I was in street clothes and they found my shield."

Jase brushed a kiss against his cheek. Arav shifted until their lips joined. "You taste like Dove."

"I told her we'd come home for her tonight. Together."

"That's why the Imperative came, then?"

"Yeah. I guess I managed to... deal." He wanted his arms free. He wanted to hold Arav tight, to save him this time, to never let him go.

"Do you think Dove's feeling it too?"

"Of course she is. We all bonded so quickly..."

What if it hadn't? He looked up, met Arav's dark gaze. What if they both died, leaving Dove alone and crippled as he'd been this past decade? He almost prayed the Imperative had passed her by.

Jase arched his body, fighting against the bindings that held him down.

* * *

"So, what's the deal? You're holding a little party, and nobody thought to invite me?" A silky voice cut through the room.

In horror, Jase looked up. Flora stood framed in the doorway, magnificent in leather and silk. Unlike the other women, she wore snug leather trousers. Her red silk shirt hung open in front, displaying a black leather bra. She looked dark and ominous in the dimly lit dungeon. A blacksnake whip was coiled at her hip.

"Oh, fuck," Arav whispered.

The music cut off, leaving the room in silence.

Around her neck, a shield dangled on a long cord.

The room was suddenly filled with light, and to Jason's horror, Dove emerged from behind the other woman. She started toward the table, but was halted by Flora's powerful arm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is a raid. Please move to face that wall. *Now!*"

She casually loosened the whip at her belt, and automatically, Jase cringed. That whip had tasted his skin more than once. Beside him, Arav cursed softly. Anger fairly radiated from his body.

Selene's brute started toward Flora, and without hesitation, her whip cracked, opening a stripe on his cheek. He roared and rushed her, and ended up on the floor with his elbow broken. While Selene was distracted, Dove reached their sides, fumbling at the buckles of the straps that held the men. Gratefully, they rubbed sore wrists, and absently linked hands as Dove hugged one, and then the other. They exchanged worried looks. She seemed... normal. Clearly frightened, but Dove showed no signs of dizziness or nausea.

There was a rumble of noise, and police began streaming down the stairs. One by one the Wilders were cuffed and taken away, while Jase and Arav sat naked, giving their statements to Regional Agent Florence Mendoza. Arav's dark eyes held checked fury. "I didn't know the Region had someone undercover on this case."

She sighed, and Jase noticed that she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Detective Jain, I wasn't after the Wilders. My assignment was blown tonight. I was investigating Lady Margaret. She's part of a Region-wide con racket. They set up these parties and then blackmail the participants. No doubt she tried to squeeze someone who happened to be more dangerous than she is. The attack on Jason was probably a warning." Her dark eyes remained downcast, and she refused to look Jase in the eye. Well, that explained Margaret's frequent visits to Jason in the hospital. Good old-fashioned guilt.

Slowly, the room was emptying. Technicians were entering with their cases and equipment. "Detective, you'd probably better go to the hospital." Arav shook his head, putting an arm around Dove. "My girlfriend's a doctor, I'll be fine." He glanced over at

Jase. Clearly, Dove hadn't had the same experience they'd had. How were they going to tell her?

Jase had pulled on his discarded clothing. Someone had given Jain a pair of sweats. Both men were barefoot. Jase looked around the room. The space had looked so ominous in the darkness, now it simply looked tawdry. Odd how things changed when you cast a bit of light on the situation. He stepped to Arav's other side. The need to touch was undeniable.

The Imperative... Twice in a lifetime. He was too numb to wonder at what could only be a miracle.

"Jase, can I talk to you for a moment?" Flora still stood at an angle to him, avoiding eye contact. He nodded at Jain and Dove.

"We'll wait upstairs." He watched as they left the room.

"How did she know to find you?" Flora turned and finally looked Jase fully in the eye. For the first time, he saw a torment there, a pain that nearly matched his own. She crossed to the entertainment system and selected a song. His eyes dropped to the floor as the melody filled the empty room.

"You wrote this."

"Before my wife died, I was a musician."

She nodded. "You weren't Jase Anders then, were you? You went by another name."

"Not so different. My given name is Jason Emerson Anders. I went by my initials. J.E. Anders. Family tradition."

"Jason, I'm sorry."

Her voice was raw, but there were no tears for Flora. "I was warned about going undercover. I've always been strong, dominant. This world..." She looked around the room, and her eyes were edged with horror. "Jase, I allowed this job to corrupt me. I hurt you."

"If I recall, that's what I wanted."

"I enjoyed it, Jase. I craved it... I crave it." She swallowed hard. "After I saw that scar, I went for help, because people shouldn't *like* hurting other people." She pressed a fist to her forehead. "I told my boss, begged to get off this assignment. And you know what?" She looked up at him then. "They want me to take over Margaret's circuit. I'm in so deep they don't want me to come out."

He pulled her into a hug, holding her tight. She stood rigid in his embrace. "Walk away, Flora. No job is worth your soul."

Flora allowed him to hold her for a moment longer, finally pulling away, gathering her dignity. "Your girlfriend, she's tough. She came here looking for both of you. She was scared witless, but wasn't going to leave until you two were safe."

"How'd she find you?"

"I found her. She looked like an innocent. I was trying to get her out. Things felt really bad tonight. She told me enough that I decided we'd better act fast. You two were lucky."

"How's Margaret?"

"She's lucky too. A bit bruised and scared as hell. But she'll be all right."

"Good." He glanced toward the stairs where Arav and Dove had vanished, his body, his very soul craving contact. With Arav. With Dove as well, but the Imperative swirled through every fiber of his body. That glimpse he'd caught of Miriam's soul looking at him through Arav's eyes had fed his newly awakened heart. He loved them both, needed them both.

"You'd better go after them. Take them home, and don't ever let anyone hurt you again, Jase."

She was standing in the shadows, her face once again hidden from his sight. Somehow, Jase knew that Flora needed saving nearly as much as he'd ever needed it.

He turned his back and walked away.

* * *

They honeymooned on the *Gaia*.

The wedding had been discreet. Their families had attended. A string quartet had played the song that Jase had written on that fateful day he'd made his decision to live. Neil had stood as his best man, and a friend of Arav's from the force had stood for him. Marina Davis had been maid of honor. The ceremony had been bittersweet. Arav and Jase had registered as Imperative Mates, with Dove as their wife. Dove had been exquisite in an antique, dove gray gown, her red hair spilling from a quaint updo. She'd succumbed to pressure and had her eyes operated on, which had done very little to improve her balance.

If anything, it was worse, and in truth, Arav and Jase would have her no other way.

Tonight, the yacht was at anchor. The waves gently rocked the boat. Their lovemaking rocked it even more. They'd all discovered that with the Imperative between Jase and Arav, some things had changed, while others remained the same.

Jase was still a restless soul, and Dove had no doubt that he always would be. Some nights, she woke in Arav's arms, Jase missing from the bed. She'd find him on deck with his guitar and paper, sometimes at the computer, transcribing music. It was as though a dam had broken, releasing his long crushed creativity. Some of the music was so heartbreakingly sad she didn't think it would ever go public, but more and more, joy was breaking through.

The men rarely discussed the Imperative, and why Dove had not experienced it. But they loved her and both refused to move into their future without Dove at their side. She'd been afraid that she'd be on the outside, but that hadn't proven to be the case.

When they made love, they focused all their needs and passions on Dove. The men embraced, touched and caressed one another, but she was uneasily aware that her presence allowed them to avoid the issue of sex with one another. Yet they didn't seem to be suffering. They were in constant contact. There was no order to who slept where. Some nights Arav was in the middle, other nights it was Jase or Dove.

They seemed content, but increasingly, Dove had the sensation of tension... waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She lay quietly, her body sated, sore and very happy. The men had dropped into a heavy sleep. Restless, she slid from her side of the bed and slipped on a robe, feeling the need for some space. She found her favorite spot on the deck of the boat. From here, she could watch the sky and the ocean. The lights of Harbor glimmered in the distance. She sighed, the melody of one of Jason's songs running through her head.

"He's a very talented musician."

Odd, that she wasn't the least bit surprised to see Dr. Patel standing in front of her, gleaming in the same golden and red sari that she'd worn to the wedding. Obviously, she'd fallen asleep.

"He is. I had no idea."

"He kept it well hidden. It was part of his self-punishment."

"It wasn't fair, you know, taking his mate, and then all those years of suffering with the Imperative."

"Life isn't fair, Dove. And even the deities do not have all the answers. Allowing the two to cross paths again was the best I could do. They had to work out their issues together." Jason and Arav? Again? She blinked, and the Goddess Sakti smiled coyly.

"He asked for peace. I planned to send only Arav, but they both seemed pulled to you. Perhaps from another lifetime. And does the Dove not symbolize peace? It seemed logical."

Dove pressed her eyes tightly together. Surely, this wasn't happening? She opened her eyes, and her boss was still there... glowing.

"You have questions, and they will be answered. But in truth, you already know the answers. You simply haven't accepted. Now go downstairs, and go back to bed before they miss you." She looked up at the sky, floating a tiny bit as she did so. "I've missed his music. He will share his gift for many years to come, and his children will as well." Dove's chest went tight. Children? Sakti laughed. The sound was music over the gentle waves of the ocean. "One more thing, Dove... if you ask Dr. Patel about this

meeting, she won't remember. She knowingly loans me her body, but has very little memory afterwards."

Dove jerked awake, completely alone now. Dream? Hallucination? The wind grew chilly. She wrapped the robe tightly around her body and rose shakily to her feet. She very nearly slipped on the stairs as the boat pitched, and she braced herself in the doorway of their cabin.

The sound of a soft moan carried to her ears, and Dove paused, watching in amazement. Suddenly, the fear that had teased her made itself plain. Was she simply a body for the men to use as proxy for one another? She knew that Jase shied away from being penetrated. He was physically healed. There was no reason he couldn't participate that way if he wished. She also knew that the rape had damaged his psyche, causing him to shy away from even the gentlest touch back there.

She suspected that Jase had unburdened himself to Arav, and that was good, that was as it should be. But still, Dove had wondered if she was only a substitute lover.

But there on the bed, the men were entwined, Jase on top, face to face with Arav. They kissed gently, their hips surging together, soft gasps breaking over the sound of the waves on the side of the boat. Arav had his knees up, his legs spread. Clearly, Jase was working his way into the other man's body.

"Bear down," Jase whispered hoarsely, the very same words he'd whispered to her before.

"It... burns..."

"Do you need me to stop?"

Arav's laugh was soft, rueful. "No... It's a good kind of hurt..." He broke off on a deep groan as Jase pulled back slowly. Dove felt herself grow wet and aroused. She was witnessing their first consummation, and in the darkness, Arav's eyes gleamed. He knew she was there. It seemed he liked being watched almost as much as he liked watching.

Her mouth grew dry. Her head spun. The men's movements grew more confident, more focused, the occasional groan punctuated by the soft slap of skin to

skin. She could see Jase was drawing close to his climax. Arav had clasped him tightly around the waist. Rough kisses were given, words of love carried on the air. She wanted to join them, to crawl on the bed, to touch, to watch. But she knew this was their moment. They needed this.

Jase buried his head in the crook of Arav's neck, thrusting hard now, his back arched, hips undulating. He sobbed as his climax washed over him. He was beautiful in his bliss, golden hair cascading over Arav's dark figure. He dug his hips, burying himself deep, wrenching the last shuddering spasms from his body.

He lay still for a long moment.

"You didn't come."

"Not yet." Arav's smile flashed in the darkness. "Will you let me..."

Jase pulled from Arav's body slowly. He slipped off a condom as he rolled to his side, giving Arav his back, and meeting Dove's eyes. His smile was uncertain, and automatically she moved to the bed, lying face to face with him. His hand dropped between her legs, stroking through her slit.

"She's wet, Arav. She's been spying, and now she's so fucking wet." His fingers wandered, pumping in and out, and then moving up to circle her clit. He brought his hand up to his mouth, sucking the juice from his fingers. When he kissed her, she tasted herself. She tasted Arav.

He stared into her eyes, and flinched slightly as Arav began to touch, to invade his body.

"Don't do this if it bothers you, Jase."

He placed long fingers over her lips. "I want it. It's time."

Down against her belly, his cock was growing heavy again. He pressed against her. He brought a knee up, resting it on her hip, opening himself to Arav.

She knew when Arav began to penetrate him. Jase hissed a bit, his eyes going unfocused. She stroked his face, glancing past him to watch Arav.

Arav looked at her in question, and she nodded. "Keep going." Jase pulled her close, nuzzling her skin, his hand again wandering to her wet pussy. He thrust his

fingers into her, hooking, pressing up into her G-spot. She groaned, feeling even more fluids seep from her body.

Behind him, Arav was beginning a gentle rhythm, thrusting and retreating, slowly, as gently as he could move. "Are you all right, Jase?"

He nodded, gasping. "Oh God... It's good... good..." He still wasn't erect enough to penetrate her, so Jase continued with his hand, and inevitably, their tempo increased. Arav pushed into him as Jase brought Dove closer and closer to the brink.

She felt his cock suddenly harden against his belly, but their position was too cramped, and besides, she was impaled on those long, clever fingers.

Arav was panting. His movement pushed Jase into Dove, and then she broke, clamping down hard on his fingers, plunging one hand into his silky hair, the other grasping Arav's arm. She bucked and thrust, and without warning, Dove found herself on her back, Jase thrusting between her legs while Arav loomed above his body. They moved like a well-oiled machine, in and out, Jase into her body, then back onto Arav's cock.

Before she came down fully from her climax, she was rising again, grinding herself against Jase, whimpering and cursing, and Jase responded, thrusting faster, slamming hard against Arav, until the dark man clasped his hips and groaned, his hips curling, forcing Jase deeper into Dove than she could have ever believed possible.

Her head roared, or was that one of the men? She bucked and cried out, relishing the weight of Jason in her, on her as he flexed, clearly in the throes of another orgasm. Together, they crested. Together, they came down, sweaty and amazed and grateful.

With a groan, Arav fell to her side. Jase simply remained there, his face pillowed against her breast. Dove reached out and looked at Arav, ran her fingers through the thick waves of his hair.

Imperative or no, she belonged to them, and they belonged to her.

* * *

"Were you really okay with that?" The bathroom door had closed and latched. In seconds, the water pump started, covering their conversation.

"God, yes. I wanted... needed to cross this bridge." Jase stroked his fingers down the fine skin of Arav's arm. He flicked the golden ring that threaded through his nipple, leaning forward to circle it with his tongue. "She needed it."

"She hasn't said anything, but I can tell something's wrong."

"I think she feels like a vessel."

"For us?"

Jase nodded. He'd watched her after sex, after they'd expended their bodies in hers. "She knows I was afraid to try with a man and that you wouldn't push it. I think she feels like a substitute."

"My God. Do you think this helped?"

"Well, it helped me!" Jase grinned. "I've never topped before. That was kinda nice."

Arav ran his tongue up Jason's chin, enjoying the rasp of his whiskers. "You were okay with me?" He'd been so afraid, but he no longer saw those shadows that had lived for so long in Jason's eyes.

"That was sublime, you inside of me, while I was inside her. It was perfect, Arav." They kissed, long and slow, breaking apart only when there was a sudden silence. The water had stopped. And the silence was broken by a thump, then a shriek.

"Dove!"

Both men darted from the bed, rushing to the tiny bathroom. Jase pulled the door open to find Dove sprawled on the floor. Her towel had slipped, exposing rosy breasts. Together, they lifted her up, ignoring her as she slapped at their hands.

"I'm okay, just a little dizzy. I'm sure it's just the motion of the boat."

As soon as they let her go, she swayed, toppling to the side. Arav caught her, and carried her to the bed.

"All right, that's better." They moved back, and immediately, Dove closed her eyes and groaned. Tentatively, Jase reached out and grasped her arm. She gave a sigh of relief. She opened huge gray eyes, looking from one to the other. When Jase let go, she blanched, and Arav stroked her cheek, calming her once more.

“Guys, I’m thinking maybe I’m seasick or something...”

“Or something!” Jase felt hysterical laughter bubbling up. Arav reached out and hugged him. He then hugged Dove, holding her tightly against his body.

“Funny I should feel better when we...” She sat bolt upright, looking from one grinning face to the other. “Oh my goodness!”

Belinda McBride

Belinda lives in the wilderness of the Siskiyou Mountains and at night, she runs naked with a pack of wolves...

Uhh...

Belinda lives *near* the Siskiyou Mountains and shares her home with a pack of Siberian Huskies who like to pretend they're wolves. And she usually keeps her clothing on when she goes outside.

Belinda loves to travel, collect rare gemstones, make soap and spend precious time with her daughters. Her degree is in History with a Cultural Anthropology minor. On weekends, you will often find Belinda ringside at a dog show, comb and spray bottle in hand.

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