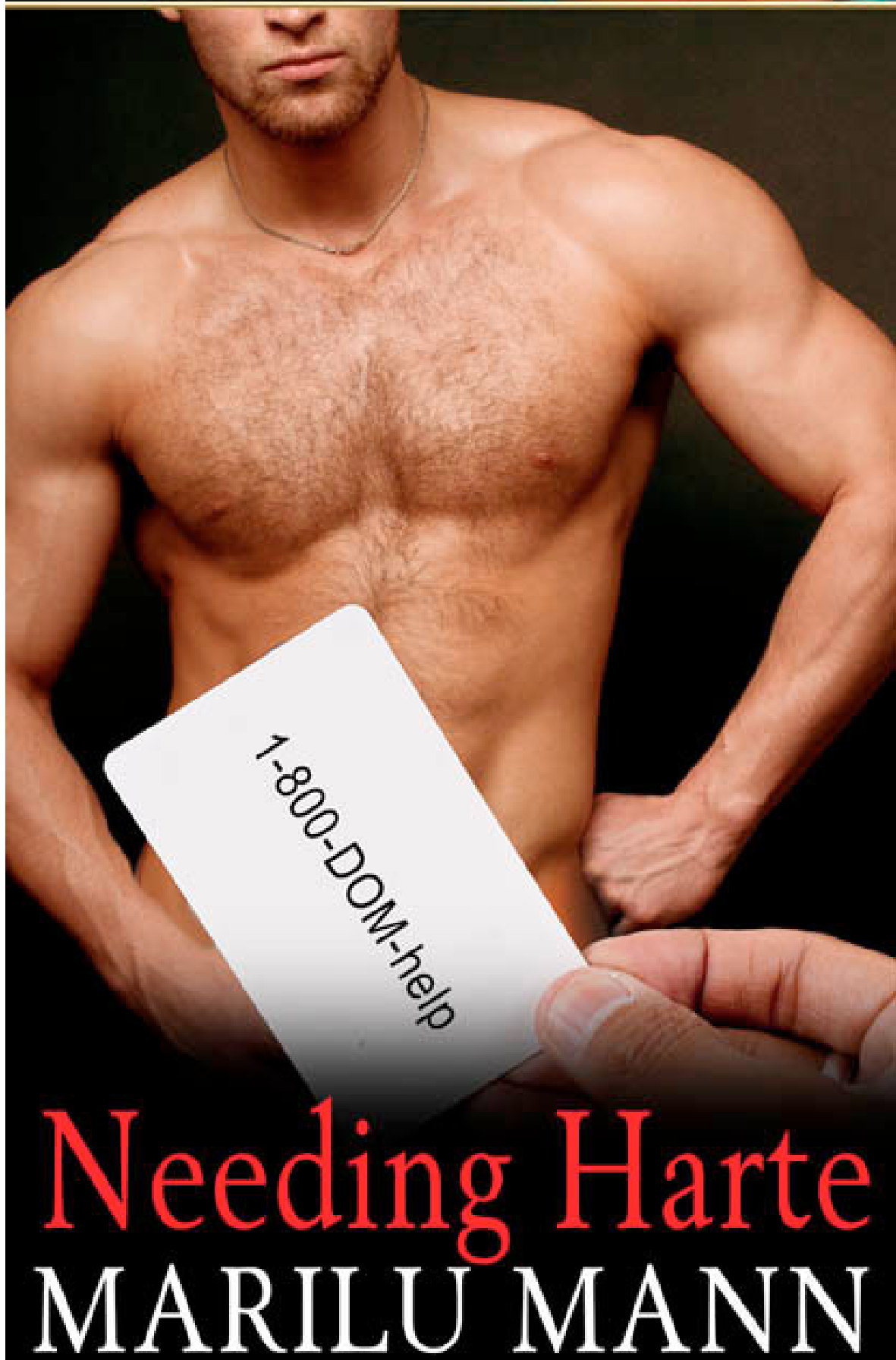


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Needing Harte
MARILU MANN

Needing Harte

Needing Harte

Marilu Mann

Part of the 1-800-DOM-help series.

Harte Donovan has a problem. A murder leads to him wanting a sexy stripper bound and naked in front of him. He can't let his secret desires ruin his career as a detective. But when he's given a mysterious business card, Harte discovers a side of himself he intends to fully embrace.

Ramey Nichols strips for a living and he's not willing to pretend to be something he's not. When this sexy submissive meets the closeted cop and unwitting Dom, something has got to give. That something might just be Ramey. Ramey knows what he wants, and more than that, finds himself Needing Harte.

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Needing Harte

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Needing Harte

Marilu Mann

Dedication

Needing Harte is dedicated to all the authors taking part in the 1-800-DOM-help series...it's still awe-inspiring to me to be involved with such a group of creative minds as those residing among the Ellora's Cave family of authors. And to my fabulous editor, Briana St. James—I can't tell you how happy it makes me to see your positive comments among the edits you request. You totally rock!!

Author's Note

As with any lifestyle choice, one should be very careful when choosing the paths one will follow. Harte Donovan makes his choice after doing some research, exploration and taking his own needs and desires, along with Ramey Nichols' needs and desires, into consideration. Please make sure you do the same.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Fruit Loops: Kellogg, North America Company

Hugo Boss: Hugo Boss A.G.

Chapter One

Harte Donovan grimaced as he sipped his coffee. Why did station house coffee have to live down to the “worse than swill” standard? He’d have brought his own French press in, but didn’t need the scrutiny. Taking another gulp, he decided he would just have to let this serve its purpose. He set the cup down precisely in the center of the coaster on his desk before picking up another file from the stack on his desk and opening it. Another necessary evil in his neat orderly world—paperwork.

“Donovan, McKinley!” The captain’s voice rang out over the steady hum of conversation and ringing phones. “Stabler and Phipps need your help with interviews. Call Phipps on his cell to find out where they need you.”

Harte and his partner, Jeff, were on their feet headed for the door before their boss finished speaking. Anything to get out of doing paperwork—even if it was playing second fiddle to another team of detectives. The other team was working a homicide investigation, which added up to a lot of leg work. It was his turn to drive, so McKinley pulled out his phone and called the other investigators.

Listening to the conversation on McKinley’s speakerphone, Harte pulled into the evening traffic to head toward the warehouse district. They were to interview the ex-roommate of the victim. Their objective was to find out where he’d been last night, how much of a connection he still had to their victim, and if he might be a suspect or know anyone who might have wanted to kill the vic.

Luck was with them. Harte found a parking spot just down the street from the entrance to Pulse. He wasn’t familiar with the club, but then again, he wasn’t familiar with many clubs in the area. McKinley led the way as they walked down the crowded sidewalk. Harte grew more and more uncomfortable as he realized just where they were. The bars and nightclubs in this part of town catered to a select clientele.

“It’s the fucking Fruit Loop. Now I know why they wanted us to pull this interview. I’ll get those assholes.”

Harte knew for a fact that McKinley wasn’t homophobic. His venting always tended to be along the derogatory lines, no matter the target. Harte swatted his partner’s shoulder to remind him they could be overheard. Straightening his tie, he squared his shoulders as they walked the half block gauntlet to the club.

Drag queens, leather-daddies and men openly cruising lined both sides of the street. A transvestite took a step forward, but another one grabbed him by the arm.

“Oh girl, first lesson. Never hit on a cop.”

Harte didn't even wonder how they knew. He was very familiar with heightened radar like that. The regulars gave the two cops sidelong glances even as they drew back from them. Harte's discomfort didn't come from prejudice. It came from fear.

Fear that he'd run into someone he knew and be outed. As a cop, the son of a cop and now an up-and-coming detective, he kept his homosexuality firmly under wraps. Even in a department known for tolerance, he couldn't afford the notoriety.

The pulsing, rhythmic music slapped him in the face as they entered the club. Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim lighting, Harte sucked in a deep breath. The club itself might be dark, but the lights hitting the stage were anything but. Two men danced their way around the edges of the stage, stripping off various articles of clothing as they went. The bass beat pounded through his body as he and McKinley made their way toward the bar.

Harte stopped beside his partner as the other man caught the bartender's eye. One flash of his badge caused most of the men near them to move a little farther away. Harte felt the speculative gazes being cast their way. He avoided making eye contact with anyone in particular. The men onstage finished their routine, scooping up the money that had landed near their feet and running off to the side as the music changed.

Suddenly all the lights went out. The thirty seconds of darkness made the lone spotlight that illuminated the very center of the stage seem like a bright, hot noon sun. A figure stood there with his back to the audience. All around Harte and his partner, the men started to clap in time with the music.

Then on a strong downbeat the man came alive. Harte couldn't look away. The sensual movement drew his attention first. The shining brown hair that hit just below his shoulders swayed with his movements. Harte let his gaze slide down to a tight ass beautifully outlined by pants that looked like leather and fit like a second skin. As the man spun around, ripping his white tank in two, all of the lights came fully up. Harte felt his entire body freeze as all the blood rushed from his head straight to his cock.

Sexy dark bedroom eyes, outlined by eyeliner and framed by thick dark eyelashes he could see even from this distance, led to a long straight nose and a gorgeous mouth he'd like to see sucking his cock. This was the sexiest man Harte had ever seen. Tossing his head, the guy danced to the end of the stage then spun around to present that tight ass to the audience.

He slapped a hand against one butt cheek and the audience roared their approval. Harte couldn't take his eyes off the guy as he unlaced his pants and slowly shimmied out of them. He knew the other man couldn't see him, and as McKinley was still engaged in a loud-over-the-music discussion with the bartender, he indulged in sating himself on the sight of the dancer.

He kept the audience right in the palm of his hand as he stripped down to a thong just barely big enough to cover an impressive cock. Shaking his head and his ass, he collected money left and right, allowing the men lining the stage to caress his legs, abdomen and chest.

He stopped them from grabbing his package with a smile and a slight shake of his head. By the time he finished dancing, money dripped from his thong and filled his hands. With a wave and a sexy smile, he gathered the pieces of his costume and headed for the back of the stage.

Harte glanced back at McKinley to see him following the bartender's pointing finger toward the back of the club. Falling into step behind his partner, Harte tried to calm his rapidly beating heart. He had to forget the vision he'd seen dancing on the stage. They stopped right outside a door marked Private, and McKinley glanced back at him before pushing it open.

The noise here was muted from the rest of the bar but seemed just as frenetic. Men rushed back and forth, some wearing headphones, some carrying bits of costumes, others getting ready to go onstage. Still following McKinley, Harte managed to look around for the hot guy from the stage without appearing to look for anyone in particular.

They stopped outside another door and McKinley knocked. Harte tried to focus on the situation at hand and not on the sexy dancer. The door was opened by a blond wearing a really nice Hugo Boss suit. He stared at the two of them for just a moment then sighed and stepped back.

"What can I do for two of the city's finest tonight?"

"You're Jason Winters? Owner of Pulse?" McKinley's voice was just as neutral as always and that helped Harte to focus.

"I am. May I offer you something to drink? Coffee, water?" Winters indicated a bar to the side of his desk though both men shook their heads.

Harte took in the thick carpet underfoot, the rich appointments in the office and the top-of-the-line cappuccino machine on the marble counter, and decided once again that he was vastly underpaid. They all sat, Winters behind the desk in a large high-backed leather chair and the two cops in straight-backed armless chairs across the clean surface from him.

"No thank you, Mr. Winters. We're here to talk to one of your employees. A Ramey Nichols."

"Ramey?" The surprise in the other man's voice was genuine. "Why on earth do you need to talk to Ramey? Is he in some sort of trouble?"

"It's nothing like that. We're assisting in a homicide investigation and simply need some information." Harte spoke up for the first time. Winters' piercing blue eyes focused on his face and Harte felt a moment of discomfort as they seemed to see right into his soul.

"Hmmm...well, though he's a bit unconventional, Ramey has never been one to knowingly break the law, so I feel sure he's not a suspect. Who was killed?"

McKinley glanced at his notebook. "A Kevin Ramos."

At Winters' swift inhale, Harte focused his attention firmly on the other man. "Did you know him?"

"Yes. And his partner, Carl Davis. Does Carl know?"

"He does. How well do you know Mr. Davis?"

"Well enough to know that he would never have killed his lover, if that's what you're thinking." Winters' voice came out sharp and full of conviction. Harte nodded.

"When can we see Mr. Nichols?"

"I'll call him in. Do you want to use my office or would you prefer to talk to him elsewhere?"

"Your office will be fine, thank you." McKinley and Harte started to get to their feet, but Winters waved them back down.

"Please, stay seated. I'll call Ramey in and excuse myself while you talk to him." With that, Winters picked up the phone and spoke quietly to whoever answered. The three of them sat in somewhat strained silence until a knock sounded on the door. When Winters got to his feet, McKinley and Harte did too.

Harte took a deep breath as the smoking hot dancer who'd captured his attention earlier walked into the room. He hesitated briefly, then came in and shut the door behind himself. The guy wore a plain white t-shirt and jeans, and Harte wanted to yank him close and kiss him senseless. When he noticed Ramey's bare feet, he nearly took a step forward. Shit, the guy even had sexy feet!

"Ramey, these Detectives McKinley and Donovan have a few questions to ask you. I'm telling you that you need to answer their questions. Do you understand?"

Harte pulled his attention from Ramey to Jason Winters for just a moment. The emphasis the man put on his statement rang oddly to him. Why would an employer use that tone with an employee? Ramey's quiet answer drew his attention back to the other man.

"Yes Sir." The guy even dropped his eyes as he answered. Harte stared at him, but the other man never raised his gaze. Winters moved around his desk and Ramey opened the door for him but kept his gaze on the floor.

"Ramey, just answer their questions. I'm counting on your honesty. I'll be right outside if you need me." He squeezed Ramey's shoulder and left the room, closing the door behind him. Ramey raised his gaze briefly, looked at McKinley and then at Harte. Harte felt his heart start to race as he caught that hazel gaze. The man was totally fucking gorgeous. Damn it. Now was so not the time to think about sex.

"You have questions for me?" His voice had a low tone that hit a chord deep inside Harte. He wanted to reassure the other man, to make him feel comfortable.

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Nichols?" McKinley indicated one of the two straight-backed chairs.

Harte saw the hesitation before Ramey pushed away from the door and moved quietly toward them. He met McKinley's gaze then glanced at Harte again. Harte saw him take a deep breath, his luscious lips parting slightly before he swallowed hard and slipped into the chair McKinley indicated. Ramey sat with his hands on his knees, and Harte saw him clench his fingers just for a moment before he relaxed his hands.

"Mr. Nichols—"

"Ramey, please."

"Ramey, then. I'm Detective Jeff McKinley and this is Detective Harte Donovan."

Jeff's voice kept going but Harte had to sit down. His cock was doing its damn level best to burst right through the front of his pants just from watching Ramey and listening to his voice. Ramey's gaze flickered to him before moving back to the desk. He wasn't looking directly at either McKinley or Harte, and Harte wanted his attention.

McKinley cleared his throat and spoke again. As he told Ramey why they were there, Harte saw the other man wipe his eyes though he never raised his head. He'd never seen anyone so contained—other than his own father who rarely showed any emotion. Ramey didn't raise his eyes from the desk until Harte asked him about his relationship with their victim. Ramey met Harte's eyes and he saw the pain there, knowing the two men had been more than roommates just from that glance.

"Mac, why don't you take a few minutes and talk to Mr. Winters again. I'll finish up with Mr. Nichols."

"Okay. I'll talk to him, then meet you in the car." Obviously uncomfortable with Ramey's grief, McKinley left the room.

Harte waited until the door shut behind his partner, then got slowly to his feet. He handed Ramey some tissues from a box on the desk. Harte had regained control over his body, at least he hoped so. Leaning against the desk, Harte casually crossed his arms over his chest. He wanted to see Ramey's eyes. Needed to see his eyes to make sure the other man told him the truth.

"Ramey." Intentionally making his tone somewhat harsh, Harte wasn't at all surprised when Ramey's wide eyes met his. He could see the man's heartbeat throbbing wildly in his neck, but it was the look in those hazel eyes that nearly caused him to choke. Sheer desire flooded the other man's face, whether at the tone of his voice or at Harte himself, he didn't know.

“Keep your eyes on me. I need to see your eyes. Were you and Kevin Ramos lovers?”

“No sir.” The whisper reached him quite clearly. “We were friends, we shared...” Ramey swallowed hard. “We shared some common interests, went to the same clubs. We made out a couple of times when we first met, but we weren’t lovers. We tended to like the same kind of guy, if you know what I mean.”

Harte clamped down hard on the swift physical reaction he had to the comment. He chose to ignore the unasked question about his own sexuality. “Do you know who might have wanted to kill him?”

Ramey’s eyes filled with tears the way they had when he and McKinley had first told him of the other man’s death. “No sir. His...how much do you know about Kevin?”

“We’re trying to find out more about Kevin. Just finish what you started to say, Ramey.”

“Kevin and Carl, that’s Carl Davis, just had a collaring...I...I mean commitment ceremony two days ago. They were ready to spend their lives together. They were great together. I’ve never seen Kevin so happy. Shit. I just had coffee with him the day of the ceremony.”

“Collaring ceremony?”

“Commitment, I meant commitment.”

“I think you said exactly what you meant.” Leaning forward, Harte brought their faces closer together. “What’s a collaring ceremony, Ramey?”

“Kevin is like me, he’s submissive. Carl collared him, became his Master.”

“Wait, you’re talking sexual submissive?” Harte knew the term. He’d never actually met someone who lived it though. One of his exes had liked to be spanked and he’d enjoyed watching the other man’s ass turn red under his hands. His blood rose again at the thought of Ramey’s tight, round ass under his palm.

“Yes. Carl is Kevin’s Master.”

“Do you think Carl could have killed Kevin?”

“No!” Ramey’s entire body stiffened. “Carl would never hurt Kevin.”

“Isn’t that what being a submissive means?”

“No, not at all. You know that.” Ramey’s voice rose for the first time in the interview. His hazel eyes were wide and stunned as if Harte had betrayed some code.

“What?”

“You’re a Dom, you know what it means.”

Harte froze again. “What are you talking about? I’m not a...what did you call me?”

“Dom. Dominant. You...you mean you aren’t? But I thought...” Ramey swallowed hard again and broke their eye contact. “I’m sorry, I honestly thought...did you need anything else from me?”

"I need your contact information, Ramey. Just in case we have any other questions for you." Harte leaned back, writing Ramey's full name, address and phone number in his ever-present notebook. As he tucked the notebook away, he watched the other man, mulling over what he'd just revealed. He rubbed one hand over his face then rubbed the back of his neck. Ramey Nichols was a sexual submissive and he thought Harte was a Dominant.

Harte had heard about that, of course, but never really considered it. Sure, he liked being in control, but that didn't mean he wanted to beat his lovers up! Isn't that what being a dominant meant? Beating up your lovers?

"Detective? Please believe me, Carl would never have killed Kevin. Kevin had some pretty hard limits when it came to pain, and Carl was a good Master. He'd never go past those limits. Besides, they really love one another."

Something in the other man's voice caused Harte to stop for a moment. There was a yearning, almost a plaintive quality to it. He met Ramey's gaze, staring hard at those hazel depths. "I believe you, Ramey."

Unable to stop himself, and not sure he would have even if he could have, Harte closed the distance between them again. He gripped the back of Ramey's head, just as he'd wanted to earlier, pulling the other man close and kissing him. Ramey smelled like soap, as though he'd showered after leaving the stage, and tasted like the sweetest sin. His lips were soft, his skin warm, and Harte wanted more and more. Ramey made a soft sound in the back of his throat and opened to the pressure of Harte's lips.

Delving into Ramey's mouth with his tongue, Harte tasted the other man, drinking in his sweetness. He pulled Ramey out of the chair and against his body, wrapping his free arm around Ramey's waist. Ramey didn't resist and his hands landed tentatively on Harte's biceps. Even knowing that he was potentially screwing up the case by kissing Ramey, Harte wanted more...in a way he'd never wanted anyone else.

Chapter Two

Ramey couldn't breathe. The hot cop, the one he'd seen as soon as he'd hit the end of the stage, had his tongue in Ramey's mouth and his hand on Ramey's ass. He wanted to drown in this man, wanted to go down on his knees and suck his cock, wanted to be on his knees with Harte Donovan's cock buried in his ass. He could feel the other man's dick rubbing against his. Ramey's had hardened as soon as Harte pulled him to his feet.

Harte's blond hair had gleamed nearly white against his tanned skin, and those gray-blue eyes had seemed to bore right into Ramey's soul when he'd entered the office. The fact that the man had been there to tell him that a good friend had been killed hadn't lessened his appeal. He'd felt the Dominant vibe coming hard and heavy off this man and despite the fact that he'd never really trusted cops, he wanted to trust this one.

He nearly whimpered in frustration when Harte tore his mouth away. His lips felt bruised and swollen and he wanted more. Harte stared at Ramey. Just as he leaned forward to, please God, kiss him again, a knock sounded on the door. Harte released him as though he was on fire, pushing back so that Ramey stumbled a little trying to gain his footing.

Harte's kiss had totally rocked his world, mastered him in the way he'd always wanted to be mastered. Breathing hard, Ramey stood with his back to the door, staring at the cop's feet.

"Detective? Are you through with Ramey? It's nearly time for him to be back onstage." Jason's voice reached him and Ramey dared a glance up at Harte. With one hand rubbing across his chin, Harte nodded.

"Yes, we're done here. Thank you for the use of your office. Ramey, I'll be in touch if we have any other questions." He heard the shaky quality in Harte's voice and was glad to know he wasn't the only one quaking.

"Yes sir. May I be excused?"

"Yes."

"No."

Jason's answer trumped Harte's, no matter how much Ramey would prefer things to be the other way around. With another glance toward him, one Ramey caught out of the corner of his eye, Harte nodded and left the room. Ramey heard Jason approach but kept his eyes down.

"Ramey, are you all right?"

"I can't believe Kevin's dead." Hoping Jason would attribute his shaking to his friend's death and not the cop's devastating kiss, Ramey shuffled around slightly, rearranging his raging erection and praying his jeans were loose enough to hide it.

"Though I'm totally shocked by Kevin's death, that's not what I'm talking about and you know it. Now," Jason's hand cupped Ramey's chin, raising the other man's face until he stared into those icy eyes. "Truth. Are you all right?"

"Yes Sir." Ramey infused all the feeling he could into those two words. Words he'd said to Jason on more than one occasion until Jason had collared his own sub six months ago. The Doms in his life were committing left and right, though none wanted him on a permanent basis. Ramey suppressed the hurt, but knew he hadn't been quick enough when Jason pulled him in for a hug.

"Ramey, what am I going to do with you?"

"Nothing, Sir, I'll be okay. But thank you. May I be excused?"

"Go, Ramey. But this isn't over. I will find out about you and the detective."

"There's nothing to find out. He was just carried away, it didn't mean anything."

Jason swatted him hard on the ass as he moved past. "Don't lie to a Master, Ramey. There's something there. Something more than just the cop getting carried away."

Ramey left the office, praying Jason would leave it alone and knowing he wouldn't. Still, there really wasn't anything with the cop...and now he was just fooling himself. There had definitely been something there. Something he hadn't felt in a long time. Something he hoped to have a chance to explore...and soon.

Harte cursed thoroughly and vividly as he stalked to the car. Years of control blown on one sexy, muscled body. If McKinley had walked in... Harte shook his head in disgust.

"Did you blow the interview?"

His head snapped up at the words while his feet tried to walk on top of one another. Neatly catching himself on the top of the car, Harte growled at his partner.

"No. But he didn't do it and doesn't have a useful thing to tell us. So it was a fucking dead end. How about yours? Anything?"

Pleased with himself for not answering "No, but I wanted to", Harte listened to McKinley's run-down. Both of them had come up empty-handed. He was curious to learn that Winters had outed himself as a Dominant though. Apparently running a strip joint that catered to gay men wasn't alternative enough.

"Wait."

The blond owner called out just as they were getting in their car. "Detective, I would appreciate it if you would call me tomorrow. I might have someone else for you to talk to."

Harte took the card Winters handed him and nodded. "I'll call you at eight."

"Dear God. Make it ten, please. I do run a nightclub, for Christ's sake." Winters grinned and spoke to him as an equal, showing none of the normal deference most gay men showed

cops, even those not in uniform.

“Okay. Ten but we’ll meet at Java Court.” Harte named a coffeehouse near the station. No reason he couldn’t at least get a decent cup of coffee while this man wasted his time. Winters nodded and stepped back from the car, heading back toward Pulse.

McKinley speared him with an over-the-glasses look but Harte shrugged him off. “Maybe he really does have something.”

“Yeah, and maybe he’s just into cops.”

Jeff couldn’t know. Harte glared at him then threw the car in reverse. “Well he’ll be one sad fucker then, because he’s not my type.”

After the paperwork was done and his shift was over, Harte went home, heading straight for the shower. He felt safe in his home where everything was always in place. He could close his eyes and find the soap or shampoo or towels—separated by color and use. Here was where he could be himself. Nothing interfered with his orderliness.

In the shower, he reached for the soap but dropped it when his mind switched the soap with the feel of a hard cock in his hand. He knelt to get the escaped bar only to see a vivid image of Ramey kneeling before him.

“Fuck.” The word dragged out on a ragged groan. “Just fuck me running. Why now?”

Rather than argue with himself, Harte leaned back under the spray. He cupped his balls, rolling them against one another. His cock hung hard and heavy, hitting his hand in rhythmic thumps. Soaping his hand, he put the soap back on the tray then slid his hand down his shaft.

With his eyes closed, he could imagine the dancer touching him. He would be willing and able to do anything Harte asked. He stroked his cock while imagining slapping Ramey’s sexy ass with his dick. Short, hard strokes matched his fantasy.

With his legs braced apart, Harte gave himself over to the fantasy scrolling through his brain. He panted as he let his head drop forward. The hot water struck the back of his neck as he pounded himself into an orgasm.

Letting out a low growl, Harte wiped the cum off the shower door. He grabbed the shower nozzle off the holder so he could spray down the walls. That was all his housekeeper needed to send her into apoplexy. Finding jizz on the tile.

He finished his shower then wrapped a towel around his waist. Time to fix some dinner and watch some mindless television. The last thing he needed to do was think more about that damn dancer.

Ramey finished his shift, changed in the locker room and then slipped out the back door to avoid anyone waiting for him in the main bar. He usually got a few offers for sex, a few others

wanting to buy him a drink and still others just wanting to hang out. Tonight, he wasn't in the mood for any of it.

Though sadness at Kevin's death filled him, he knew Carl wouldn't welcome his presence or his phone call right now. Carl's family was fully accepting of his gay lifestyle and completely oblivious to his D/s relationship. They'd take care of him. Ramey's mind returned to its fixation with one hot cop and he wanted to relive every moment of that kiss in Jason's office.

Though Harte had denied being a Dom, Ramey knew the instinct was there. He'd been in the lifestyle long enough to recognize those tendencies, just as he knew his own submissive nature. The way Harte had held on to the back of his head, the way he'd taken total control of that kiss just made Ramey want to beg for more.

Walking the few blocks to his apartment, Ramey let the whole encounter run through his mind again. He unlocked the security door to his building and headed up the three flights of stairs. The elevator wouldn't do him any good tonight. He needed to push his tired body just a bit more. Besides, the stairs helped him keep in shape. Who needed a pricey gym?

Then again, Harte's hard body had probably been honed in the gym, and if he wanted to work out with or even on Ramey, he wouldn't object. Just the thought of those powerful arms restraining him, of those broad hands squeezing his ass made Ramey rock-hard—again. He'd have to find someone willing to top him soon.

He only wondered who he could get to fill the role who resembled the cop enough to allow Ramey the fantasy that it was Detective Harte Donovan wielding the flogger, Harte Donovan pushing his limits and ultimately, Harte fucking him senseless.

With a slight smile, Ramey closed his apartment door behind him, throwing the locks into place and heading for the kitchen. He'd showered before leaving Pulse, but his stomach was reminding him he'd skipped dinner. A guilty pleasure left over from childhood awaited him. An ooey-gooey grilled cheese and tomato sandwich and a big glass of milk. Wondering if Harte was into comfort food or a total health nut took him through his meal and Ramey washed his dishes before leaving them in the drainer by the sink.

His bed waited, along with a bottle of lube and a lovely rubber dildo he could use to pretend he'd managed to get Harte home. A vision of those gray eyes filled his mind as he stripped and let his clothes fall where he stood. Grabbing the lube and dildo, he slowly oiled the big cock then rimmed his own ass with the lube.

Sliding his fingers around his hole, Ramey dipped the lube inside, preparing himself. Stretching his opening and sliding more lube in, he could imagine Harte standing over him, telling him to go deeper, faster.

Ramey imagined Harte gripping that big cock he'd felt hidden behind the conservative gray suit and lining it up with his ass. As he slowly pushed the dildo into his ass, he thought

about Harte leaning over him. Gripping his cock with one hand, and pushing the dildo into his ass with the other, Ramey rocked on the bed. His breathing sped up, his heartbeat racing as he dreamed about Harte restraining him. Harte pushing that big cock into his mouth, forcing himself deep into Ramey's throat.

He wanted Harte's hands on his body and Harte's cock in his ass. Pushing the dildo even deeper and speeding up his motion on his own cock, Ramey fucked himself into a shouting orgasm.

As his heartbeat slowed, he eased the dildo out of his ass and slowly rolled off the bed. Clean the toy, clean his body of come and hopefully dream of Harte all night. Ramey grinned as he headed for the bathroom. He'd have the memory of that kiss and his own imagination to carry him through until he could get back to a dungeon on his night off and find a Dom willing to play. Hopefully a blond with blue-gray eyes.

Chapter Three

Harte reached the coffee shop a full ten minutes before his scheduled meeting time with Jason Winters. Sincerely doubting that the man had any real leads in the Ramos murder, he still wanted to know why Winters had insisted on this meeting. Did he know that Harte had kissed Ramey? Was he going to try to blackmail Harte in some way?

Knowing he'd quit his job before allowing that to happen, Harte straightened his tie and entered the café. Harte was surprised that Jason Winters was already sitting at a table dead center of the room with coffee and a bagel in front of him.

He smiled slightly as Harte made his way across the room and offered his hand. Harte shook his hand then sat down. A waitress came to take his order and Harte duplicated Winters' breakfast. Waiting until the waitress left, Harte looked at Jason Winters. Definitely good-looking in a very smooth, polished way, the man oozed confidence and control. Harte sipped his coffee and focused on Winters' face.

"You have some information for me, Mr. Winters?"

"Jason, please. And I hope you'll allow me the same intimacy, Harte?" At Harte's slight nod, he continued. "I think you know that I really wanted to talk to you about something other than your case. Specifically, Ramey Nichols."

"If that's the case, I don't really think we have anything to discuss."

"Wrong, Harte. Ramey is a friend of mine and I saw the attraction between the two of you. I also saw your faces before you left my office. Ramey would have gone down on his knees for you in a heartbeat if you'd commanded him to."

"Commanded?"

"Please, let's not trade semantics, Harte. I have a feeling you're more of a Dom than you're admitting, possibly even to yourself. Let's talk plainly, shall we? People with our...taste..." Jason quirked an eyebrow then smiled.

"Well, we have very limited arenas for pleasure. Finding a treasure like Ramey when you least expect it can throw a man off-stride. Here's what you need to know about him. Ramey is submissive in many ways, but don't mistake that for insecurity. He knows who he is and what he wants. He wants a Master in the bedroom. Someone to take control, tell him what to do, push his limits.

"But he needs an equal outside of the bedroom. Someone to show him he's worth more than he thinks he is."

"I have no idea why you think I need to know this." Harte could feel his pulse racing but knew he betrayed nothing to the other man.

"Harte, there's one thing you need to understand about this particular bent to our lifestyle. Never lie to a Master. You think you've hidden your reaction to my information about Ramey, but I can see your pulse beating hard in your throat. I can see the dilation of your eyes, and you licked your lips three times while I was talking about Ramey. If those aren't the signs of a man with a serious case of lust, I don't know what are."

Taking a deep breath, Harte blew it out slowly then nodded.

"Okay. Say you're right. What if I don't know what to do with someone like Ramey? I've never wanted to beat up my lovers. A spanking now and then? Sure, I'm up for that. Some restraints from time to time? Yeah, I've used my handcuffs for more than arresting people. But I'm completely out of my element with what you're talking about."

They stopped talking as the waitress came by to see if they needed anything. Winters smiled at her as she refilled his coffee. As soon as she walked away, he met Harte's eyes again.

"No one said anything about beating your lovers, Harte. A flogging or caning, maybe, but not beating. Ramey has limits, as do most subs. A good Dom, and I think you have that potential, will push but never break those limits. You'll force the sub into taking more than he thought possible, find yourself reaching to fulfill every need that sub has and in doing so, find your own freedom." Jason finished his coffee and set the cup precisely in the center of the placemat in front of him.

"Someone gave me something. Told me I'd know when the time was right to use it. I think now is that time." Reaching into his pocket, Jason pulled out his wallet and extracted a plain white business card. Placing it on the table, he stood and picked up the check their waitress had left. "Use this and call me if you have any other questions."

With that the other man left. Harte picked up his own cup and finished a really fine cup of coffee, then set it down just as precisely as Jason had, also in the middle of his placemat. He picked up the card and turned it over.

"1-800-DOM-help? What the fuck?"

Tossing the card back onto the table, he got to his feet and left. It was going to be a long day and he had way too much to think about already. A help line for Doms? Really? Isn't that some sort of contradiction in terms?

Ten hours later, as he unlocked his front door and yawned widely, Harte was still mulling over what Jason Winters had said that morning. Moving across his comfortable living room toward his gun safe, he couldn't get the memory of Ramey and that kiss out of his mind either. What would it be like to have Ramey here, ready to do his bidding, wide open and ready for him to make love to, to fuck, whatever his mood? Suddenly coming to a stop, Harte realized something was off.

Someone had been in his place. Looking around, he spotted what was wrong. There, right in the middle of his coffee table, a plain white business card.

“Son of a bitch!” Picking up the card and confirming what he already knew, Harte yanked his notebook out of his pocket and thumbed through it until he found Jason Winters’ phone number. As soon as the man answered, Harte tore into him. “You bastard! How did you get into my place?”

“Donovan? What are you talking about?”

“That card you gave me. I left it at the café and now it’s here, in my house. How the fuck did you get in here?”

“I haven’t been to your place, Harte. If the card is there, well, let’s just say I’m not totally surprised. There’s something almost mystical about that particular connection. Call the number and then if you still need to talk to me, call me back.” The bastard hung up. Harte stared at the phone in his hand then shook his head.

“We’ll see about this bullshit.” Dialing the number, he listened as the phone rang once, twice and a third time. Finally a male voice answered.

“1-800-DOM-help, this is the Operator. How may I direct your call?”

“I was given this card and I just need to know what this is all about.”

“You’ve reached a help line, sir. May I ask your preference? Are you Dom or sub?”

“I don’t fucking know. I don’t know what this is all about.”

“Ahh...I see. One moment, please, I’m going to connect you with Master Thomas.” Soft classical music filled the earpiece as Harte flopped down on the sofa. Still confused, he waited to find out what was going to happen next.

“This is Master Thomas. Who is calling?” The command in the voice was clear, and yet it didn’t put his hackles up...too much.

“My name is Harte Donovan and I want to know how the hell this card wound up in my house. I left it at the café and Jason Winters said he didn’t break into my house. So how the fuck did it get here?”

“Master Harte, please give me a moment. Ah yes, Jason Winters. We gave his sub some guidance not too long ago. Now please let me explain. I’m part of a very special group. We provide assistance where needed, to subs and to Doms. In your case, I’m guessing you need a little more assistance than just a phone call can take care of.”

Master Thomas laughed softly and Harte pulled the phone away from his ear to stare at it in disbelief for a moment. Putting it back against his ear, he listened to what the man had to say.

“You like control. You want to tell your lovers exactly what to do and when. I’ll bet you are very precise about everything in your life, aren’t you?”

Harte shook his head. "Okay, so you've got me there."

He listened as Master Thomas outlined what Dominance was. Like Winters, this guy reiterated the loving side of Domination—how it would be his job to help Ramey find what he was looking for.

"Wait a damn minute. Why are you bringing him up too? Oh I get it. You and Winters are in on this together. It's a joke, right? Some kind of setup?"

Harte had to carve out some space. His gut ached with a strong pull, a yearning, to experience what the other man spoke about.

He wanted it. Didn't even know he wanted it until he heard the words from Thomas. What he described—that level of trust with someone—it wasn't something he'd ever admitted to himself, but he wanted it.

Thomas laughed. "Master Harte, I know you want Ramey. Hell, I've seen him and I wanted him."

The curl of rage that flamed up nearly consumed Harte. "He's not some piece of meat you can just pick up at the store. Don't talk about him that way."

His anger caught him off guard. How could he feel that strongly about someone he'd just met? Hell, they hadn't even talked about anything other than Harte's investigation. Then they'd shared that steamy, crank-your-cock kiss.

"Believe me, Harte, I understand what you're feeling. I've been in your shoes. The question now is do you want to pursue these feelings or do you want to live the rest of your life in denial? Do you want to stand by and let some other Dominant collar Ramey? Make no mistake, someone will eventually collar that sexy sub."

His answer was instant. "Tell me what I need to do."

He felt a door inside of him open. Some long-buried part of him stretched into awareness. Thomas answered patiently as Harte asked every question he could think of. If he was going to do this thing, he wouldn't be half-assed about it.

Stifling a yawn caught him completely by surprise and he glanced at the clock on the mantel to see that he'd been on the phone for nearly three hours. He'd talked to Thomas about things he'd never talked to anyone about and learned things he'd never even dreamed about.

At the end of their conversation, Thomas suggested he visit a local private club, by invitation of course, and see if he might be able to deal with what he found there and then pursue a possible relationship with Ramey.

"Unfettered? I've never heard of that, Sir." Ramey paused his aimless pacing in Jason's office. "Is that where you and Leo met?"

He knew Winters' sub had been completely unknown on the local scene but the rumor was that they'd met in some private, swanky dungeon. Ramey licked his lips. Maybe a little playtime with some new blood would get his mind off the cop.

Cops were dangerous in his world and not just because they put you in the wrong kind of cage. Ramey'd lived on the street for while after leaving the community of artists where his parents lived. He'd learned fast that there were two kinds of cops out there—dirty and mean or clean and mean. Either way you got screwed and not in a good way.

"Ramey? Weren't you listening? You're lucky you aren't wearing my collar. I'd make you eat on the floor for a week." Jason's smile gave the lie to his threat.

"Sorry, Sir. I guess my mind wandered. So you'll take me to this club?" He smiled at Winter's affirming nod.

"Wear something that comes off easily. I may put you through your paces to show off your pretty ass to some of the Masters there, boy."

Ramey laughed. "I have just the thing."

Winters just waved him away as he bent back to his paperwork. With that unspoken dismissal, Ramey pulled the door closed behind him. A new club. Tonight would be a new start. He would let some of his pain over Kevin's death out. He'd found that the bite of the whip helped more than alcohol to excise the hurt. He hummed as he went to the dressing room to get ready for the night. He hoped he'd meet someone new at the club.

Harte rubbed a hand down his thigh. The leather pants weren't new but they had been shoved in the back of his closet for a long time. The bluish open-necked cotton shirt he'd paired with them had been a gift from his last lover. The guy swore the color was the same as his eyes. Thomas had given him some instruction on what to wear and how to act, key phrases to use if approached by a sub while inside and what not to do as a Dom.

He hadn't been this nervous since his first day on the job. Taking a deep breath, he rapped on the dark wood door in front of him. A massive bald guy opened the door and just stood there, not saying a word. Harte held out the business card Winters had given him and said, "Master Thomas sent me. My name is Harte Donovan."

"Welcome, Master Harte. I'm Hayden. Please come in."

Stepping through the unfamiliar door felt strangely like coming home. The dark wood, the niches with couches and chairs set aside for conversation, and in one case, an obvious Dom getting a blowjob from a very enthusiastic sub. All of it drew him in, made him feel comfortable. It was almost like stepping into his own skin for the first time.

Striding up to the bar and catching the eye of the very attractive female bartender, he ordered coffee, not wanting alcohol to cloud his mind in any way. Sliding a cup in front of him,

the woman filled it with rich-smelling coffee. Harte met her eyes as he lifted it to his lips.

“Just made it fresh. I’m Tasha, by the way. Give me a shout if you need anything. And welcome to Unfettered.”

“Thanks.” The vivid blue halter top and low-riding leather pants Tasha wore outlined a very athletic figure, nice hips and long legs. Though his taste had never really run to women, he could appreciate the view as she walked away, her red ponytail swinging between her shoulders.

The cop in him didn’t like the open area he was in, so he moved deeper into the club, finding an empty spot of wall to lean against and observe. Not only that but he felt better with his back against the wall. Here he could keep an eye on anyone coming inside. With that much of an early warning maybe come up with some cover story as to why he was here. It wouldn’t do for him to be found here by anyone he knew, just as it would have been dangerous for him to have gone looking for Ramey anywhere else.

He watched the door, saw the various subs and Doms as they walked through the club or danced on the crowded dance floor. There were all kinds of couples, men with men, men with women, women together, and several threesomes. He found it very easy to pick out the Doms and subs by their attire. Most of the Doms were fully clothed while the subs...weren’t.

As he stood with his cup cradled in one hand, a man wearing only a leather harness-like contraption and a pair of tight leather shorts came over and knelt in front of him. Harte glanced down at the man’s bowed head and felt his own pulse rate increasing. “Speak.”

“Master, my name is David. My owner sent me to tell you that I am yours for the evening, if it pleases you.”

Swallowing, Harte raised his gaze to sweep the club. A stocky older man with a big gray mustache was leaning against the bar raised his beer in a toast in Harte’s direction. Looking back at the young man kneeling on the wood floor in front of him, Harte grinned. Touching the younger man’s head, stroking him softly, he raised the man’s chin so he could see his face.

“Tell your Master I appreciate the offer but I’m waiting for someone.”

“As you command, Master.” The younger man gracefully rose to his feet, backed up a step or two and bowed, then backed up even farther before turning and approaching the older man at the bar. Harte watched as he went to his knees in front of his Master and saw the older man stroke across the harness before offering his sub some water from a glass on the bar.

Glancing back toward the entrance, Harte felt his heart stop in his chest. Jason Winters had just entered the club with Ramey and another man. Winters held a leash in his left hand and that leash was attached to a black and gold collar around the slender brunette’s neck. That sub wore what looked like a black loincloth while Winters wore black leather pants and a black leather vest without a shirt.

Ramey was also leashed, but Winters wasn't holding onto his leash. It looked like it was attached to the belt around Winters' waist. Ramey wore a red G-string similar to the one he'd worn onstage the first time Harte had seen him. The guy was just as gorgeous now as he'd been under stage lights.

Unable to get his feet to move, Harte watched as another Dom approached Winters and the two subs. The two Doms spoke and then the stranger turned his attention to Ramey. Harte felt a swift rush of anger as Ramey nodded and Winters handed his leash off to the other man.

Not taking his eyes off them, Harte watched as the Dom led Ramey to a big X affixed to the wall. Ramey's wrists and ankles were secured to the wood and the Dom strolled over to a wall display with several whips and canes. Choosing one with a long handle and several loose straps, he moved back toward Ramey. Now Harte could move. He made his way through the crowd, closer to the area where the two men were.

He noticed Winters and his sub coming toward him but didn't acknowledge them until the other Dom landed his first blow on Ramey's upper back.

"He agreed to this?"

"Ramey enjoys a good flogging from time to time. They discussed his limits, it'll be a flogging only, no sex."

Harte narrowed his eyes as Jason smiled at him. "Ramey's choice, Harte. He seems to be saving himself for someone."

The other Dom had landed several blows on Ramey's back and buttocks, even his upper thighs. His skin had taken on a nice rosy glow, but even from a distance, Harte could see that the marks wouldn't last long. He noticed another man in a bright gold vest standing off to one side, observing everything that happened there. Though he stood impassively with his arms crossed over his chest, his facial expression was a bit troubled. Years of observing people let Harte recognize the uneasiness in the other man.

Indicating the watcher with his chin, he slid a glance toward Jason. "Who's that?"

"Dungeon Monitor. He'll make sure everything's in order."

"He doesn't like what's happening there. Look at his face."

"Hmmm..." Jason studied the other man then turned his attention back to the other Dom and Ramey. "Damn. He's not pulling his strokes. Ramey'll be bruised tomorrow."

On the Dom's next stroke, Ramey shouted, "Blanket!"

Jason tossed the leash in his hand to Harte, throwing a quick "Stay here," over his shoulder as he and the monitor guy moved into the open space behind the scene. Harte wasn't sure if that command had been directed at him or the leashed man kneeling at his side.

Jason grabbed the flogger before the Dom could land another blow and Harte saw the Monitor move to Ramey's side, touching his shoulder and speaking quietly to him. Jason's hand on the Dom's heaving chest kept him in place as the monitor unfastened Ramey from the shackles.

"He was wrapping." The quietly spoken words from the man kneeling at his side tore Harte's attention from Ramey.

"Master Blake was wrapping the flogger. It hurts." The sub at his side glanced up at him, then turned his attention back to Jason.

"Wrapping? That means the flaps went around Ramey's body, right?"

The guy nodded without taking his gaze off Jason and Ramey. Harte turned his attention back to them too. Jason and the monitor were talking to the Dom who had been flogging Ramey. He shook his head but handed the flogger to Jason and turned to walk away.

Ramey walked gingerly at Jason's side, keeping his gaze on the floor. His chest heaved and sweat streamed down his body. He looked up once as he and Jason drew near, and the surprised pleasure in his gaze caused Harte to smile. He let his own gaze roam down the other man's body and saw his cock twitch at Harte's attention. Jason had clipped the leash back to the plain silver chain collar around Ramey's neck and now he held it out toward Harte.

"I'm putting Ramey in your care for now. I promised Leo time in the stocks." Jason patiently held the leash out to Harte until he took it, trading it for the leash around Leo's neck. "Ramey?"

Waiting until the other man looked at him, Jason stared hard at his face. "Be safe, and you are not to leave the club tonight without Leo and me, understood?"

"Yes Sir." Ramey dropped his gaze again as Jason led his sub away.

Harte watched them for a moment then turned his gaze back to Ramey. "You look like you could use some water."

"Yes, please, Sir." Harte led Ramey back to the bar. It felt weird but strangely right to have the other man walking slightly behind him. Stopping at the bar, he caught the same female bartender's attention and asked for a glass of water.

When she brought it to him, he turned to hand it to Ramey, then hesitated. Remembering the other Dom, he touched Ramey's chin to bring his head up, then held the glass to his lips. Ramey took a sip then met his eyes over the glass. Harte felt his breath catch as the other man took what he offered, no, what he provided. He felt his whole body swell, felt his chest puffing out and his cock filling out.

Ramey needed him, needed him to take care of him. In that moment, everything Master Thomas had told him on the phone, everything Jason had tried to tell him over coffee, everything came together as though someone had flipped a switch in his head. Harte smiled

for the first time that night.

Ramey dared another glance at Harte as he sipped the water Harte held out for him. Though he'd agreed to the scene with Master Blake, he'd been seeing Harte in his head. Now to have the other man standing right in front of him, caring for him, he wanted to shout, laugh and cry all at once. When Harte pulled the glass away, Ramey went to his knees, head bowed and hands palm up on his knees.

"Sir?"

"Speak, Ramey." Hearing his name on Harte's lips made his cock jump again. It had been hard since about the third blow from the flogger and had flagged a bit as he'd been taken off the St. Andrew's cross. Now it was harder than ever and slightly painful under the G-string he wore.

"Sir, if you haven't already chosen for the evening, I am yours." Lifting his head without permission, but needing to see his reaction, Ramey smiled at the expression on Harte's gorgeous tough face. His eyes had widened slightly and he looked shocked and excited at the same time. Then he schooled his features and cupped Ramey's chin.

Harte's hand was warm, slightly calloused and strong as he held Ramey's face still. "You want me to use one of those flogger things on you?"

"If it pleases you. Or a paddle if you're more comfortable with that."

"Ramey, you have to know I've never done this before."

"But you're a Dom, Sir. There's no doubt in my mind that you are. I'm willing to be with you as you learn."

"You're putting a lot of faith in me, Ramey."

"Trust, Sir. I trust you not to harm me, to meet my needs and allow me to meet yours."

"Are you talking sex, Ramey? Because I definitely feel those needs where you're concerned."

"If it pleases you." He couldn't resist any longer. Though with any other Dom touching without permission might be a problem, he could almost sense that Harte needed him to make the first move. Though it wasn't completely in his nature, he found that he had needs where Harte was concerned too. Sliding one hand up the slick leather pants, he cupped the back of Harte's knee and leaned against him. "Whatever pleases you."

"Not here. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"There are usually private rooms, Sir. The bartender will know."

"Tasha!" Harte's voice drew Ramey's attention. He could hear the tension there. Rubbing his face against Harte's thigh, Ramey leaned even more against the other man. He felt the muscle tighten and dared to place a kiss against Harte's hip. Harte's fingers threaded through

his hair, pulling his head back.

“On your feet, Ramey, now.”

He got to his feet and gasped as Harte yanked him close, kissing him fast and hard, thrusting his tongue deep into Ramey’s mouth. With a soft moan, Ramey relaxed against Harte, kissing him back, rubbing his body against the hardness of Harte’s chest, sliding his hands up and down the soft shirt.

Pushing him back a step, Harte held out a brass key. “Let’s go.”

Ramey fell into step behind Harte, his head bowed, his gaze roaming over Harte’s back and ass. He wanted to lick his way around the other man’s body, nuzzle his balls, suck his cock deep and swallow every drop of cum Harte had to offer.

Trembling in excitement and arousal, he followed Harte down a dimly lit hallway to a room with a plaque on the door proclaiming it to be number four. Harte put the key in the lock and turned the lights on before leading Ramey inside.

Chapter Four

He didn't even have a chance to look around. Harte had him up against the door kissing him again and Ramey had absolutely no objection. Taking control of the kiss seemed very natural for Harte, and giving over that control was definitely in his own repertoire. Ramey stroked his hands down Harte's shirt again, this time hoping Harte would give him permission to remove it.

Breaking their kiss and taking a step back, Harte stared at him. Ramey gazed at his face for a few long minutes then dropped his eyes. He started to go to his knees and felt Harte's hand on his shoulder.

"Stay standing for a minute. I think I know how this is done, but if I misstep, feel free to help me out. Now I've been told that every sub has hard limits, some things they absolutely won't do. Tell me yours."

"Blood play. I pass out at the sight of blood, especially my own."

"Fair enough. I heard your safe word earlier. You say 'blanket' and the scene stops, right?"

Ramey nodded.

"What else?" Harte fought his raging desire to just begin. He had to know, to learn as much as he could first. He'd been given a gift. He didn't want to screw it up. Dragging a breath in, he waited.

"Some fire play or wax play is okay. I'm not real big on mummification, makes me totally twitchy, to be honest. Absolutely no scat or urine play. I don't like needles either, the blood thing again." Ramey risked a glance upward and found Harte staring at him, looking totally flummoxed.

"You had no idea any of that existed did you?"

"Not a fucking clue." Shaking his head and laughing softly, Harte backed up and sat on the bed. "Since most of what you said scares me shitless, how about we stick with something simple. C'mere...what should I call you?"

"Pet, sub, Ramey, anything you wish, Sir."

"You call me Sir, and I heard you call Jason that as well, but Jason's sub called him Master."

"It's your preference, Sir."

"All right then." Harte paused to consider the choices. He chose the one with the least negative connotations for him. "Sub. Come here." Ramey walked forward since he hadn't been told to do otherwise and knelt on the floor between Harte's spread legs. He could see the other man's cock pressing against his leathers and his mouth watered.

Harte leaned forward and kissed him again, sliding one hand down Ramey's chest to pinch his nipple. Ramey groaned and pressed against that hand. Keeping his own hands to himself was hard, but he managed until Harte leaned back from their kiss.

"Unbutton my shirt, sub."

"With pleasure, Sir." Harte rested his weight on his hands as Ramey leaned up and unbuttoned the first button. He spread the shirt open wider with each button, admiring the firm chest appearing before him. The hair on Harte's chest was only slightly darker than that on his head, sparse around his brown nipples and slightly thicker in the middle. Leaning forward, he dared to lick around one of Harte's nipples and felt the other man's hand on the back of his head.

"Harder." Complying was easy and he sucked and nipped at Harte's chest even as he continued to unbutton his shirt before pushing it open completely. They were both breathing harder when Ramey finished with the last button. Harte yanked on the hem and tossed the shirt off the bed. "Stop."

Ramey stopped but couldn't resist licking his lips again, keeping Harte's taste in his mouth.

"There's a selection of paddles on the wall over there. Go pick one and bring it back to me."

With a nod of his head, Ramey started toward the wall on his knees. "On your feet, I want to watch that ass."

"Yes Sir." With a smile he couldn't hide, Ramey got to his feet and walked slowly toward the wall, looking at his choices as he went. Paddles of every shape and size hung on pegs on the wall. Some were fur-lined, some had blunted spikes, some were made of wood, some of plastic.

Taking one off the wall, Ramey tested it against his upper thigh, slapping it hard but not as hard as he thought Harte would. The sting caused him to draw in a deep breath and, pleased with his choice, he turned to face his Master.

That particular thought stopped him in his tracks even as he devoured the sight of the sexy man reclining on the bed. Harte's blond hair gleamed, his eyes were bright and a smile rested on those harsh features, making him look younger. Knowing he could easily commit to this man without ever even having sex with him caused Ramey's feet to move forward. He reached Harte and knelt, presenting the paddle he'd chosen across both open palms and bowing his head.

Harte took the paddle from him as he sat up. "Up here. Put that sexy body right here. Wait. Lose the G-string. I want to see that cock."

Slipping the G-string off, Ramey felt his dick bounce. He barely resisted stroking himself as he looked at Harte's face. Harte's eyes had narrowed a little and his mouth opened as he licked his lips. Harte reached forward and cupped Ramey's balls, squeezing them once, then again before releasing them to stroke Ramey's prick. "No hair, huh? I figured as much when I saw you onstage, but wasn't positive."

"Hairless works better under costumes, Sir."

"Hmmm....Now, across my legs, sub. Five swats to start and we'll see where we are."

"Yes Sir." Stretching himself across Harte's legs, he felt the smoothness of the leather under his body. Harte's warmth came through to keep him from feeling at all chilled and Ramey held himself ready. Harte slid one hand down his back to his ass, squeezing each globe, pressing slightly against the welts from his earlier flogging. Ramey hissed in a breath and released it in a rush when the paddle hit his right butt cheek.

"One, Sir." He heard the breathlessness in his own voice, the anticipation. Another stinging swat landed, this time on his upper thigh. "Two, Sir."

Harte rubbed the spot he'd just swatted. "Damn, that's a pretty sight. You okay, sub?"

"I'm good, Sir."

"Good, 'cause I'm not done with you." The third and fourth swats landed on his left butt cheek and left upper thigh and Ramey heard his voice going higher even as Harte's seemed to be getting lower. The fifth strike hit him and Ramey felt his body floating. It took him a moment to realize that somehow Harte had picked him up and put him face-down on the bed.

Ramey started to slide his knees up to better present his ass for what he hoped would be a hard, fast fuck, but felt Harte turning him to the side. "You okay, baby?"

All he could do was nod at the endearment, but apparently that was enough. Harte got off the bed and unlaced his pants. Ramey lifted himself a little to watch and caught Harte's chuckle.

"Too bad I didn't bring my handcuffs. I'd love to cuff you to the bed and fuck you that way."

"Yes Sir." Harte laughed out loud then, even as he held up a familiar-looking bottle.

"They think of everything around here. Condoms and lube in a nice little basket, right beside the bed. You ready for my cock, sub? Or do you want a few more swats?"

"Cock, please, Sir."

"Where do you want it, sub? You want it in your mouth or your ass?"

"This is your ass to fuck, Sir. Your mouth to take. Whatever pleases you."

Harte's eyes seemed to spark at that and he got on the bed at Ramey's side. He leaned down to kiss him again, another one of those awe-inspiring kisses. Ramey sighed as Harte moved away from him. He could get so used to those kisses. "I'm going to fuck you, sub. Hard and deep, and you're not to come until I tell you to, clear?"

“Yes Sir.”

Harte moved behind him, pulling one of the pillows down from the head of the bed and shoving it under Ramey’s stomach as he rolled him back onto his stomach. “God, that’s a pretty sight. That ass is nice and red and you’ve got an amazing body, baby. Must be all that dancing, huh? Keeps you in shape, doesn’t it?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Ramey, you have permission to talk anytime we’re together. I like the sound of your voice, understood?” Harte covered his cock in one of the condoms as he spoke.

“Yes Sir. Thank you. Please fuck me.”

“With pleasure.” Harte squirted lube onto Ramey’s ass, pushing one finger into him and spreading the lube around. He squirted more lube around his opening, probing with two fingers, stretching him, and then Ramey felt the head of Harte’s cock pressing against his ass. With slow rocking motions, Harte pressed his cock inside Ramey as he squeezed Ramey’s sore ass at the same time.

Ramey had to concentrate hard not to come, but Harte had told him not to so he wouldn’t. He could feel every long hard inch going into his body and arched his back so that Harte’s strokes hit that spot inside that made chills break out on his body. Harte leaned over him, fucking hard and fast even as he kissed and gently bit at Ramey’s neck. Turning his head, Ramey hoped for a kiss and Harte complied with that unspoken request.

Ramey moaned and moved one hand down his body to pinch the head of his cock. He removed his hand before Harte could reprimand him and tried to concentrate on the feel of Harte’s cock sliding in and out of his ass instead of on his need to come.

Harte squeezed his eyes shut even as he moved his hips harder and faster, shoving his cock deep into Ramey. The little sounds Ramey made, the small motions as he pressed back into Harte’s thrusts. The absolutely gorgeous redness of his ass from Harte’s paddle. All of it was going straight to his head—and not the one that did most of his thinking. He’d nearly come just from entering Ramey, but fucking him was possibly one of the best experiences of his entire life.

He felt Ramey’s hand move again and knew the other man was heading for his own cock. With a devilish grin, he reached around Ramey’s body and stroked the steel rod for himself. Ramey cried out, bucking harder against Harte’s thrusts as he fought his own need to come.

Sliding his hand up and down Ramey’s cock with the same rhythm he used to fuck him, Harte leaned as far as he could over Ramey’s back and whispered, “Come,” in his ear. Ramey shouted as cum spurted immediately from his cock. Harte kept stroking him until he felt Ramey shudder, and then he let go of his dick, grabbed his hips and really pounded into

him until his own orgasm hit him. Squeezing his eyes shut and feeling his muscles quivering, Harte gave himself over to the rapture, filling the condom with his own cum.

Gently pulling his cock out of Ramey, Harte fell to the side, breathing hard. Ramey slumped beside him. Harte felt Ramey take his hand and forced his eyes open to see Ramey licking his fingers, cleaning the come from them. Harte chuckled softly. "Give me a minute, baby, and I'll get something to clean you off."

"No Sir. That is for me to do. Thank you." Ramey pressed a soft kiss to his mouth and Harte felt him getting off the bed. Since he still couldn't feel his legs, he stayed put. A soft warm wet cloth caressed his skin, wiping away sweat and taking the spent condom with it.

"I thought after-care was the Dom's responsibility."

"It is, but this is my pleasure, if you allow it, Sir. You are so gorgeous, Sir."

"Ahhh, c'mere." Pulling Ramey down beside him, he kissed him again. He adored kissing Ramey, the guy responded so readily.

Ramey curled into Harte. He knew they couldn't sleep here even though he wanted to do just that. Harte explored his face with his lips, sometimes just touching him gently then pressing a warmer kiss to his flesh. A niggling doubt weaseled its way up. What if this was just a one-time thing? What if Harte was just trying the lifestyle out?

Then Ramey remembered that this hot man who'd just paddled then fucked his ass was a cop. What if...

"Sir," Ramey pressed his hands against the hard chest to create a little breathing room. "I need to know. Is this...are you..."

His heart began to race as his skin grew cool. Harte's blue eyes seemed like endless points of sky. Ramey felt dizzy as his mind raced. The guy was a cop. Ramey was a stripper. No way would this ever work. As Harte drew in a breath, a soft knock came at the door.

Ramey jumped at the reprieve. "I'll see who that is."

Ignoring the "no" felt like nails down a chalkboard, but his sense of self-preservation kicked into overdrive. His relief at seeing Master Jason and Leo nearly made him weep. He tried to be casual but his voice trembled.

"The bartender told us where you were. I should have been clearer about leaving. My intention was that you not leave the main room, Ramey. Donovan, you and I will discuss this." The chill in Master Jason's voice couldn't be clearer.

Ramey swallowed hard as he glanced apologetically over his shoulder at Harte. He would definitely trade Master Jason's anger for the time he'd just spent with Harte. "Is it time to go home, Sir?"

Winters cocked his head, then nodded. "Donovan, I'll call you tomorrow."

When Harte gave a short, almost curt nod, Ramey fought the urge to go back to him. Harte seemed lost somehow and it made Ramey want to kneel before him to pledge his undying service. He resisted the other word. It was too soon and too rare in his experience for that to happen.

He pulled on his G-string while Harte watched silently. With Master Jason and Leo standing in the hall just outside the door, the energy in the room had gone from heated to downright chilly. Ramey's confusion threatened to overwhelm him. He wanted to stay with Harte, he wanted to be home. He needed a cocktail and some loud, pounding music forcing every other thought out of his brain. Maybe he just needed to work out.

He needed Harte. Instead he stood silently as Master Jason clipped the borrowed leash to his collar and then to his belt. The three of them made their way through the club to the dressing room and then to the car. Ramey curled into the corner of the backseat and closed his eyes.

"Ramey, faking sleep is only going to postpone the inevitable." Leo's voice drifted from the front.

"Let him be, boy. He needs some time." Although Jason's voice was soft, even Ramey heard the steel. He was thankful for it. He did need space to sort things out. Anything that moved him beyond this place of feeling so lost.

Instead of just stopping and dropping him off, Master Jason got out of the car in front of his building. Master Jason held his chin after they hugged. "Ramey, I am available for discussion after six tomorrow night. Please come see me."

Nodding, Ramey wrapped his arms around him again. He reached out to squeeze Leo's hand then let himself into his building. The elevator seemed too closed in so he opted to run the stairs just to let some steam off. He reached the third floor easily.

Once inside, he turned on his computer. He cranked some trance music then poured himself a glass of red wine. Ramey flopped down on the couch but popped back up restlessly.

What was it about Harte that had him so wound up? He massaged his head with both hands while trying to get into the passive state of mind this music usually transported him to. A glance at the clock told him it was just after two in the morning. He wondered what Harte was doing. Had he stayed at the club? Found another sub to practice on?

What was he thinking anyway to get involved with a cop? That could only lead to trouble. His parents had always distrusted cops and they'd passed that on to him with their nomadic lifestyle and lack of any real parental guidance. They'd essentially kicked him out of the house when he was just sixteen because they just weren't interested in him being there anymore, and because they couldn't deal with his BDSM tendencies.

From there he'd had a few run-ins with cops himself. He didn't trust them even though there'd been one or two who had tried to help him. He had the feeling that Harte might be one of those cops, the good ones. He'd shown some compassion when his partner had told Ramey about Kevin's death. He had taken the initiative to learn about being a Dom before coming to the club, and he'd done a damn good job of it for someone new to the lifestyle.

Ramey wanted to spend more time with him, in or out of the club scene.

"Damn it. I don't even have his number." Ramey set the glass of wine down hard enough to slosh a bit over the edge. "This is crap."

Getting on his stationary bike, Ramey sucked in a deep breath as his recently paddled and fucked ass hit the hard seat. As he found a somewhat comfortable spot, he set the time for forty-five minutes and peddled like he could actually get somewhere.

Harte stared at the closed door. What the hell had just happened? Could Ramey be that casual about sex? Then he laughed. Of course he could. He was a hot stripper sub who apparently was wanted by everyone, Dom or not.

And Harte was just someone who didn't know the first thing about Domination other than how it made him feel.

Dragging a hand over his face, he decided he needed more information. Even after talking with Winters and Master Thomas and doing some research on the Internet, he didn't feel that he knew enough. After dressing, he went back out to the bar. The club was still hopping but it felt empty without Ramey. Another sub offered himself but Harte refused. He leaned his elbows on the bar.

"Hey there, handsome. More coffee?" Tasha's friendly smile got one in return even if he didn't feel it.

"Yeah. Can I ask you some questions?"

She grinned as she poured the java. "Absolutely. We bartenders are the same everywhere. I'm here to listen. What's your name, anyway?"

"Harte. Tell me something, Tasha, what drew you into this?"

"You mean this particular den of iniquity or just the lifestyle?" She laughed and sipped from a glass of water.

He laughed with her as he picked up the coffee cup. "The lifestyle. Even someone as new to this as I am can see the appeal of this particular place."

"Well, that's a delicate question, Master Harte."

"Wait, stop right there. How do you know I prefer to be in control?"

"Your demeanor? The very butch haircut? Or maybe it was the fact that about ninety minutes ago you were standing right here with a nearly naked guy on a leash giving him water

from your hand?" She raised a red eyebrow at him with a "duh, asshole" expression on her face.

"Okay, busted. So, are you also a Dominant?"

"Like I said, that's a very delicate question. I used to be in the lifestyle twenty-four seven as a slave. When my Master and I parted ways, it took me a long time to get my head back on straight, you'll pardon the pun." Tasha sipped at her water again and focused her very green eyes on his face.

"Someone gave me a special business card, told me to call the number, that I'd find what I was looking for. After spending some time with Mistress Dru, the manager here, I realized why I'd been so unhappy with my former Master. You see, Harte, I'm not a sub or a Dom. I'm both, a switch. Depending on who I'm attracted to, who I'm in a scene with, I can take either role.

"Now, your boy Ramey? He's a total sub and I can't see you ever giving up control for a very long period of time. Am I right?"

"Yeah, you are. So you can go both ways? And you'll pardon that pun." As he intended, she laughed again.

"Exactly! So answer this, Master Harte. How did you feel when Ramey trusted you enough to let you take control, to tell him what you wanted, what you were going to do, what was going to happen while the two of you were together?"

"Like the king of the mountain."

"And how did Ramey react?"

"He was great. So responsive, so..." Looking up at Tasha, Harte smiled. "He was amazing."

"So, you've got this amazing guy who lets you tell him what to do, who responds to you in ways you never dreamed of, and he just left the bar with someone else? What's wrong with you?"

"Our lifestyles are so different. He's a dancer, a stripper. I'm a..." Harte hesitated then met her eyes again. "I'm a cop." His voice came out low, he didn't want that particular fact broadcast in this venue.

"Yeah, that doesn't surprise me. Listen, Harte, let me break this down for you. You're gay. You're in a profession that doesn't take too kindly to people being gay. You're probably in the closet at work. Now you've discovered that you're also a sexual Dominant."

The look she gave him was half-amused and half-understanding. "As if your life wasn't complicated enough, let's just add the cherry to that particular shit sundae, the guy you're totally attracted to is a sub, which is a great thing, but he's also a stripper. That's not so great with your job. So what do you do? Do you let him slip through your hands and into someone

else's or do you take a chance? I bet if you came out at work your co-workers wouldn't be a bit surprised."

The other bartender's voice reached them. Harte looked up to discover that the bar had become crowded.

"It's last call, Harte. I've got to go before this crowd turns ugly. Just think about what I said." With a quick squeeze of his hands, she moved away from their little corner of the bar and started filling other drink orders. Harte finished his coffee, left the cup on the bar with a generous tip and made his way back to the entrance.

The same bouncer stood there. He smiled briefly at Harte as he held open the door. "Did you have a good evening, Master Harte?"

"Yes, Hayden, thank you."

"Come back soon, Sir."

Harte made his way back to his car and sat behind the wheel for a few minutes. Glancing at the clock on the dash, he saw it was just after two. He was off tomorrow and wondered how much trouble he'd be asking for if he went back to Pulse or to Ramey's apartment. Harte had the address from his earlier interview and no way was he finished with Ramey. He wanted more, a lot more from that particular sexy stripper.

Despite the fact that being with Ramey could mean the end of his career as he knew it, he could not stop thinking about the other man. With a sigh, Harte started the car and headed for home. It wasn't a good time to be making this decision. He needed some sleep and he had some work to do around the house before he went back to work.

Even after that particular pep talk, the discussion with Tasha kept running through his mind. Did his co-workers really know he was gay? How could they? He'd always been so careful, so in control. No one in his family knew he was gay...did they?

Entering his home, he went straight to the kitchen for a glass of water. His thoughts were way too deep for this time of the morning. He stripped in the bedroom and pulled on a pair of cotton shorts before heading to the spare bedroom and the treadmill. A nice run should calm his mind enough to let him sleep. He'd tackle everything tomorrow—including one sexy sub who wouldn't stay out of his brain.

Chapter Five

Ramey knocked on the office door, waiting for Jason's acknowledgement before pushing it open and entering the room. Jason put his pen down and indicated the chairs in front of his desk.

"Have a seat, Ramey. You okay?"

"A little tender, but I'm fine."

"Good. I'll be sure to let Leo know. He was worried about you. Now tell me about Harte." Jason leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of him but never taking his eyes off Ramey.

Knowing it wouldn't do him any good to ignore the question, Ramey took a deep breath.

"He's amazing. Tentative but so damn in control at the same time. And you know he's gorgeous."

"Was he good to you, Ramey? Did he hurt you?"

"Yes. I mean, no! I mean." Taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly, Ramey started over. "He was good to me, Sir. He didn't hurt me, he paddled the hell out of my ass and then fucked me like there's no tomorrow, but..."

"But?"

"He's a cop, Sir. What is he doing with someone like me?"

"Ramey..."

"No, I know it's stupid. He's not really with me, right? I'm just someone he was attracted to and it was just a hook-up. There's nothing more to it than that, right? I'm just being stupid, just hoping for more. Just wishing my life away. Well, wish in one hand and shit in the other, right?"

"Quiet!" The absolute command in the single word snapped Ramey right back to reality. With his heart pounding in his chest and his emotions high, he met Jason's gaze then immediately dropped his eyes.

"You are absolutely wrong, Ramey. Yes, Harte is a cop and yes, he's new to the D/s lifestyle, you're right about that. However, the man is more than attracted to you and he took to being your Master like the proverbial duck to water. Ramey, look at me."

Taking a deep breath, Ramey lifted his eyes to meet Jason's. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with what you are or what you do. Yes, you dance for a living. You take off your clothes in front of roomfuls of people. But you are not a whore and you are more than worthy of love. You are not less than, Ramey. You're an intelligent, totally hot man with a big heart. And you deserve someone who appreciates that."

He wanted so badly to believe what Jason was saying, but the doubts wouldn't go away. "What about his job? Is Harte going to be comfortable introducing me to his friends? 'This is my boyfriend, he's a stripper'."

Jason laughed out loud. "Ramey, have you ever heard Leo introduce me to his fellow teachers? Does he say, 'this is my boyfriend and he owns a gay strip club'? No, what you hear him say is 'this is Jason, my life-partner'. If Harte cares enough for you, his friends will accept you. Besides, I know plenty of cops who date strippers. You need to figure out if Harte is what you really want. If he is, then Leo and I will do what we can to help you, both of you." Jason's hands landed on Ramey's shoulders and he gave him a brief shake.

"Now, get your head out of your ass and decide if you want to pursue a relationship, either a real one or just the occasional scene, with Harte Donovan. And not that you asked, but I'm telling you. If you give up on this, just walk away from it without trying? Well, then you're not as smart as I always thought you were. Now get out of here and go make some money. Your public awaits."

Ramey felt a little better as he left the office. Yes, there were some major differences between his life and Harte's, but could they find a common ground? Could they find a way to mesh their lives without either of them feeling cheated? He might give himself permission to daydream about that while he danced.

An hour later, as he took to the stage, he was still daydreaming about the possibility of a relationship with Harte. The music resonated through his body. The sound of the crowd, the excitement backstage, all of it filled his senses. It took him to a place in his brain very similar to the sub space he found at the hands of a good Master.

He loved the ability to just let his body go, to move with the music and please himself and the crowd. He hit the stage with a big smile on his face and nearly fell right off the edge when he saw Harte sitting at a table up front.

He could feel Harte's eyes on him even as he continued with his routine. Every swivel of his hips, every clench of his ass, every time he ran his hands down his own body or flirted with someone in the crowd, Harte sat and watched. It turned him on in a major way to have Harte there and he started putting little extra moves and steps in his routine, wanting Harte to be turned-on too.

The crowd was mostly on their feet as they clapped and egged him on. Money hit the stage, more than he'd ever earned in one night, and Ramey couldn't stop grinning. Picking up his tips, he headed for the side of the stage, catching Harte's eye again and tilting his head to the side. He saw Harte's barely imperceptible nod and the grin stayed on his face as he headed for the dressing room.

Ramey dropped his tips into a zippered pocket of the bag in front of the mirror he used and listened to the voices of the other dancers as they got ready to go onstage. In about two minutes he'd be alone in the room, but hopefully not for long. Shortly after the last dancer left, slamming the door behind himself, a short knock sounded and the door opened. Ramey looked into the mirror and met gorgeous blue-gray eyes.

"Hi." He winced internally at the uncertainty in his voice. Ramey turned and leaned against the makeup table, staring at Harte. In the sudden silence, he heard the lock click on the door behind Harte.

"Hi yourself. C'mere." Harte crooked one finger and Ramey ran toward him. Harte caught him hard against his chest, shoving his fingers through Ramey's hair and holding his head for one of those fabulous kisses.

Ramey felt his knees going weak but steadied himself against Harte's body. Harte broke the kiss and just stared at his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"Watching you seduce every goddamn man in the room. Christ, Ramey, you're really good at this."

"Seduction?" Hearing the playful tone in Harte's voice, he responded in kind and was rewarded by a smile crossing those features.

"Yes, and dancing. You've been doing this awhile?"

"Yes. And we're about to be interrupted. The others will be back in here in just a few minutes."

"What time do you get off?"

"Midnight. The shows all stop then, even though the bar stays open until three."

"Meet me at the bar for a drink."

"Are you asking or telling me?"

One of those blond eyebrows rose and those eyes went very blue. "I'm telling you, sub."

"As you wish, Sir." Ramey leaned forward to hug Harte and felt Harte's arms come around him strong and steady. "Sir? May I ask a question?"

"Ask."

"Do your co-workers know you're gay?" The long silence was answer enough. Ramey felt his heart drop before Harte even started to answer. He kept his head on Harte's chest, listening to the beat of his heart.

"No. With my job...it's just not...I'm a good cop, Ramey. I do my job really well and I'm on the fast track right now. I don't want to derail that."

"Where do I fit in with that?"

Before Harte could answer, someone turned the doorknob and hit the door from the outside. Several confused voices sounded from the other side of the door and someone banged loudly on it. “You should go. I have to be back onstage in a few minutes.”

Without looking up, Ramey stepped away from Harte. He moved to stand in front of his mirror as the door opened. He was not going to watch Harte walk out. He didn’t want that to be his last sight of the other man. He wanted to remember the teasing and the kissing.

As the other dancers came into the room, some of them giving him hell for locking the door for a quickie with his boyfriend, Ramey just smiled. If his smile was a little strained, well, only he knew that. He honestly didn’t believe Harte would still be waiting for him and inwardly cursed himself for pushing it. Harte had taken the first step by coming to watch him dance. Ramey had just effectively shut the door in his face.

Yanking his costume off, Ramey wiped his body down with a towel and pulled out the next costume. He had two more routines to get through. He had to maintain and not look at the bar to see if Harte was waiting for him. First the solo then the final group number—he took a deep breath, he could do this.

“Ramey, turn,” his friend Tony hissed at him. The three-minute final felt like three hours and he couldn’t keep his head on the moves. Ramey clenched his jaw into a rigid smile as he caught up with the other dancers. Finally the music ended and he could flee the stage. Part of him wanted to go to the bar but another part wanted to go home and pass out—or hit the bike again.

Harte nursed his drink. He’d allowed himself one gin and tonic, since he didn’t have to be at work early. He grimaced when he saw Ramey’s concentration falter. They definitely needed to hash some things out. He wasn’t going to be the reason for Ramey losing money, or worse, his job.

As the dancers exited the stage, Harte’s pocket vibrated. He snatched the phone out then cursed when he saw the text. All officers on the Ramos case had to report for a seven-in-the-morning meeting. Damn lieutenant—didn’t he know not everyone kept his cock-a-doodle schedule? Still, he wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to talk to Ramey tonight. They had to hash this out.

He had some hard decisions to make. Did he want to come out to his co-workers? To his boss? Did he want to pursue a relationship of any kind with Ramey? He could answer a solid yes to that. Did he want to compromise his career to do that? Harder question. His musings were cut short when Ramey joined him at the bar. Though the man stood right next to him, he might as well have been across the room. Hating that distance, Harte turned to face Ramey. Before he could speak, Harte held up his hand.

"Me first. Though I'd hoped to have at least a couple of hours to spend with you tonight, now I have to be at work by seven. That means I'm going to have to hit the sack in about an hour. So, can we go somewhere?"

"Sure." Ramey's voice had lost the sad quality he'd had in the dressing room. But he sounded resigned now, and Harte didn't want that either. "There are a couple of private rooms here. Not like at Unfettered, but no one will bother us in there. I can't leave work just yet, we're on the clock until three."

"Private suits me fine. Lead the way."

Knowing Harte followed him and knowing how well the worn jeans hugged his ass, Ramey put a little extra sway in his step. Just as he'd hoped, Harte's attention was firmly on Ramey's ass when he glanced back over his shoulder. The rooms set aside for private dances weren't ideal for conversation, but then again, Ramey wasn't really interested in doing much talking right now.

He led Harte to the room farthest from the noise around the main bar. With another glance over his shoulder, Ramey opened the door then leaned against it so that Harte could precede him into the room. The lighting was dim, giving the room an almost cave-like quality. Two long upholstered couches were flush against the far wall and a big fabric ottoman on wheels could be moved in front of either couch.

There were several black and white photos on the walls, each depicting a nude male torso from shoulder to groin or buttocks. They could have been hanging in any art gallery, the lighting and composition more reminiscent of high art than porn.

Harte looked around then walked closer to one of the photos. He studied it for a few minutes then looked back at Ramey. "This is you."

Pleasure washed through Ramey. Harte had recognized his body out of all the pictures on the walls. "Yes. All of the photos in here are of the dancers. Jason thought it would bring more intimacy into the room."

"He's right." Harte turned to study the other photos, then came back to the middle of the room. "Ramey, you asked me a question in the dressing room, and I want to explain my answer."

"You don't—"

"Stop." At the definite command, Ramey quieted. Harte moved closer to him. "I'm damn good at what I do and my career is very important to me. However..." Harte cupped Ramey's face, tilting it up slightly and making Ramey meet his eyes.

"I'm willing to compromise. I want to know if you and I can be more than just a one-night hook-up in a place like Unfettered. I want to know more about you and I want you to know more about me. I don't know where you fit in with what I do, but I do know I'm willing to ex-

plore this a bit. So what do you say? Want to give this a shot?"

Ramey nodded and stepped into Harte's embrace. He wrapped his arms around Harte's waist and started to sway.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, where I come from we call this dancing. I figured a smart guy like you would know that."

The sharp smack on his still slightly tender ass had Ramey sucking in a deep breath and lifting his face to Harte's smiling one. "Don't get smart with me, I'll turn you over my knee."

"Promises, promises." Ramey snuggled even closer, enjoying the feel of Harte's muscular body against his. They were close enough in height to make dancing smooth and not awkward, but Harte was bulkier, his muscles different from Ramey's own more slender build. He liked the contrast. He felt Harte chuckle even as his arms tightened a bit around Ramey.

Though he wasn't used to leading, he liked the feel of Harte responding to his movements. He liked it even more when Harte's hands slid down to his hips, pulling his lower body even closer to Harte's. Ramey could feel Harte's cock thickening behind his jeans and turned his head to nip at Harte's jaw. The slight rasp of Harte's evening beard brushed against his own smoothly shaven cheek and he knew he'd have some beard burn when they left this room. Ramey smiled even as he nipped at Harte's jaw again.

The kiss wasn't unexpected at all. Ramey had been hoping for another one. Harte kept one hand on Ramey's lower back, his other gripped the nape of Ramey's neck, holding him right where he wanted him for this kiss. Ramey let his own hands wander, sliding around Harte's back, up to his shoulders and then moving around between them to stroke Harte's chest and pinch at his nipples. Harte made a rough sound in his throat and dove back in for another kiss.

This time when Harte let him up for air, Ramey stepped back. They were both breathing like they'd run a marathon. Harte's eyes practically glowed and Ramey reached up and touched Harte's lips, then his cheek, then his forehead. Harte's eyes closed briefly as he tilted his head toward Ramey's caress, then he snared Ramey with another smoldering look.

"How much longer can we count on being uninterrupted?"

"Probably another half hour. The crowd's not that big tonight." Ramey swallowed hard then stepped forward. "Do you want me, Sir?"

"Good God, yes. But what I want from you will take longer than thirty minutes, Ramey."

"But thirty minutes is what we have, Sir. May I suggest we make the most of it?" Ramey dropped to one knee in front of Harte, his hands going immediately to Harte's belt. He kept his gaze down until Harte cupped his chin and tilted his head up.

"Is this what you want, Ramey? I thought we'd talk first."

"We can talk later." Ramey succeeded in getting Harte's belt undone and his jeans open. The dark boxer briefs weren't a surprise though Harte hadn't worn anything under his leathers the other night. Ramey had just figured Harte for a boxer brief kind of guy. Leaning forward, he ran his open mouth over Harte's cock, blowing warm air through the soft cotton fabric.

"Ah, sweet....suck it. Suck my cock." Harte's hands threaded through his hair and Ramey quickly pulled the briefs down so that Harte's hard dick sprang free. Ramey didn't waste time, but took Harte into his mouth and then deep throat him. Harte's hips jerked convulsively and Ramey heard, "Fuck!" and then Harte was thrusting forward, fucking his mouth.

Ramey slid his hands around to Harte's butt, shoving Harte's clothes farther out of his way. He loved Harte's smell, his taste and especially his cock. He could suck him for hours. Harte pulled away much too soon, yanking Ramey to his feet and tugging at his clothes. "Off, now."

Loving that he'd reduced Harte to one-syllable words, Ramey quickly stripped out of his faded jeans and slipped his feet out of his shoes before jerking his shirt off over his head. Before he could move closer again, Harte spun him around and pushed him toward one of the couches. Ramey started to kneel on the couch, presenting his ass to Harte, but couldn't stop his gasp of surprise when Harte spun him around again.

A second push, this one to his chest, had Ramey landing breathlessly on the couch. Harte leaned over him, tonguing his nipple before sucking hard on Ramey's chest. Ramey ran his hands over Harte's short hair and down his neck, loving the feel of Harte's teeth and tongue. "Ahhh. That feels so good, Sir."

"Master. You called me that last night. I like the sound of it." Harte kissed him hard as he pinched Ramey's neglected nipple.

"Yes, Master." Ramey arched up into Harte's mouth, then gasped again as Harte released his nipple with an audible pop and curled his fingers around Ramey's throbbing cock.

"You're damn good at sucking cock, sub, and I loved fucking that tight ass. Now I want to know how long you can keep from coming. If I suck your cock, if I lick your balls and ass, will you come, Ramey?"

"N-n-no, Master." Ramey stuttered out an answer, his brain having gone completely numb with the feel of Harte's hand stroking his cock. "Not until," another gasp escaped him when Harte cupped and squeezed his balls. "Not until you command."

"Good. Don't come. Not yet." Harte's warm mouth closed over the head of Ramey's cock, and he couldn't stop the shout that escaped. Master Harte chuckled again then licked his way down to Ramey's sac. Sucking Ramey's balls into his mouth as he stroked his cock, Master Harte took total control over Ramey. All Ramey could do was toss his head back, gasp for air

and concentrate on not coming!

Ramey opened his eyes, watching Master Harte's head moving, feeling his mouth surrounding Ramey's cock and his hands gripping, squeezing and playing with Ramey's asshole. Master Harte licked his way down Ramey's cock again, then licked his way around Ramey's balls before sucking his forefinger into his own mouth and pressing it against Ramey's ass.

"I'm going to fuck you with my fingers while I suck your cock, Ramey. You are not to come until I tell you, clear?"

"Yes, Master." Ramey bent his knees, holding himself open for his Master's possession.

"You're so fucking gorgeous. Looking at you like this, I just want to fall on you like a madman and fuck you until the sun comes up."

"Yes, Master."

Harte laughed again then tilted Ramey's hips up even farther, licking and sucking on Ramey's sac before moving his tongue down and wetting Ramey's asshole. Harte sucked his fingers into his mouth again, then gently pressed against Ramey's opening, pushing in just to the first knuckle before pulling out and pressing in again. Harte set up a slow rhythm, never entering Ramey fully, just teasing him, even as he started sucking on Ramey's cock again.

Ramey gripped his knees, holding himself open, groaning his excitement and approval of every move Harte made. He could feel his impending explosion building and forced himself to think of something, anything else. Still, the warmth of Harte's mouth, the smell of his skin and the feel of his fingers, now going deep inside Ramey's ass, all combined to pull him closer and closer to the edge.

Opening his eyes, he saw Harte staring at him as he tongued the head of Ramey's cock. Harte pushed his fingers even deeper into Ramey's ass, hitting that sweet spot deep inside, and took his mouth off Ramey long enough to whisper, "Come now," and Ramey shouted as Harte covered the head of his cock again, swallowing every drop of Ramey's cum.

Ramey's spine felt totally loose when Harte lifted his head, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. That was when Ramey realized that Harte's fingers were still buried in his ass. Harte pulled out slightly then thrust back in, his free hand, the one that had traces of Ramey's cum on it, went to Harte's cock, pumping it in the same way he pumped his fingers in and out of Ramey's ass.

Starting to reach for Harte, Ramey froze as he shook his head. "No, be still, sub. Just take it. I'm going to come all over you and I want you to rub my cum into your chest. I want you to wear my scent until you get home, clear?"

"Yes, Master." Instead of touching Harte, Ramey grabbed his own knees again, holding himself open for Harte's strokes.

“Oh yeah, that’s it. That’s it.” Harte’s motion increased, both on his own cock and in Ramey’s ass. “Fuck, yeah.”

With another groan, Harte pumped his cock into his fist, and cum shot out the end, landing right in the middle of Ramey’s chest, another spurt hit his chin, and Ramey remembered what his Master had told him to do. Releasing one leg, Ramey started rubbing the sticky trails into his skin.

Harte’s head fell back and he slowly moved his hand away from Ramey’s ass, leaning back against the back of the couch and staring at Ramey with a grin. Ramey sat up, practically begging for a kiss, and jumped, banging his head on Harte’s chin as someone knocked twice on the door.

“That means our time is up.” Rubbing the spot on his head where he’d bashed into Harte, Ramey looked up.

“We should probably get out of here then.”

“Yes, Master.” Harte grinned at him then, and gave him the kiss he’d been needing.

“Get dressed, sub. We still need to talk.”

They quickly got back into their clothes, the smell of sex hanging in the air and clinging to both of them. Ramey loved the way Harte had branded him. When they left the private room, they left hand in hand. There was no sign of whoever had knocked so Harte assumed it was an early-warning system. They stopped in the dressing room long enough for Ramey to grab his bag, then headed toward the main bar.

Harte found Winters. After a brief conversation, he got the club owner to agree to let Ramey off sooner rather than later.

“I still want to talk with you tonight, Ramey. Can you spare me an hour or so? Winters released you to me for the night.”

The flash of surprise and pleasure thrilled Harte. Ramey’s slightly breathless response also warmed him. He wanted to fuck him senseless again but needed a bit of recovery time.

“There’s a twenty-four-hour place a few blocks away,” Ramey offered.

Harte nodded. “I’ll drive.”

Leading the way out of the bar, he was very aware of Ramey following him. The similarity to the night before hit him and Harte smiled slightly. The satisfaction he’d achieved in the private room equaled the anticipation he’d felt last night but was quickly being replaced with trepidation. How could they make this relationship be about more than hot sex when he couldn’t keep his hands off Ramey?

They reached the car and he hit the button to unlock the doors. The sudden searing pain on the back of his neck caught him by surprise. Ramey’s angry shout ricocheted in his head

as his knees hit the ground.

Reaching for the nonexistent gun at the small of his back, Harte tried to focus on what was happening around him. Shouts from his left drew his attention.

"Fucking ass fuckers! Kick their ass, Jimmy." Two white assailants in their mid-twenties had Ramey backed up to a wall. Harte fought his way to his feet as Ramey shouted again. His head swam as he clung to the car for support. What he saw surprised the shit out of him.

Ramey fought like a man possessed, or one in the middle of a mixed-martial-arts fight. Hands and feet flew as he took on the two assailants.

"C'mon, bitches, bring it. You assholes are going down. Nobody fucks with me or mine." The ferocity in Ramey's tone was backed up by the solid connection of his fist with the first perp's jaw.

Harte got to his feet and waded into the mix. By the time Harte made his first swing, Ramey had the first asshole on the ground and his foot made contact with the left side of the other guy's face just after Harte's fist hit the right side. The man dropped like a stone and Harte felt like doing the same. His head pounded and his breath came hard. "Shit, that hurts."

Ramey practically flew to Harte's side. He touched the back of his head with gentle care. When it came away bloody, Ramey went to his knees beside Harte. "Oh my God, you're bleeding, Harte! Oh fuck!"

Ramey turned white with one hand reaching toward him while the other wrapped around his stomach. Harte remembered Ramey's aversion to blood. He let himself slide back down to the ground, using his car for support. Harte pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Who are you calling?" Ramey's voice was hoarse but the color was returning to his face.

Harte grimaced when he spoke. "The station. We need a car out here to pick these guys up."

"Do you want me to stay?" Ramey still knelt an arm's length away from him.

"What? Of course I do. You'll need to give a statement, Ramey. And guess what?"

"What?"

"You haven't passed out." Harte added a smile even though the movement hurt like hell. He was rewarded by Ramey's soft chuckle.

"No, I haven't. Wow. I already hear sirens. Someone else must have called the cops."

Ramey's tentative look tore through Harte. He looked over his shoulder toward the sound of the approaching cars. Harte watched him tremble before he quietly asked, "What do you want me to say about why I was here? With you?"

"Just tell the truth, Ramey. We were leaving the bar and before we got in the car we got jumped."

"But won't they wonder about you?" Ramey gestured back toward the club.

"Maybe, but we still need to talk. I don't want to lose this chance to talk to you. We might have a break in a case, and I may be out of touch for a few days."

"I'm not going to cost you your job or your reputation, Harte. I'm not going to do that to you." Ramey smiled sadly even as he backed up on his knees and looked over his shoulder again. Two uniformed cops got out of their patrol car, drawing their guns as they did so.

"Over here!" Ramey waved at them. "He might need an ambulance. I saw the whole thing, officers. Those two men just came out of nowhere and attacked him. I was just getting off work and heading home."

Ramey continued to babble, speaking so fast Harte couldn't get a word in edgewise. He watched the cops and Ramey, letting one of the officers check the back of his head and hearing them call for an ambulance. He'd let the paramedics check him, but no way would he go to the hospital. The two men were handcuffed as a second patrol car pulled up followed by the ambulance.

Though Ramey had moved away from him, Harte saw Jason and some of the other dancers come out of the club. Though none of the cops asked what he was doing in the neighborhood, he could see the question on their faces. Ramey might have thought to spare his reputation, but he didn't seem to realize that that particular cat was probably already out of the bag and howling his damn stupid lungs out.

Harte watched as Jason walked over to the cops and put his hand on Ramey's shoulder. He wanted to get to his feet and stop him. He knew he was too late when Ramey walked away with Winters. Pain unrelated to his head injury lanced through him. Ramey didn't even look back. It was as though he really was just some random man who'd been mugged.

"Gay bashing's a hate crime. You don't have to testify, but it would help if you did."

Harte slumped back against his car, trying to focus on the paramedic flashing her light in his eye. She glanced over her shoulder at the uniform who was talking to him. The female officer nodded at the paramedic with familiarity.

"Hey, Jill." She turned back to Harte. "Look. I know who you are, okay? The other unit is questioning bystanders. Are you going to testify or not? I can leak this out to the community and they will raise holy hell over another bashing down here."

Harte blinked away the intensity of the light and the surprise. "I don't know, Officer. I need to think about it."

She nodded as she stood up. "Do you want one of us to drive you and your car home?"

The paramedic hissed at that. Harte knew she was going to insist that he take a ride in the box to the hospital. He threw cold water on that immediately. "No doctors. I'm fine. Clean me up and, yes, I'll take you up on that ride home."

Luckily the other uniform drove him home. The ride back was quiet and fast—just what he needed. He had to sort out what had happened back in that alley.

Entering his house, he threw his keys across the room. He'd blown it, totally blown it. It had all been so out of control with everything happening way too fast. He should have told Ramey that he was ready to come out, to take the chance on losing his job. He should have...

No. Ramey wouldn't have believed that, just as Harte wasn't sure he meant it. He grabbed one of the reusable ice packs he kept in the freezer. Might as well go to sleep for now. He had a feeling tomorrow was going to be a hell of a long day.

Chapter Six

Ramey sipped at the glass of wine Jason had poured for him and leaned back. "Well, one good thing came out of all of this. I didn't faint at the sight of Harte's blood."

"Stop it." Jason leaned over Ramey, glaring at him. "This thing, whatever it is between you and Harte, is not over."

"I don't know about that. He's probably busy with work. Plus, he probably won't want to see me for a while, since all those cops know I work at Pulse."

"Bullshit. Harte's not going to get rid of you that quickly. He'll figure something out."

"But that's just it. I don't want him to figure something out. I don't want him to have to try. If we can't be open with even one part of our relationship, how can we ever get further with anything else? Harte can't tell anyone he's gay and if that's true, how can he be honest with me or with himself about any other aspect of our lifestyle?"

Jason flopped down on the couch beside Ramey. "I never thought about it that way. Damn it, Ramey, do you have to prove how fucking intelligent you are right now?"

Ramey huffed out a laugh. "Jason, I know what it means to hide who you are for more than one reason. My parents dealt just fine with me being gay. They had a lot of gay friends in their artsy little circle. What they couldn't deal with was my need to be controlled during sex. See, to them that made no sense.

"They couldn't have cared less about me being into men. It took them catching me in the barn with one of our neighbors while he used a riding crop on my ass. That totally twisted them up. That's when they kicked me out."

"Jesus, Ramey, how old were you?"

"Sixteen. He was my first Master and my first lover. A much older man, all of twenty-six." Ramey laughed then sobered as he remembered that time in his life.

"I resolved right then that I wouldn't hide who I was. In the gay community, I didn't have to because there were a lot weirder things out there than me being a sub. Though I want to be with Harte, I can't live in the darkness. I can't hide from my own community, and I won't. But I also can't force Harte not to hide his preferences.

"Hell, if I tried that with you or any other Master, you'd keep me from sitting down for a week with the thrashing you'd give me. Why should Harte be any different?"

Jason hummed a long deep sound. "You are right. I don't think Harte is any different. And I don't think he is any good for you. In fact, I'm going to tell him you're off limits."

Ramey's response kicked in so hard he didn't have time to filter. "Like hell you will."

At Jason's cocked eyebrow response, Ramey screwed up his face and added, "Um...Sir."

The bellow of laughter was not what he expected. Nor did he prepare for the bear hug Jason wrapped him into. "That tells me everything I need to know, Ramey. Everything. Be ready to go to Unfettered tonight. You and Master Harte need to have a long talk. I am going to do something incredibly cruel to you, Ramey. Worse than telling Harte to leave you alone."

"What's that, Sir?" Ramey couldn't think of anything worse than not being able to see Harte again. But when Jason answered him, he realized he hadn't thought of everything.

"I'm going to give you both the gift of honesty. Balls-to-the-walls honesty, Ramey."

"Do you think he's being honest with you, Detective? Right now the lover is the leading suspect, but we've got nothing on him."

Harte fought the urge to roll his eyes. Normally he had the utmost respect for his superior, but the questions the man was asking with regard to this case had him stumped. They'd already cleared Carl Davis. The guy had a rock-solid alibi.

In fact, as a big-shot lawyer, his alibi was more than just rock solid. He'd been having dinner with two of the governor's aides about some charity event they were all involved in.

"I've heard rumors that they weren't just gay, that they were into some really...well, freaky stuff. Whips, chains, that's just not normal. I want you to look into the lead that this might have been some gay sex thing gone wrong."

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't think that has anything to do with this. All indications we have are pointing to either a random mugging or gay bashing gone horribly wrong." Phipps, the lead investigator, spoke up.

This time Harte couldn't control his reaction. He'd been so buried under other cases he hadn't heard about an increase in gay bashing until last night when the uniform had said something about mobilizing the community. "Has there been an increase in gay bashing?"

"You should know, Donovan. You were in the neighborhood last night and got your own head bashed. What were you doing there anyway?" One of the other cops spoke up before anyone else could.

"Shut up, Foley. No one asked your opinion." McKinley threw the cap of his pen at the other cop. "Donovan doesn't have to explain himself to you or anyone else."

Harte glanced at his partner, who looked at him and grinned. He knew that shit-eating grin and knew he was about to catch some major flack.

"Just because he went back to Pulse to watch the pretty boys dance, hell, we won't hold that against him. I have to admit, if I was into playing hide-the-hockey-stick, I'd have been right there with him. Besides, if my partner is gay, what business is that of yours?"

"What?" Harte's voice joined the rest of the exclamations and McKinley got to his feet, heading for the coffeepot.

"Puh-lease. He's way too fucking polite. He's a good conversationalist. He cooks. He lives in the cleanest apartment I've ever seen a man in. My wife has been trying to fix him up with her friends for the last two years.

"And as far as I know, he hasn't ever taken any of those women back to his place. And I know for a fact one or two of them would have done him in his car if he'd asked. So Harte likes men. So what? Don't any of you have something you'd rather the rest of us not know that we already do? Like you, Foley. Want to drop those pants and let everyone see what's under them?"

"Fuck you, McKinley."

"No thanks, I'm not interested and from what I've seen, you're not Harte's type either. Besides, I've got a hot wife waiting for me at home. Now can we please get back to the case at hand?"

Harte swallowed hard. His partner had just outed him and for now anyway, the guys had taken it completely in stride. No one had pointed at him, called him names or anything like that. They'd all just gone back to work, discussing the case. He waited until the buzz of conversation got a little louder then leaned toward McKinley. "Jeff, what does Foley wear under his pants?"

"Thongs, dude, and believe me, it ain't pretty. Walked in on him in the locker room one afternoon. Scarred me for life. So, how long have you been gay?"

"How long have you been a redneck asshole?"

"That long? Damn, son, MaryAnn was right all along. She said the only reason you'd turn her friend Stacey down was if you were gay."

"Why'd you bring it up now?"

"Well, I figure if you're going to be hanging around the club where your new boyfriend works, someone ought to know so the patrols won't ask too many questions."

"He's not my..."

"Gentlemen? Whenever you're ready to rejoin the investigation into the murder?" Their lieutenant's voice rang out loud and clear, causing both Harte and McKinley to turn their attention back to the situation at hand. Harte felt his pocket vibrate and pulled his phone out to see a text message.

Unfettered, 9PM. Be there. No excuses. JW

He didn't even wonder how Jason Winters had gotten his phone number. The only thing he wondered about right now was how soon he could get out of here.

Harte parked his car and gripped the steering wheel tightly. He'd had a trying day and had the feeling it wasn't over yet. He and Ramey needed to come to some sort of understanding

tonight. Now that everyone he worked with knew he was gay that was one less issue for them to deal with. Any repercussions from that he'd deal with as they arose, but they wouldn't involve Ramey and they wouldn't be Ramey's fault.

He got out of the car and took a deep breath. Heading toward the club, he felt the weight of the day pressing down on his shoulders. As he knocked on the door and was greeted by Hayden again, he felt some of that weight lifting.

"Good evening, Master Harte. How are you tonight?"

"I'm okay, Hayden. Thank you. Have you seen Jason, I mean Master Jason, tonight?"

"Master Jason and his Leo, along with Ramey, are already inside, Sir."

"Thank you." He walked past the doorman and into the club. There was a different vibe in there tonight, or maybe he was the one who was different. Harte bypassed the bar, though he did wave at Tasha as he went past. His goal was the three men sitting at a table. Okay, technically, one guy sitting at a table and two men kneeling at his feet.

"Winters." Harte gave back the same icy stare the guy hit him with.

"Donovan. Have a seat. We need to talk." Harte saw Ramey stiffen even as Leo reached up to touch Winters' knee.

"I'm listening." Harte took the unoccupied chair and rested his arms on the tabletop.

"I've decided that you aren't good for my friend. I think you need to explore with some other sub, not Ramey."

"Well, if I understand the way this works, that's not your decision to make. Ramey isn't yours. He's able to make his own decisions about who he becomes involved with and what that entails."

"What could you possibly offer him? A life of living in secret? The inability to go out in public without fear of reprisal from your job? Ramey deserves more than that."

"You're right. As of today, however, my job isn't an issue."

"You're giving up being a detective?"

"No. I never said that. But my partner outed me. I had a long talk with my lieutenant and my captain this afternoon. I told them that being gay had never hindered my ability to do my job in any way, that I'd been gay a lot longer than I'd been a cop, and if they had an issue with it I'd turn in my badge. Since I'm damn good at my job, they're not stupid and they don't want a lawsuit for wrongful termination on their hands, they declined." Harte paused and met Jason's eyes again.

"I told them there was someone I was interested in, that I'd met him during the course of my investigation into the death of a gay individual, and that I intended to pursue a relationship with him. I have removed myself from the investigation into Kevin's death so there won't be any issues with the DA's office once his killer is found."

Harte gave a short laugh. "I also told them that I wasn't giving up my position of first baseman on the department softball team, and since the chief desperately wants the trophy back from the fire department this year, they'll leave me alone on that as well. Now, anything else you want to know about my job and how it's going to interfere with my relationship with Ramey?"

Harte shifted back in his chair with his arms crossed across his chest. Winters narrowed his eyes.

"Your relationship with Ramey? Donovan, one scene does not equal a relationship."

"You're right, but if you'd stop interfering, maybe Ramey and I could discuss this on our own."

Winters stared hard at him for a moment then glanced at Ramey. "Ramey? Do you want to have a conversation with Master Harte?"

"Yes Sir."

"Good." Harte held out his hand, daring Winters to try to stop them from talking. Winters placed Ramey's leash in his outstretched palm, then closed his hand over Harte's with the leash trapped between them.

"There's something you need to know, Donovan."

"What's that?"

"Ramey is an incredibly loving individual and he has a lot to give to the right Master. I'm not sure you're that man, though I'm willing, for now, to give you the benefit of the doubt. However, know this. Ramey is not just my employee, he's my friend. If you hurt him in any way, you'll find yourself in trouble with the majority of the gay community. Doors you aren't even aware of will be closed to you, and losing your job will be the least of your problems." Winters let go of his hand and got to his feet.

"Leo and I will leave the table to you. Ramey, you're not to leave Unfettered without talking to me first. Clear?"

"Yes Sir."

Without another glance, Winters led his sub away. Harte clenched his fist on Ramey's leash, trembling in rage. Winters had just openly threatened him and the Dom in him was having a hard time dealing with that. However, he had something much more important to deal with than that arrogant asshole. He had a sub he needed to clear the air with and a man he definitely wanted to have sex with again kneeling on the floor in front of him.

Harte sat down and tilted Ramey's head back so he could see those bright hazel eyes again. "Ramey, I want your eyes on me, understood?"

"Yes, Master."

The thrill that went through him at those two words caused his heart and his cock to swell. Though he'd probably hurt Ramey in ways he'd never truly know, the other man still elected to call him "Master", to claim him. Now Harte had to prove to Ramey that he was worthy of that appellation.

"First, you were right."

The look of shock on that gorgeous face was worth dropping that bomb. "You heard me. You were right. Not telling my co-workers about us was wrong. It was weak. I didn't do the coming out but I would have. For the chance of us being more than just a hook-up or a couple of one-night stands."

Ramey gulped as he nodded. Harte didn't stop. "Two, I want you as my sub and as my partner. Can you be both?"

When Ramey didn't answer, Harte felt his stomach drop. Then it hit him. "You may speak freely, Ramey."

"Thank you, Master. I'm glad you're out at work. I can be your sub and happily. I..." Ramey looked down then seemed to remember Harte's command as he looked back at him. "I'm just not sure I can be a cop's partner."

It hit him harder than he expected. Harte rocked back in his chair then let the legs hit the floor with a resounding thud. "You want me to give up my job?"

Ramey interrupted him before he could say anything else. Laying a hand on his thigh, Ramey pressed his cheek against his own hand. "Oh it's not that. Let me start over. I didn't say that right. Master, it's just that I don't know if I can be the kind of partner you could be proud of. I'm a flamer who takes his clothes off for money and I like to dress in leather."

Harte snorted. "You think I didn't notice? You think I care? You're also someone who can kick some serious ass when necessary. The job you did on those two bastards the other night? Come here."

Standing, he drew Ramey to his feet. He cupped Ramey's face, reveling in the strength he saw and felt there. "Sub, I don't know how or why this happened, but I'm falling for your flaming stripper gay self. I want all of you. I don't care what others say. If they can't see the beauty and courage in you, I don't want to be around them. You are what matters to me."

He caught Ramey up into a hug that melted into a kiss. When he felt his cock growing hard, he growled, "Do I need to talk to Winters first? I want you now."

"Yes, you do need to talk to me first. Leo, stay here."

When Winters didn't order Ramey to stay as well, Harte felt a relief he didn't expect. It seemed like tacit approval from Jason Winters. Harte nodded at Ramey. "Stay with Leo."

Then he spun on his heel to follow the other Dom into a small storeroom behind the bar. They both leaned against the shelves eyeing one another. Harte knew how to play this partic-

ular scene, he'd done it enough times with suspects.

He won the waiting game when Winters cleared his throat. "I want you to know that I treasure Ramey as a friend. I meant what I said about not hurting him. Last night I questioned my own judgment about letting you test out your latent Dominant side on him. He's too rare to treat casually."

Harte nodded. "Agreed. And I'd chop off my own left nut before I hurt him. He's opened up something in me no one else ever has. Ramey feels like my missing piece."

Even as he spoke the words, he cringed at the over-emotional sound of them. But he had to be honest. Winters had to understand what Ramey meant to him.

"I do understand what you're feeling, Harte. You've just echoed words similar to the ones I said myself about Leo. I trust that you won't hurt him on purpose but what about unintentionally? Ramey isn't someone you can hide in your closet when things get rough."

At that, Harte pushed off from the wall. Jason did as well. The two men stared one another down until Harte finally spoke. "I want to punch you for saying that. I wanted to kill you for telling me he was too good for me. Then I realized you were right. He is too good for me. His submission is a gift and I will never stop thanking him for that. Dammit, do you want me to say to you what I haven't said to him yet? Fine. I love him. It's fast and it's crazy and different from any other relationship I've ever had, but I want him in my life and at my feet forever."

Something changed in the other man's face. Where there had been ice, Harte saw thawing. Jason reached out his hand and Harte took it.

"That's all I needed to hear. Now let's go get our boys. What do you say we put them up on the stocks for some spanking? I'll show you some of my techniques."

Harte smiled as he shook Jason's hand. "I'm all about learning how to pleasure my sub and turning his ass red. Lead on."

Harte saw the sigh of relief Ramey released when he and Jason returned to the table. Following Jason's lead, he took Ramey's leash and led him toward a corner of the room. Jason spoke to one of the guys wearing the bright vests, a Dungeon Monitor, he remembered, then motioned Harte forward.

Ramey's entire body pulsed with desire and excitement and no small amount of fear when he saw the two men stalking toward him.

"This is it, Leo," he whispered as his companion squeezed his hand.

"Ramey. Leo. Follow us. Don't forget the toy bag, Leo." Master Jason didn't stop. Leo and Ramey scrambled to gather the bag and hurried to catch up. When they fell into place just behind their respective Doms, they exchanged another hand squeeze, then focused on the shoulders in front of them.

St. Andrew's cross. Oh please, let it be the cross. Ramey begged in his mind but he wasn't disappointed when they stopped in front of the stocks and the bench. He knew Leo enjoyed the stocks, but they both waited to see where they would be secured.

His Master conferred with Leo's. Ramey let the warm thrill of that thought course through him. His Master. Finally the right one had come along.

"Sub."

Ramey jumped. He'd been so lost in his own happiness. "Yes, Master?"

"I want to see you face down on that bench now. Move it." The command snapped out like the lick of a whip—just enough heat to sting with the promise of more. Ramey nearly saluted but refrained. He'd have to find out how his new Master felt about military play later.

He rubbed his cheek against the soft fake leather as Harte secured his hands and ankles into place. He loved being stretched like this. His arms reached forward for the front supports while his cock nudged the top of the bench. His legs were spread apart on the two padded kneeling platforms. When Harte stood between the platforms, Ramey felt his own cock grow hard. It was the perfect height for a good, hard fucking if Harte chose to take him in public.

The soft sound of voices had him turning his head. He saw Leo smiling at him from the stocks. His smile reflected Ramey's joy back at him. Then the air changed as Harte stepped away from him.

"Master Jason is going to demonstrate strokes on Leo. I will be using you to show what I've learned. Sub, you are not to speak during this unless it is your safe word. Nod your head if you understand."

Ramey nodded. Then his world went dark as his master deftly blindfolded him. His heart pounded then he heard the first sharp smack followed by Leo's gasp.

Master Jason gave a dry commentary as he showed Harte various implements. Ramey tried to keep up with which ones were used on Leo but lost track when he heard the familiar sound of a cane striking flesh. Then he felt the air whisper against his bare flesh.

"I'm here, sub. I'm going to use my hand first. I want you to count for me. I'll give you six strokes with each toy."

Ramey jumped and shouted, "One, Sir!" as the first blow fell. He got to four before feeling his Master's hand soothing the skin that was just beginning to warm. At six, the intensity changed. Ramey felt the swat of the very familiar hairbrush.

His ass stung as the next implement brushed against it. His master carefully flogged him six times without wrapping once. Then came the slapper with its distinctive sound six times, three on each cheek. Ramey began to float as he let the pain carry him up into that high he loved so much.

He struggled to remember to count when the paddle came then wept with joy when Harte switched back to his hand. The hot, heavy swat of flesh on flesh brought pain and pleasure. His cock swung against the table's edge, driving him further up and out.

When the strokes ended, Ramey wanted to weep again. At this point he was never sure if it was because it was over or because it had finally stopped. He felt Harte press against his ass. The rough zipper sent screaming ecstasy from his ass to his mouth where it erupted in a shout of delight.

"Okay, my pet. I need your ass in a different way now, but I don't want to share that with everyone." With that, Ramey felt his bonds being released. He didn't say anything. He just continued to float as Harte lifted him into his arms. He felt safe and loved. He trusted this man with all that he was.

The feel of Ramey, warm and compliant in his arms, trusting him to take care of him, made him feel ten feet tall. Harte secured another private room from Tasha, giving her a wink as he set his sub on his feet and led Ramey away from the noise and the crowd. He might have preferred to carry him into the room, but with Ramey being just an inch or so shorter than he was, it was a bit awkward. He might have been able to carry him over one shoulder, and they might get to that eventually.

After locking the door behind them, Harte unsnapped the thong Ramey wore and ran his hands over the still glowing globes of Ramey's ass. The soft moan that sounded through the room went straight to his cock, hardening it even further. He just hoped he wouldn't come as soon as he entered his sub.

Bringing Ramey to the bed, he had him lie down on his back. The hiss Ramey let out further inflamed him. Rummaging around in the cabinet in the room, he found just what he was looking for. He knew just how to put these to use after his research on the internet.

"Sub, I'm trusting you to tell me if these restraints are too tight, clear? I want you immobile, not in pain."

"Yes, Master."

Harte grinned again as he secured Ramey's thighs in the spreader bar then hooked fleece-lined cuffs around his ankles and clipped them to the bar, opening his lover for his perusal and use. It had the added benefit of letting him see that amazing ass again. Leaning down, he sucked the head of Ramey's throbbing cock into his mouth, loving the sound torn from Ramey's throat. Feeling Ramey's hands in his hair brought his head up.

"No, that won't do. Hands up." With Ramey's immediate compliance, Harte secured his hands in another pair of the fleece-lined cuffs and then secured those to a convenient hook in the wall at the head of the bed. "Comfortable?"

“Yes, Master. Thank you.” Ramey gifted him with a smile that lit the room and Harte returned it.

“No, thank you, sub. Ramey, I will treasure you, this, always.” He leaned down and kissed his sub then got off the bed briefly to study the picture before him. He’d never seen anything sexier. Ramey’s body spread and stretched for his use, the look on Ramey’s face, his shining eyes and the smile still playing over his face.

Harte approached the bed again, this time veering toward the conspicuous basket on the bedside table. Taking out a bottle of lube and a condom, he leaned over his sub. Dropping the lube on the bed, he covered his cock, watching Ramey’s eyes flash and seeing him lick his lips. He wanted that mouth on his cock, but there was plenty of time for that. Right now, he wanted that ass.

Flipping the top off the bottle, he trailed a thin line from the head of Ramey’s cock to his ass. He spread the lube, hearing a strangled moan come from his lover, and grinned. “You have permission to speak, to scream, whatever you feel like, baby, but you don’t have permission to come, clear?”

“Yes, my Master.”

Slowly sliding a finger into Ramey’s ass, Harte wrapped his other hand around Ramey’s cock and gave him a slow squeeze from base to the red weeping head. Setting up a slow rhythm, he fucked Ramey first with one finger, then two, even as he kept stroking his cock. Ramey made incoherent sounds, turning his head from side to side as Harte kept stroking. Finally, he couldn’t take it any longer.

Pushing Ramey’s legs up even higher, Harte eased his cock into his lover. Ramey shouted at the invasion, then met Harte’s eyes, pleading with them even as his whispered “please” reached Harte.

“Not yet, baby. Hold on.” Seating his own throbbing cock in his sub, Harte withdrew almost all the way out then pushed back in. Setting up a hard, fast motion, he reached down to stroke Ramey again. He saw his sub pulling against the bindings on his wrists and knew the other man wasn’t going to last much longer. With a grin, he moved deeper, hitting Ramey’s sweet spot. Ramey screamed and Harte joined him, roaring, “Come now!”

Ramey’s cum shot out of his cock, spurting up almost to his chin, and Harte felt his own cock explode inside the condom. Ignoring his own weak limbs, Harte pulled out and dealt with the condom. Then he quickly released Ramey from his bonds and wiped a warm wet cloth over his lover, cleaning him and calming him at the same time. Wrapping Ramey in his arms, Harte felt more at ease than he’d felt in a long time. As soon as Ramey’s breathing returned to normal, Harte rolled him to his back so he could see Ramey’s face.

“Ramey? You okay?”

“Yes, my Master. Thank you.” As Ramey gifted him with the sweetest possible kiss, Harte smiled against his mouth.

“I love you, Ramey.”

“What?” The shock on his face for the second time that night made Harte laugh.

“Did you honestly think I was going to let you leave here tonight without knowing that? I love you. I know it’s sudden, and if you need more time...”

“Oh hell no! I love you too!”

Suddenly finding himself flat on his back with a very enthusiastic sub kissing him senseless, Harte knew he’d found everything he’d ever needed in one sexy package.

About the Author

Marilu Mann brings the steaminess of the Louisiana bayous to her books and she doesn’t stop there. Marilu’s willing to travel to the frozen tundra of Wisconsin to heat up those northern nights and melt a little snow. She’ll also circle the world to Wales, Ireland, Scotland and back just to bring you books that make you sweat.

Currently residing in Texas, Marilu is an avid armchair traveler. Her sexy shifters will set your blood to boiling in no time. Owned by one Diva Teen and various animals, Marilu keeps busy writing the novels her readers beg for.

Marilu is thrilled to be a part of the Ellora’s Cave family and loves to hear from readers.

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Marilu welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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