



DIABLO BLANCO CLUB
UNDER CONTROL

Twillia Rain

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Chapter One

Bethesda Naval Hospital

Bethesda, Maryland

“Time to leave, Gunnery Sergeant,” the nurse said. Her crisp command accompanied the squeak of her rubber-soled shoes as she pushed a wheelchair into Vance Justiss’s hospital room.

Looking up from his chair near the window, Vance didn’t bother smiling. He had no reason to. “Packed and ready, ma’am,” he replied. He maneuvered himself out of the chair with his good arm and tucked a crutch beneath it. As his training demanded, he maintained his balance and proud bearing, despite the fact his left arm was secured against his chest in a blue sling and his left leg was immobilized by an air cast from midthigh to ankle.

“If you’ll take a seat,” the nurse patted the chrome-and-vinyl device.

“No, thank you, ma’am,” he declined. “I’ll be fine.” He was a Marine Force Recon. No fucking way he was being rolled out of the room in that contraption. “If I could have you—”

A young marine barreled into the room, coming to a quick stop in the doorway. "Sorry I'm late, gunny," the younger man said, offering a crisp salute that Vance returned. The kid smiled at the nurse and moved to grab the packed duffel bag on the foot of the bed. "Lennox is in the car, and transport home is waiting."

"Stationed at Pendleton, Gunnery Sergeant?" the nurse asked Vance as she kept pace with them down the hall. She hovered on his left side, ready to catch him if he stumbled.

Not damned likely he'd let her get hurt trying to support his weight, no matter how his injuries ached. "Yes, ma'am," Vance confirmed.

"The doctor says your physical therapy is scheduled to begin at the end of the week."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll be back on your feet in no time, gunny." Vance watched the kid on his right grin. The unit was always on Corvus about his inability to curb his enthusiasm, but Vance knew the newest member didn't pay much attention to the harassment because he just kept smiling.

"No doubt, Corvus." Vance ignored the pain each step shot through his body. *Push past it, soldier.* The damage to his left hand and leg was permanent according to the doc. There was nothing he could do about it. The only thing he could do was get back on his feet so he could honor his word and finish what he'd started.

He had a promise to keep, and he refused to do it on crutches. He just needed to make it through the next few weeks, to get beyond those first few minutes every morning when memories of his last mission—Aimee's screams and the concussion of the explosion—soaked his body in cold sweat. It was difficult to face his failure to protect her, an innocent civilian. The fact that she was a young woman he'd kept safe periodically over the years when their paths crossed as her missionary parents moved throughout the Middle East only made it harder.

Those were the mornings when the nightmares had his heart slamming against his ribs, and his disgust at what he'd done caused bile to rise in his throat. Shadowy moments when thoughts of the weight of his .38 in his hand and the chill of the steel against his temple seemed to offer the comfort of a final escape. It was always the same when he entertained thoughts of ending his life. Despite the feelings of hate and disgust, three reasons kept surfacing to keep him sucking air in the here and now.

One, Ben would never forgive him if he took the coward's way out.

Two, he had to keep his promise to Aimee.

And three, marines weren't quitters.

And damn it, he was still a marine.

Four months later

San Diablo, California

Voices buzzed and hummed throughout the central lounge of the Diablo Blanco Club. From his place behind the bar, Ben Murphy grinned as he watched a pretty blonde in a gray silk dress lead her lover – a man nearly twice her size – up the stairs by a length of silver chain settled around his throat.

The twenty-foot bar was nestled between the two sweeping granite staircases that led to the second-floor playrooms. Ben relaxed against the polished teak counter and took note of the various entertainments playing out around the room. Just like any other nightclub in San Diablo, the Diablo Blanco Club provided distractions to its members. But unlike other nightclubs, the distractions were not in the form of canned music or live bands. This particular club had its own brand of "shows." Tonight was no different.

Near the Club's entrance, Evaline, a Domme, applied punishment to her slave with sharp, forceful strokes from her quirt. Brandon, who was six inches taller than his

mistress, counted each blow in a choked voice. With his hands braced against the wall, he focused his gaze on the paint and chair rail in front of him rather than the few people around them watching the display.

On the other side of the room, close to the double doors that led into the dining hall, four men and two women relaxed at a round table playing a game of poker. The pile of green, blue, and red chips on the table had shifted ownership multiple times in the two hours since the group had begun their game. On the floor beside five of the six players sat their submissives. Each sub assumed the posture his or her Dom or Domme required of them, whether it was kneeling upright or resting against their master's leg. They all held their hands in their laps, some resting on their thighs or folded or relaxed on their legs. Three of the subs kept their heads bowed and their gazes directed to the carpet between their parted thighs, while the other two had their eyes closed as if they were napping.

As he continued to scan the room, Ben stifled the urge to laugh out loud. Earlier he'd served drinks to three newcomers—a man and two women. They'd each come in separately. The man had taken a seat in a comfortable chair across the room from the bar, his attention never remaining on one person or group for very long. One of the women had left not long after Evaline had begun to punish Brandon. Ben surmised her departure was probably due to guilt since it was her repeated and adamant attentions to the slave that had resulted in him rebuffing her with a very colorful and caustic series of suggestions. It had been his failure to remain silent that earned him a punishment from his mistress.

The second woman had flitted around the room before drifting over to the poker table. Her attention seemed focused on the only unaccompanied Dominant involved in the game: Mike Halsey. Ben recognized him as one of the descendants of Collas Brysson Halsey, the Diablo Blanco Club's founder. Ben watched as the woman smoothed her hand across Mike's shoulders and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

Ben was acquainted with the cheerful smile Mike pasted on his face in response as one meant to soothe. The careful way he lifted the woman's hand from his shoulder and cupped it in his larger palm could be viewed by some as romantic, but the lack of interest or heat in Mike's amber gaze was lost on everyone except those closely familiar with him. The kiss he pressed to the palm of the woman's hand seemed to placate her, and the smile and words he offered her, whatever they were, took the sting out of his rejection. So much so that the woman smiled at Mike and slipped a piece of paper into the pocket of his shirt before she moved away from the table and found a seat on one of the couches.

Ben allowed his gaze to wander once more. On one of the comfortable sofas in the lounge, facing the bar, another descendant of the original owner of the Club was indulging in the attentions of his wife. Stroking his fingers through her dark curls, Bryce Halsey halted Mattie's mouth on his cock and drew her to her feet. Without a word, she turned her back to her husband, straddled his lap, and slowly lowered herself onto his dick. Barely audible groans whispered through the group of men and women sprawled in chairs or lounging on other sofas watching the pair.

Having been present two months earlier when Bryce first publicly fucked his wife at the Club, Ben could recall what the sight of Bryce's firm, tanned hands around his wife's hips looked like. Now, though only three months pregnant, her belly already showed a distinct curve, and her full breasts, exposed by the lowered straps of the light purple halter on her dress, displayed tight, strawberry-colored nipples.

Glancing around at the men and women enjoying the performance, Ben wasn't surprised when Dina, a longtime Club member, rose from her chair and tugged at the leash connected to the nipple chain adorning the tits of her submissive and life partner, Lonnie. The two women made their way up the staircase to his left. Lonnie maintained just enough distance from her mistress to keep the chain taut, while Dina gave the occasional pull to tease her. Even the male newcomer settled into the armchair farthest

away from the activity seemed to take note of Mattie and Bryce, despite having shown little reaction to the other scenarios playing out around him.

No, the Club wasn't a regular nightspot, but rather an exclusive retreat for adults interested in bondage, discipline, and slave-master relationships – BDSM for short.

Ben had been an official member of the Club for nearly six years and had come to appreciate the easy acceptance of the different visitors and guests. He had heard about the Club from Vance Justiss, a friend from his Force Recon unit. Vance had even introduced him to the Club owners when Ben first visited San Diablo after the younger man transferred into his unit eight years ago. Subsequent visits as Vance's guest had only cemented Ben's interest in what the Diablo Blanco Club offered.

After leaving the Marines, Ben had moved to San Diablo and had taken the opportunity to continue his education on the West Coast. It was while he was working through his residency and short on cash that he applied for a bartending position at the Club. The money was good, and the job had additional benefits. As a Club employee, he wasn't expected to entertain any of the patrons, but off the clock, if one of the women or men caught his eye or he caught theirs, the rooms upstairs or the lounge could become their playground.

As a switch, Ben enjoyed both dominating and being dominated. Topping and being topped each held their own appeal, and Ben had become well versed in the various forms of discipline and bondage. Under the tutelage of Bryce Halsey and Richard Bennett, another partner of the Club, Ben's knowledge and skill in the world of BDSM had grown. His awareness of his own needs and the San Diablo residents' open acceptance of his bisexual nature had helped heal wounds created by the rejection he'd endured from his own family when he admitted his attraction to men to them.

He'd joined the Marines when he was eighteen just to prove to his father, Francis Murphy, that he was still a man, despite his sexual inclinations. Four years of hard work had gotten Ben into Force Recon. By twenty-four, he was leading his unit. Not

that it had mattered much, at least to his old man. Even in the six years since Ben had left the service, his dad still remained distant.

Then Ben met Vance. Just thinking about his fellow marine made Ben's cock stir. Eight years ago when the young marine had transferred into his unit as their new sniper, Ben had a hard time tamping down his interest. Even now at thirty-two years old, he still had problems maintaining his composure around Vance, but at least he'd gotten better at hiding it.

On their first leave, Ben had forgone a visit home to Virginia and accepted Vance's invitation to meet his parents and check out his hometown of San Diablo. Ben had been drawn to the town and the people from the second they'd hit the city limits.

At that time, he had still regretted that his father would never accept him as he was. Gaining his degree as a physician assistant and taking a job at the hospital had made it easier for Ben to stay as far away from Virginia and his family as he could get. And as close to Vance as possible, at least until Vance's unit was deployed overseas fifteen months earlier. Now, since hearing about Vance being wounded six months ago in a skirmish with terrorists somewhere in Iraq, Ben was waiting for the stubborn bastard to come home.

A drink request from a patron pulled Ben from his thoughts. As he watched the varied reactions of the members to the different activities playing out around the room, waited on customers, and turned down two guests curious about meeting for drinks after he got off shift, Ben realized it had been a while since he'd last had sex. Pausing as he ran a damp towel over the taps on the draft beer dispenser, he had to take a few moments to actually remember when he'd last been with anyone. Despite the frequent offers he'd received lately, he'd had no problem turning the interested parties down. The truth behind his lack of interest was that he found it difficult to maintain a hard-on while his best friend, the man he loved, was halfway around the world fighting a bloody war.

Six months ago, he had received word that Vance had been wounded and shipped stateside. After hearing how close he'd come to losing him, Ben decided it was time to finally tell Vance the secret he'd been keeping for years. How the object of his affection would handle the confession was another issue entirely. Although he didn't doubt Vance's friendship and he had long ago identified his friend's attraction and interest in members of both sexes, Ben was unsure just how accepting of his feelings the younger man would be.

Though their attraction had been simmering below the surface for years, Ben knew Vance fought his feelings. With his military career, Vance needed to maintain a certain facade befitting his rank. Publicly outing himself would mean the end of all that; even if he admitted to being bisexual, all anyone would notice or comment on would be his male partners. Ben didn't begrudge the younger man his denial, but he hoped for the day when he could hold Vance in his arms as both friend and lover.

But Vance hadn't made any effort to contact him since he left the hospital in Germany and was shipped to Bethesda, not even since he was shipped from Bethesda back to Pendleton four months ago. The fact that he continued to stay quiet and out of reach made the point of Ben's confessing moot. Justiss was a determined soldier, but Ben knew, having heard through mutual friends both in and retired from the Marine Corps, that the injuries Vance had sustained could spell an end to his being available for active duty.

If the rumors were true, the decision would be a difficult one for the soldier to handle. Vance's entire focus the two years they'd served together and the six years since Ben had been out of the corps had been maintaining his standing in the military until he had put in enough years to retire. His skills with languages and training as a sharpshooter, as well as his leadership abilities, had moved him through the ranks, but if the injuries he'd received were debilitating, active duty would no longer be an option, ending any further climb in rank. Ben knew that despite the closeness of their

friendship, Vance needed time on his own to come to terms with his changed future. And when he was ready, Ben would be waiting.

The opening of one of the double doors leading from the reception area to the lounge had several Club occupants, including Ben, turning.

The sight of the very man his thoughts had been centered around and the silence that followed the closing of the door had Ben reaching for an unopened bottle of twenty-five-year-old scotch. Though his heart hammered against his chest, his years in the corps and emergency room training helped him hide his surprise behind a mask of calm. Cracking the bottle's seal and sliding a crystal rocks glass onto the teak bar, Ben stifled the curse that pressed at his lips as Vance approached.

Not quite six feet tall, the battle-hardened marine still bore signs of his recent deployment in the barely hidden limp and the healing scar that stretched from the corner of his left jaw to the spot just below his Adam's apple. Black slacks hugged his narrow hips, tailored to accommodate the thick muscles of his thighs and calves without looking bulky. His black polo shirt stretched tight over his broad shoulders, massive chest, and taut abdomen while the short sleeves emphasized the impressive bulge of his biceps. Though he was just two years shy of thirty, Vance's buzz-cut black hair was liberally sprinkled with gray, due more to his Apache heritage than the action he'd been involved with as a member of an elite reconnaissance unit.

When Vance held up three fingers, Ben felt his stomach clench: it was going to be one of *those* nights. There had been different occasions over the years Ben had known Vance that he'd seen Vance ask to use room three upstairs—the one room in the Club specifically designed for restraint and discipline. He'd gone with the younger man each time and applied the punishment Vance needed to get through the anger or pain of the situation haunting him.

Setting the key for the room beside the bottle of scotch, Ben forced himself to look away from the man he loved and turn his attention to the patrons of the Club. He'd assumed Vance's silence over the last four months had been based on his need to

recover from his injuries, but one look at the emotionless mask on his friend's face told him otherwise. There had been more to this last mission than the knife wound on Vance's throat and the shrapnel in his thigh and hip.

Forcing down his emotions and focusing on an order for one of the customers, Ben heard the scrape of the key on the bar and the soft tread of Vance's boots as he passed. He took his time to fill the drink request, knowing the buzz of the panic button would sound once from room three when Vance was ready. Staying busy and chatting up patrons who had questions was the only way Ben would be able to distract himself from the thoughts of what he'd have to do once he joined his friend in the room.

As strange as it might seem, there were times when the four years of age that separated him and Vance had no bearing on their relationship. Then there were days when Ben looked into Vance's eyes and, instead of being the older, more mature one, Ben felt decades younger than his friend, whose soul was burdened beyond all imagination. Those were the days Vance would request to use room three. His dependence on Ben to exorcise the demons in his mind had forged a bond between them that nothing could destroy.

On those occasions, something ate at Vance's stoic control—something only a session under the whip and being bound in shackles would allow him to face and master. And Vance expected—no, counted on—Ben to provide the punishment. Over the last eight years, while they served in the Marine Corps and after his enlistment ended, Ben had never turned away from his friend's needs, but each time it came to this, Ben was concerned Vance would slip over the edge.

He feared that, instead of using the sessions to determine how long he could remain under control, the young marine would edge into the extreme end of the discipline spectrum. He worried Vance would venture into the realm where blood play and self-mutilation could become an everyday occurrence—a place Ben had no intention of ever exploring.

Vance paid little attention to the other patrons as he entered the Diablo Blanco Club. A quick shift of his teal eyes as he passed a sofa acknowledged one of the Club's owners, Bryce Halsey, and his new wife, Mattie. Ben had e-mailed that the Dom had married. In the decade he'd belonged to the Club, he'd seen Bryce publicly fuck his subs. Vance had even seen Bryce direct another man in how to pleasure his companion when Bryce had decided to include a third. Vance noticed this time, though, the expression on the older man's face carried a hint of pride and possessiveness that hadn't been there in the past. Perhaps Ben was right in his estimation that this time Bryce had finally met his match.

But even the sight of the pretty brown-haired sub riding her master's cock in full view of several Club members couldn't shatter the ice that had been creeping through Vance's body since his last mission. Inches thick, the ice had built with each successive nightmare or memory tormenting him with what he'd done. Even the concern shadowing Ben's gray eyes didn't touch the little bit of soul Vance knew remained inside him, and that just made matters worse.

The anger and self-loathing he'd felt since his last mission had him tense and snapping at everyone around him. At night, he crawled into bed drained, desperate for peace, but it eluded him even in his sleep. There were times when he just wanted to escape from it all. But no matter how tired and no matter how dispirited he felt, there was as always that twinge—the feeling that forced him to face the dawn, crawl out of bed, and deal with the agony of physical therapy and the clawing ache that wouldn't leave him.

Not bothering with the glass, Vance snatched up the bottle Ben had lain out on the bar for him, hooked his finger through the ring on the key, and headed for the curved stairway on the far side of the bar. He could feel the different gazes of the Club patrons following him up the carpet runner. The back of his neck itched, just as it had on each of his missions. He'd probably never lose the awareness of others watching him. As a soldier, that sixth sense had kept him alive. But it wasn't necessary at the Club. Since

he'd turned eighteen, it was one of the few places he could actually relax and indulge himself, and he knew Ben would always cover his six.

Ben had never really understood the methods Vance used to cage the emotions that raged within him. As a child, Vance couldn't understand where the intense anger came from. It was like a slumbering beast inside him: slow to arouse, but frightening when released. By his early teens, he'd discovered a good knock-down, drag-out fight could help him control it, but he hated the reputation he gained at school and the upset it caused his parents.

The disquiet and frustration he had about his feelings truly manifested the first time he grew aroused while kissing his girlfriend. As his arousal grew, so did the intensity of his emotions. The strength of his emotions had overwhelmed and frightened him. Fearing that it would result in him hurting someone he cared for, Vance had gone to his father for help. His father, Gavin Justiss, had listened to his concerns and tried to reassure Vance that the fear he had about hurting someone weaker than him if he lost control was unfounded, but Vance wouldn't believe him. After several days of discussion, Gavin had turned to the owners of the Diablo Blanco Club – Bryce Halsey and Richard Bennett. Through practice and training, Vance developed the ability to focus his emotions, to draw on the rage and use its energy to maintain control over his emotions and calm his anger. It was that focus – that control – that made him a damned good soldier.

In addition to allowing him to control his emotions, the focus achieved through the use of pain also allowed him to control his body, which had given him the ability to hold off his own arousal and climax, for hours if necessary, in order to fully satisfy his lovers' needs.

Until Aimee. Until he'd grown too confident in his ability. Until his dependence on pain to master his body and mind was used against him. Until he'd lost his control.

In the six months since his last mission, he still hadn't regained it. The ability to focus his emotions to create and deny response in his body was gone. The mastery he'd

taken years to perfect had disintegrated into nothing. Even the few times his body had reacted to mental or physical stimulation, climax had been impossible for him, smothered by the nightmarish memories of his last mission, when his body ignored his dictates and an innocent was harmed.

The rage and anger had built up and were eating away at him. He needed focus to regain his control, focus he could only obtain through physical pain. His own attempts to wield the lash on himself hadn't proved successful, but he knew what would help: Ben. Ben had assisted him with his battle for the last eight years. He would help now too.

While Vance knew Ben would balk once he spotted the healed wounds, he was confident he could get around that. Ben would help him drive away the anger, the guilt, and perhaps even the nightmares that made Vance consider ending his life.

Once locked inside room three, Vance looked around at the familiar surroundings. Black leather padding covered all four walls of the room. Its tall windows were shrouded in ebony suede curtains. He knew the second closed door led from the sparsely decorated bedroom into a spacious bathroom.

Knowing there was at least another forty minutes left in Ben's shift, Vance planned on taking his time getting ready. Tossing the key onto the black lacquered table next to the door, Vance twisted the top from the scotch bottle and downed his first swig. The smooth burn of the single malt warmed his throat and belly. His fingers itched to pull out the picture he carried in his wallet, but he still found it difficult to look at her smiling face. In the six months since he'd failed Aimee, nothing had been able to break through the icy wall encasing his thoughts and emotions, but with Ben's help that would end tonight.

"A fucking waste," Vance growled, avoiding looking into the cheval mirror situated next to the armoire. He knew what he looked like, and he had little desire to meet the gaze of the bastard he'd become. After another gulp, he set the bottle beside the key on the table and crossed the room to remove what he needed from the armoire.

Despite the Club's rules regarding punishment play, since the early days of his training, he'd received special permission from Bryce for what he required. After introducing Ben to the Club and to Bryce, his permission had continued probably due to his choice of partner rather than his offer of security in exchange for the dispensation. As long as it permitted him to regain the control he'd lost and needed to allow him to feel like a man again, Vance couldn't give a shit.

Wrenching open the cabinet doors, he lifted black leather cuffs from a shelf, pulled open a drawer to collect the coiled whip, and then let his fingers hover over the ball gag before deciding Ben would never use it. Hell, it was going to be hard enough to convince him... Vance shook his head and shied away from going there. A second, smaller whip that was more in line with the multistrand floggers joined its larger cousin in his grip.

"Take it one step at a time, soldier," he ordered himself, carefully closing the drawer and cabinet before moving to drop the tools on the bed.

The seat of the straight-backed chair was firm, with very little cushioning beneath the black leather, but Vance barely noticed it as he leaned forward and began to strip the laces from the hooks of his boots. He cursed as his left hand fumbled slightly. The dexterity in his fingers had been reduced by his injuries. The healing wounds along his left hip and thigh protested with sharp twinges, but he ignored them. Drawing on or pushing past his pain had gotten him through the hardest tests in his life. He was determined that this one wouldn't be any different. Standing the polished footgear beside the chair with the laces carefully tucked inside, he wondered how long it would take him to lose the habit of keeping everything neatly stored away. If he accepted the diagnosis of the surgeons and physical therapists, he didn't have a future in the Marines. Not as a soldier, at least.

Signing away the career he'd based his life plans on would be difficult, but he expected it would be. Setting aside the rigorous discipline he'd learned during his ten years in the Marines could begin with the simple relaxing of long-held habits. Leaving

laces untucked might be the first step toward abandoning ten years of hard work. If the life of his men and himself didn't depend on him staying in top physical condition, he could stop practicing his daily routines. A snort of wry humor escaped him as he realized that if he could stop finding reasons to keep waking up each morning, he wouldn't have to worry about losing control again. Keeping his body and mind in top physical and mental condition wouldn't be an option or a concern.

If he were a quitter.

"Marines don't quit," he told the empty room.

He rose to strip off his black cotton shirt, wincing at the pull the motion caused in the recent scars peppering his side and back. The red stripe along his throat wasn't the only memento he'd received on his last mission.

"Ben's gonna pitch a fit when he sees this." He chuckled without amusement as he glanced down at the two recently healed gunshot wounds on his chest and the starburst pattern of marks left behind by shrapnel.

He squeezed his left fist and grimaced at how weak it felt. The resistance from the healing muscles and ligaments in his forearm had him gritting his teeth in frustration.

Suddenly, the image of tear-filled cobalt eyes flashed across his mind, freezing the breath in his lungs. He could almost feel the soft stroke of Aimee's fingertips along the scars he carried from previous missions. The pain and worry in her gaze had stirred a need inside him that he'd never experienced with anyone but Ben.

His heart slammed against his ribs as he shook off the memory. He very carefully folded his shirt and placed it on the chair seat. The stretch of his muscles against the newly healed scars on his back had him glancing at the mirror over his shoulder. The scars couldn't be seen in the muted light of the room, but he knew where every line had been placed. Each stroke of the whip against his skin had seemed the ultimate in irony: the one punishment his captors had selected was the very method he found most stimulating – and the one least likely to make him break.

A brief smile tugged at his lips but flattened out as that memory led to the ones he'd fought long and hard to suppress. He could feel the rage stirring inside him. His need to conquer the frustration, anger, and pain he felt at his failure to control his body and emotions when Aimee most needed him to was what had brought him here to the Club, but it wasn't the only reason he'd come. Vance also knew it was time to fulfill his promise to Aimee—time to face the man he loved. He loved Ben. Not as a brother in arms or a friend, but as an adult male both emotionally and physically drawn to the older man. More importantly, Ben was the only person he trusted to help him regain control of his need, to harness the beast that was his rage.

Through carefully applied punishment, Ben would be able to help him exorcise the memories that undermined his control. And Ben would also help him fulfill the promise he'd made to Aimee. Vance shook away his thoughts and continued his preparations.

Next to go were his trousers. The soft twill slid over his skin like a caress until it caught on the hammer of the snub-nosed .38 strapped to his calf. Vance knew Ben would be pissed if he told him how many times in the last six months he'd held the cold metal to his own temple. But each time he had set it aside at the thought of what his suicide would do to the man he loved.

He folded and stacked his pants on top of his shirt. Stripping his black socks from his feet, he rolled them into a ball and stuffed them down into the top of one boot and filled the other with the holster and gun before moving to collect the bottle of scotch from the table. The liquor burned again as he swallowed a hefty portion and returned to the high-perched king-size bed. As he passed the mirror, he paused and finally stared at his reflection.

He looked the same.

The same black hair peppered with silver. The same dark stubble along his jaw despite his having shaved first thing this morning. The same darkly tanned skin inherited from his father along with the high, flat cheekbones, sharp nose, and square

jaw of the Mescalero Apache tribe. After another quick swallow of scotch, he did the one thing he'd avoided for the past forty-eight hours since he'd last set the muzzle of his .38 against his temple and come closer to pulling the trigger than ever before. He looked into his own eyes.

His blue-green gaze was dead, lifeless, as he nodded. "Full circle, Aimee. Just like I promised you."

His eyes flickered to his boot where the .38 was hidden. But the same three reasons not to put twenty cents worth of lead through his gray matter still remained: Ben deserved to be told how Vance felt; Aimee deserved to have a promise kept; and marines didn't quit.

He looked himself in the eyes once more. "And I'm a fucking marine."

Chapter Two

The buzz came earlier than Ben expected. He'd finished closing out his till and totaling his bottle count and had just begun to help empty the dishwasher when the light under the number three lit up. The bartender relieving him glanced at the panel of panic lights before looking at Ben.

"Vance," Ben explained, letting the other man know that it wasn't an emergency signal.

The towel he'd been drying glasses with went into the laundry bin beside the door as Ben headed through it and into the hallway that connected the bar to the kitchen and storerooms. Down the hall, he stopped to wash his hands in the employee restroom before heading up the back stairway to the playrooms. Then, using the duplicate key, he let himself into room three.

On the table beside the door, Ben spotted the scotch bottle; it was more than half full. He breathed a little easier. The more Vance drank, the longer the punishment lasted. It looked like Ben wouldn't have to spend too long wielding the whip this time.

After closing and locking the door behind him, Ben turned, took three steps into the room, and froze. His breath was sucked away when he spotted his friend naked, sprawled on his back across the black suede comforter. In the dim lights thrown by the

bedside lamps, the natural reddish brown tone of Vance's skin seemed pale. Just as his best friend's sudden appearance at the Club had surprised Ben earlier that night, the sight of him naked on the bed stole his breath and had his heart ready to burst out of his rib cage.

Every other time they'd been in this room, Vance had been careful to remain covered, if not in his boxer briefs, then in a pair of jeans, fatigues, or slacks. He had never gone naked before. But this time his usual black cotton boxer briefs were missing, and evidence of his tendency to sunbathe nude was apparent in the lack of tan lines at his hips and thighs.

With one arm stretched over his eyes, he looked on the edge of sleep. The thick leather cuffs he wore, with their steel D-rings and buckles, appeared innocuous against his muscled wrists and forearms. The sight of his flaccid cock, startlingly large despite its soft state, resting in a nest of jet and silver curls stirred Ben's own member to life. Imagining taking Vance's thick stalk down his throat or up his ass had Ben fighting for control of both his arousal and his breathing.

Vance was so damned beautiful that Ben ached at the sight of him. It took everything he had to keep from stripping off his clothes and climbing into bed with him. Maybe this time it would happen. Maybe this time, he'd have the nerve to actually kiss Vance and show him how he felt. Ben doubted the other man realized just how intimidating Vance's sexuality was to him.

Twin bullet wounds and scars left by shrapnel showed pink against Vance's darker skin, distracting Ben from his sexual thoughts, but not deflating his interest. Hoping to inject some humor into the tense atmosphere, Ben cleared his throat. "So, what's with the au naturel look?"

Vance's arm came up. His teal eyes watched Ben's face as though analyzing every nuance of his expression before moving down his body. Vance seemed to weigh Ben's brown shirt, khaki slacks, and brown loafers. Ben could swear he was doing a careful study of his body. Having stuck to the rigorous fitness routines he'd learned while in

the military, Ben knew the younger man would find nothing lacking in his physique. Hoping to tease a smile out of him, Ben quipped, "Like what you see?"

Buried in his friend's gray eyes, Vance spied the heat generated by arousal rather than curiosity. They'd been dancing around each other for the last few years, and they both knew it. Rolling off the bed, he stepped in close, invading the older man's space. He looked up a few inches to meet Ben's gaze. "Yes. I've liked it since the first time our CO dropped me into your unit."

Moving back a step, Vance tamped down on the surprise generated by the heat stirring in his groin. He should have known that, despite all the times he'd failed to induce arousal in his body over the last six months, being close to Ben would reignite the fire. He ignored the twitch of his thickening cock, trying to recapture the ability to stem the arousal Ben's presence had created. He smoothed his right hand over Ben's shoulder, noting the heat of his friend's flesh beneath the fine cotton fabric. The slam of Ben's heart against his palm had Vance lifting his gaze. "When I joined your unit, I heard the rumors."

"Rumors?" Ben didn't stiffen in shock. His gaze remained cool, steady.

Vance felt the tensing of Ben's firm muscles as he drifted his fingers down Ben's chest. His thumb and forefinger paused to tweak Ben's rising nipple, before moving on to caress the muscles roping his ribs. Vance nodded. "Yeah. Some of the guys mentioned you were into men as well as women."

"And?"

The urge to wrap his arms around Ben had Vance shaking. The length of his cock grew with the arousal that his proximity to Ben engendered. Damn it, stay down. Focus, Vance commanded his flesh, but it remained insubordinate, thickening and rising while he fought to harness it. "It got me hot. Remember when you helped me deal with Tina?"

Ben nodded. "That was seven years ago."

“Yes. That was the first time I showed you how I controlled my anger.”

“I have to admit, taking a flogger to your ass wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when you dragged me in here.”

“If I hadn’t been worried about being written up for fraternizing with a superior officer, I’d have been all over you.” Shoving his head deep, Vance dropped his hand, unable to stop the grin Ben’s groaning protest brought to his lips. “By the time you left the corps, I figured we were better off just keeping it friends. But it did make me curious about what you’d do if I renegotiated play.” Sustaining eye contact, Vance watched the heat flare in Ben’s gray eyes. “Did you expect me to turn my back on you?”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

“I’ll never turn my back, but renegotiating is very likely. In fact, it almost happened four years ago when I came back from that trip to South America.”

Ben nodded, his eyes closing as if savoring the memory of that brief instant when they had drifted close, their mouths a whisper away from each other, before the raucous laugh of a Club visitor had shattered the moment.

Ben’s warm, callused fingertips rose to stroke Vance’s cheek. The rasp of Vance’s beard stubble against the pads of Ben’s fingers echoed in the quiet room. Electricity arced between them, making it harder for Vance to stifle the urge to drag Ben’s head down to his and seal their mouths together. He’d wondered what Ben would taste like. For years he’d dreamed of spending minutes, hours, days devouring Ben’s mouth. Kissing Ben would happen, but not now. Not yet. He first needed to harness the beast inside him, to regain his ability to tell his body what to do, instead of the other way around. That was step one. Then he would tell Ben what was in his heart. He needed to stick to the plan. He needed to regain control over his body and mind first.

Pulling away, Vance gripped his friend’s hand and shook his head. “Not yet.” Making sure Ben remained in front of him, he moved toward the restraints.

“But—”

"Get through this, and we'll talk." *Hell.* Vance retreated a step and grimaced. *I'll be very lucky if he sticks around after I tell him what I've done.* Taking his place beneath the steel chains suspended from the ceiling, he lifted his right hand and secured the clamp to the D-ring. The clumsy fumbling of his fingers had heat burning in his cheeks, but Ben didn't try to help him. Though long enough to allow him some range of motion and leave his arms bent into an L shape, the other chain was just out of his reach, so he held his left hand up and waited for Ben to fasten it for him.

"You're a damned tease, Justiss," Ben grumbled, sliding the clamp into place and moving back far enough that he could lean against the leather-covered wall.

It settled the knot in Vance's belly to see more amusement than concern in Ben's eyes. But that amusement wasn't likely to last. Hoping to keep him placated, Vance gave Ben a lopsided grin. "You haven't seen me tease yet, Murphy."

"Ah, how soon we forget." Ben chuckled. "I was tending bar the night the pretty redheaded model negotiated a threesome with you and David Henderson."

Memories of the hot, wet clasp of that particular female's pussy had Vance's grin widening. "I'd forgotten about that." But before he could begin to relax, the image of cobalt eyes flashed through his mind and the feel of another redheaded woman's tense frame pressed against his sent a shudder through his body. His smile slipped away, and the strength of his arousal waned.

The wary look that filled Ben's eyes had Vance swallowing heavily. He watched Ben's broad chest lift as he filled his lungs with a long, slow breath and then released it. "You know" – Ben offered with a lopsided grin – "with as many times as we've come close but never done anything, we could just skip this part and go straight to the fucking."

Vance had always known how much he needed this man. "If I had known you wanted me as much as I've wanted you, I would have hauled your sweet ass into bed twenty minutes after I found Tina screwing that drummer in the alley behind the bar

downtown. Or the week you spent helping me arrange and get through my parents' funerals."

"I could have used some hot sex to get me through Amanda and Gavin's funeral too." Ben shook his head.

"Dad and Mom liked you." Vance nodded.

Ben seemed to shake off the melancholy feelings as he grinned. "It was a hell of a shock to have your dad asking me if we were involved that first night you invited me to San Diablo on leave."

"Ironic that they noticed it before we did." Vance smiled and recalled. "Mom was always asking if you were still free when she'd write me."

Ben grimaced. "If your dad hadn't explained to me why you use punishment the way you do, I might have stopped after that first time."

Vance shifted his feet, unsure how he felt about the disclosures his father may have made to the man he loved. "Why did you ask him and not me?"

Ben shrugged. "Because I wasn't sure if you were teasing me or if you really trusted me enough."

"I wouldn't have had you help me every time I came back from a mission in one piece if I hadn't trusted you."

"Instead, you've had me beat your ass until you come."

"Too bad we've never done the fucking part."

"Yeah." Ben moved away from the wall and stepped close, using only his eyes to examine Vance's body. "I know. Damned shame, huh?"

Feeling the slide of Ben's gaze like a caress against his skin, Vance felt his cock twitch and harden again. Taking the one step that still separated their bodies, he thrust the fingers of his left hand through Ben's hair, tugged his head down, and whispered against his lips, "But we're gonna correct that tonight."

Vance pressed his mouth against Ben's, savoring the firm, soft flesh before pushing his tongue inside to stroke and tease. He couldn't hold back his smile when he tasted a hint of cherries. Ben's addiction to the jarred fruit was legendary in their old unit. But mixed with the heady flavor all his own, Vance was sure he could easily develop an addiction to Ben's kisses.

Even as his mouth fed on Ben's, Vance wondered how long Ben's need for him would last. The few men he'd been attracted to in the past hadn't stuck around for long. Not that he'd expected them to. His career wasn't one to inspire intimacy, especially in a same-sex relationship. The "don't ask, don't tell" rule in the military in no way offered protection from harassment by homophobic soldiers. Hell, even some of the men in their unit had been reluctant to socialize with him or Ben when they suspected their preferences weren't restricted to women. However, most of their fellow marines had determined that trial by fire more than earned them the right to be treated as equals.

Ben's hands were warm where they clutched Vance's hips, holding him close against the thick erection confined by his khaki trousers. Vance's own hard-on had reached full strength, even without the application of the whip. That same arousal, however, stilled yet again when Ben's hands moved to his back and slid across the first of a dozen or so scars that crisscrossed Vance's skin.

Ben pulled free, moving to better view the damage done to Vance's back. "Christ," he hissed, his fingers carefully tracing the raised scars. "What the fuck did you get yourself into, soldier?"

"There was a bit of a problem on my last mission..." The amusement in Vance's voice was evident though Ben was sure he tried to suppress it.

"Problem, my ass." Ben came around to face his friend. "Cluster fuck is more like it. There's no way I'm taking the whip..." he started, imagining the pain Vance had endured.

“No.” The firm resolve in Vance’s voice had Ben meeting his gaze. “Either you do it, or I get Halsey to send someone up here.”

“The chances of opening these wounds up—”

Again, Vance interrupted him. “Are slim. Besides, you never strike higher than the base of my spine or lower than midthigh.”

“Still—” Ben started.

“It’s either you or someone else.”

He suspected Vance was bluffing, but he couldn’t be sure. He knew the younger man needed someone he could trust, someone who understood the roiling emotions that he needed to control. Downstairs there were unattached Dommies and Doms who could provide Vance with punishment, but the concern for his mind wouldn’t necessarily be a priority to them. Vance’s trust in his own control was at stake. Allowing a stranger, someone unconcerned with the emotions bombarding Vance, had Ben swallowing the rest of his argument.

“Nothing too extreme tonight, Vance.”

“Take me to my place, Ben.”

The plea in his friend’s voice had the hair rising on the back of Ben’s neck. “Vance, your back isn’t in any condition to take on that kind of treatment.”

“Just once.” Vance held his gaze. The pain in his blue-green eyes was visible, even if it was firmly repressed. “I need this one more than any other time, Ben.”

“Why?”

Vance remained silent, his gaze steady.

Ben struggled against the urge to demand Vance explain himself. He had watched him deal with the loss of his parents and his anger at seeing a child maimed by a rebel extremist during their last mission overseas together. Each time he had provided the punishment Vance needed to harness the fury inside of him, but something about him this time unnerved Ben. “You need to tell me, V. Why this? Why now?”

Vance shook his head. His gaze was shuttered. "After. Take me to my place, and I'll explain it to you after."

The utter resignation in his voice swayed Ben. Despite his reservations, he agreed. "Okay, but just once." Ben moved to the bed and collected the coiled whip.

In the mirror, he could see Vance twist in his bonds to watch him cross the short space. The instant Ben caught sight of the smaller device, he suspected his love had something different in mind than their usual session. Keeping his mind focused on what he would need to do over the next few hours, his hand flexed around the supple woven handle of the shortened bullwhip.

"How long this time?" Ben asked, returning to take his place behind his friend—within striking distance.

"Until I say stop."

"Same safe word? Evac?"

Vance shook his head. "No. Make it 'Aimee' this time."

Ben fell silent. Something was definitely wrong, but he knew Vance. No matter how long or hard he demanded an answer, the younger man would remain quiet until he was ready to reveal the truth.

His hesitation must have unsettled Vance, because he glanced over his shoulder. "Ben?"

Swallowing his protest, Ben nodded. "Okay, Aimee it is."

Chapter Three

The first lash landed across his ass. There was enough force in the blow to sting but not to hurt. Vance knew Ben used the test strike before on other lovers who were curious about the way pain could draw out pleasure, but he had never needed the warm-up with him before. In the years his friend had been performing the punishments, Vance had never balked at the weight of Ben's blows. This time wasn't any different.

"Harder, Ben." He glared over his shoulder at the older man, conveying his need for heavier handling.

Lifting the whip, Ben increased the snap of the leather, this time striking hard enough that Vance was sure it caused a visible red welt to form across his lower back and left ass cheek. His fists clenched above the buckled black leather, but not a sound escaped his lips. Turning his gaze back to the onyx leather-covered wall in front of him, he silently counted each lash as it fell.

Over and over the whip sliced through the quiet room, its whistle and crack muffled by the padded walls. No matter where the blows were placed, above or below or even directly on his butt, Vance never uttered a sound. His breathing never grew labored – he made sure of that – and his gaze never strayed from the tiny imperfection

on the wall he'd found years ago, a ripple in the leather identifying a small scar on the animal's hide. It was the one spot he always searched for and centered his mind on during his sessions with Ben.

His attention narrowed, his focus zeroing in on the dimple as he tried to channel the energy building in his body. Controlling his body, relaxing into and absorbing the sting of each blow had always stirred Vance's blood more than any adrenaline rush induced by the life-and-death missions he'd been on in the past. He used the pain to help him focus and channeled it, which produced a feeling of power he'd only ever experienced in orgasm. He used the minute flaw in the black leather as his lodestone, his focal point.

His nemesis.

The snap and crack of the whip preceded the sting along his lower back, drawing his attention back to his body. The heat of his skin where the lash landed sank deeper to pool in the center of his body. The sensation of power he gained by managing his need, his feelings, was there, but it was just out of reach. It hovered on the edge, teasing him as he fought against his body's urge to dance beneath the pain of each strike of the whip. Even as he used the spot on the wall to direct his energy, it seemed to act as a siphon, a vacuum, drawing away every bit of proof that he was a man capable of holding the reins on his body and mind—no matter what happened. What good was he if he couldn't make his body respond when he ordered it? It was that control, the proof that he was the master of his body that he so desperately sought.

And he was damned well going to get it back.

In the time since his semifailed mission, since the wounds to his flesh had healed while those to his soul continued to fester, his mind wouldn't let him attain that fire, that moment of release so profound that heaven seemed millimeters away. And still it teased him. With every strike, the whistle and crack of the whip sounded, heat striped his ass, pain zinged along his nerves, but despite the thick jut of his cock, no other

evidence of climax whispered through his body – proof it was no longer his control that dictated his pleasure.

He could feel the twist of his emotions pulling at him, taunting him even as he worked to gain leverage against them – without that leverage, without that upper hand, he would be lost. That was what terrified him, just as it had when he was a child – the intensity of his feelings ruling his body. He feared that he no longer controlled the beast that was his emotions. The reins had slipped from his grasp in a dirt-floored shack in the middle of some damned desert, and he wanted them back. He wanted to rule the creature inside him, not be ruled by it.

Closing his eyes in hopes of finding a way to focus his energy and use it to bypass the barrier between himself and satisfaction, Vance listened to his body. He felt the tension mounting, the heat growing, and tried to direct it, but nothing responded. No need curled at his center. There was no tingling in his balls or along the base of his spine to presage climax.

The image of tear-drenched blue eyes flashed against his closed eyelids, causing his fingers to grip the cool chains tighter. The gaze haunting his thoughts, waking and sleeping, held pain and fear – things he understood and dreaded. But worse yet were the confusion and shame he'd glimpsed in those eyes just before...

Again he wrenched his mind away from the memories, snapping his eyes open to glare at the dimple that centered him. Sweat stung his eyes, the zing and snap of the lash registered against his skin, and the cool links of steel beneath his palms grew warm in his grip. Somehow what he felt for Aimee had snapped his control. He needed ownership, mastery of his emotions again, or he was useless as a partner. In Vance's mind, a man who could not manage his emotions was a danger to those he loved. He would never allow himself to put Ben at risk.

It had taken him four painful months to admit that he needed to try something else to regain command of his life. Vance hoped that the love he felt coupled with his

trust in Ben would allow him to reestablish control over his body and mind. Only when Vance had that back would he allow himself to consider making a future with Ben.

With Ben's help, he would regain the control he'd lost that cursed day under the desert moon half a world away. And with every strike, Vance prayed even harder that he would be able to face the consequences after he told the man he loved what kind of monster he'd become.

Sweat soaked Ben's shirt, plastering the soft cotton to his broad chest and narrow hips. Perspiration darkened the fabric where he'd tucked it into the waistband of his slacks. His dark blond hair drifted into his eyes, forcing him to stop to brush the nuisance away.

Vance never spoke a word. A quick glance at the wall clock had Ben cursing his best friend's sanity. Over thirty minutes had passed. The welts along Vance's lower back had merged into one massive lump. The thin whitish pink scars made the red welts look even more obscene. The break, though short, was enough to cause Vance to look over his shoulder to see what was wrong.

At his unspoken question, Ben responded, "You need to stop."

"Not yet."

"Vance, you can't take—"

The grip on the chains above his cuffs didn't falter. "Not yet, Ben."

"There has to be another way," Ben offered.

Vance shook his head, twisting so he faced him. His turquoise gaze startled Ben. "No, it has to be this way."

"Why? Damn it, Vance." Ben threw down the whip and stomped over to him. "Your body can't take this anymore." He reached behind the younger man and pressed his hand against the raised welts.

Vance hissed through gritted teeth but didn't drop his gaze. "I can."

"No, you can't."

"You fucking pussy!" Vance snapped, anger twisting his features. "If you don't have the balls to do this, get someone up here who can."

"Over my dead body." The anger in Ben's voice surprised him, but not as much as the jealousy that tore through him. Letting another person, man or woman, apply the whip to Vance ripped away at Ben's soul. The connection between them was sacred, something no one else was allowed to share.

"Why? Are you afraid one of the other Doms can deliver what you can't?"

"You haven't let anyone other than me handle a whip in years." Satisfaction curled Ben's lips, easing the anger he felt and taming the green-eyed beast on his back.

"Who says? You?" Vance taunted. "I've fucked and been fucked any number of times since we started our little sessions."

"That's sex. A couple of bodies in a bed." Ben shook his head, gesturing to the discarded whip and the restraints holding Vance. "This is more."

"Punishment," Vance sneered.

"You don't want punishment."

"Who says?"

Ben shook his head. "This has never been about punishment, Vance. It's always been about control. You always have to be in control."

"So what if I do? People get hurt if you aren't in control."

"Yeah," Ben said, "but *real* trust is about giving up control. Real passion comes from losing control."

"No." Vance shook his head. "A man controls his passion. Satisfaction comes when you're under control."

"No it doesn't, Vance." Ben smiled, leaning close. "Real passion, real love, comes when you surrender to the emotions. Give in to all those feelings inside you and just let go. Instead of binding all those emotions like a caged beast inside you, let them go. Give

in to the different feelings and sensations and see how much more there is to loving someone when you let go.”

“No.” Vance shook his head again, his eyes wide and frantic as if what Ben was saying terrified him. “Under control. A man has to stay under control in all things.”

Once, when Gavin Justiss had explained why Vance used punishment and pain to test his control, Ben had been amused. And many times over the years, he’d been tempted to challenge Vance to a duel of control. A test to see if the use of pain or the use of pleasure was more powerful in overriding the hold Vance exerted over his need. But Ben had never been concerned with Vance’s method of training.

Until tonight.

The look in the younger man’s eyes held more than a need to blow off steam, to find sexual release in the rhythmic crack and sting of the whip. And his refusal to listen to logic only made Ben more determined to protect Vance from himself.

“You need control so bad?” Ben growled, one hand reaching forward to grasp Vance’s short-cropped hair. “You think you’re so fucking macho?”

“More than you, Murphy.”

“Then don’t come.”

“What?”

Ben’s eyes held Vance’s as his free hand dipped down to stroke the length of Vance’s erection. “You heard me, soldier. You’re so fucking strong, prove it.” Bending closer, Ben stroked his tongue over Vance’s lips before setting his teeth into his friend’s full bottom lip for a sexy nibble. “No matter what, control your cock and don’t come.” Pulling back, he increased his challenge. “In fact, I’ll make you a deal.”

“Wha...” Vance stopped to clear his throat and tried again. “What’s that?”

“Thirty minutes. Same length of time I used the whip. No matter what I do, you can’t come, and” – Ben squeezed the cock in his hand hard – “you can’t ask to come.”

"If I do, what then?" Another hiss slipped free from Vance's lips as Ben stroked his thick flesh.

Ben chuckled. "No whips." When Vance looked like he was about to refuse, and knowing the reasons why the younger man felt he needed the punishments, Ben conceded. "Until I say the back is healed enough."

"And if I don't ask or come, if I stay in control, we go until I use the safe word?"

Ben nodded. "I'll even use the small whip."

"Wherever I ask?"

This time it was Ben's turn to hesitate, but at the determined look in Vance's gaze, he gave in. "Yes. Wherever you ask."

He could read the hesitation in Vance's gaze as he pondered the contest. They'd never engaged in a true battle of wills. Nothing before had seemed important enough for Ben not to concede to what Vance wanted. This time was different. This time he knew there was more than just sexual gratification involved. As he saw Vance waver, Ben gave a final push. "Not man enough, Justiss?"

"Plenty man enough, Murphy," Vance snapped back and then nodded. "Okay. Deal. You've thirty minutes to try to make me come. Do your worst."

Ben hid his satisfaction. The cocky, overconfident smirk on Vance's face told him the other man felt Ben wouldn't be able to make him come. We'll see about that, Ben thought.

Minutes later, Vance swallowed back another cry. He gnawed on his bottom lip, his fists clenching the chains above his crossed wrists as Ben's hands coasted over his hips and down his thighs. Okay, he thought, this was a *bad* idea. At first he'd considered it a win-win situation. He'd counted on his current inability to orgasm to keep him from losing. He had doubted that anyone, including Ben, could make him climax.

Wrong.

The second Ben's mouth had made contact with his flesh, that ephemeral goal became very tangible, which posed a new struggle. Whereas during the session under the whip he had strained to feel the need to orgasm in order to exert his will over his body and emotions, under the assault of Ben's lips, he now fought to master that need. When Ben taunted him into donning the blindfold, things had only become worse.

With his eyes covered, he had no way of knowing how much time had passed, but he trusted Ben to stick to the allotted thirty minutes. *Christ*. He gulped back another groan and focused on breathing. *It's gonna be a long fucking half hour.*

The wet suction of Ben's mouth never stayed in one spot for long. And he hasn't even gotten close to where I want it, the prick, Vance thought, fighting the desperate need to have that sweet suction working on his cock. His desire was undermining his original goal of taking hold of his need and mastering its course. He couldn't let his need rule his body.

"You do taste good, Vance," Ben whispered. The soft gust of his breath teased the curls dusting Vance's lower abdomen.

Ben's chuckle was bad enough, but the tap of the older man's fingers along his shaft was hell on him. Vance again tightened his grip on his bindings. There was no damned way he'd be able to keep a rein on his climax if Ben kept that up.

"Go down an inch, Ben, and you'll really find something to savor," Vance taunted, then winced at the pulse of heat that coursed through his balls. Being unable to orgasm over the last six months hadn't been as hard to deal with as being unable to manage his body. He wanted to dictate whether he was aroused and when or if he climaxed.

"You mean this bit of meat?" Ben taunted, his fingers tapping the solid length of Vance's erection.

"Uhn."

"Nah, I'm gonna have it for dessert."

Ben's hands moved around to the hot, raised flesh on Vance's ass, causing him to shift his legs apart and push back into Ben's hold. The throb of pain generated by the pressure created by his move had his cock bobbing upward.

"You do like your pain." Ben's voice sounded grim, but the stroke of his hands over his ass had Vance aching for more. The smooth stroke of Ben's fingers along the crease of his butt had his glutes flexing, trying to tempt the investigation deeper.

"Yes." Vance wasn't even sure if he was agreeing with Ben's comment or merely voicing his approval of the older man's touch.

What would it feel like to have Ben's callused fingers probing his hole? The way he teased and stroked, the touch of his fingers butterfly light, Vance wondered if Ben would use the same soft caress when he delved into his ass for the first time. The thought sent a shiver rippling through his body, terminating in the heated column of skin and muscle being studiously ignored by the man he'd craved for years.

The sharp slap of flesh against flesh startled a cry from Vance's lips. Despite the fabric covering his eyes, Vance couldn't help but widen them. Strikes from a whip he'd had, but a spanking? That was something he hadn't experienced since he'd entered middle school. The tingle of his skin had him pushing against Ben's hand, curious to see if a second swat would result in a similar sensation.

Ben chuckled, the heat of his breath washing over one of Vance's aching nipples. "Hmmm, we've never tried a spanking before, have we, Justiss?"

Teeth nipped at the straining nubbin as Vance grunted. "No."

"I'll have to check your response to it...later."

Vance fought the curses hovering on his lips. *Do it now, damn it. Pain, I know how to deal with. I know how to focus and control it. It's this fucking teasing that's driving me insane.* The heat of Ben's body moved away, drawing another protest Vance had to stifle. Just how much longer would he have to wait before Ben called a halt to his torture? Without his vision, every touch was more intense. A rustle of fabric had him holding his breath.

The soft *click* that sounded like a thumbnail against plastic had Vance cocking his head to the side. Buttons? The pale gold buttons marching down the front of Ben's shirt came to Vance's mind as the tiny sound repeated. He's taking off his shirt, he decided. He could feel the muscles at the left corner of his mouth twitch as he fought the urge to smile.

The sudden wash of cool air over Vance's skin had him groaning. The hum of the air-conditioning system echoed, but not loud enough to drown out the rasp of metal teeth separating. *Fuck, now he's getting rid of his pants.* Vance cursed the silken darkness blotting out the vision he'd waited years to see. Even his cock seemed to be in agreement. Vance ground his teeth as he felt the heat and pressure between his thighs increase.

Anticipation had his blood rushing through his veins. Images of Ben's body pressed against his skittered through Vance's mind. Having shared quarters with the man during their time in the military, he recalled his toned muscles and lean hips, but the feel of his skin against him would be novel, new. Turning his attention away from his thoughts, Vance listened but heard nothing.

Fingertips trailed along his skin. First over his fingers, easing each one from around the chains. "Let go." When Vance balked, Ben's voice grew firm. "Now, Justiss. Release the chains."

"Hmm, playing the Dom, are we?" Vance teased.

"Did I tell you to speak?" Fingers gripped his chin. The scent of sweat and arousal filled Vance's head at the same time his instincts recognized there was no give in Ben's voice. He meant business. Tethering his own internal Dominant, Vance waited—mouth shut—to see what Ben would do next.

The drift of callused fingertips began as soon as Vance relaxed his hold on the chains. They trailed around the base of his cuffs where his forearms crossed and down the slope of his biceps. It was a caress that seemed to be measuring the heat, the flex and play of muscles and sinew. When Ben's right hand reached the scar just below Vance's

left collarbone, he froze. The warm pad of a thumb circled the pink pucker of flesh, pressing, investigating.

Vance's breath hissed through clenched teeth the instant Ben's lips replaced his thumb. The moist warmth whispered a soft kiss against the scar and the matching one two inches below it. The effect the tenderness of the kiss had surprised Vance. It was as if the reminders of the pain associated with the wounds could be wiped away with the touch, much like a mother would kiss her child's scraped knee to make it feel better.

More confusing still, Vance realized, was the measure of peace that stole over him. The arousal was still there. Fuck yeah, it was still there. But the urgency associated with his long pent-up frustration dissipated, washed away with each careful touch. In its place, the deep inner feeling of completeness began to stir. With that first moment of awareness, Vance sank his teeth into his bottom lip. The jut of his cock and the heat in his balls worked against him. The heat was growing. His control was slipping, just as it had with Aimee.

Ben's sliding fingers continued to tease, delineating each of Vance's ribs, before smoothing along his obliques and exploring his abs. The instant the damp tip of Ben's tongue teased the dip of his navel, Vance couldn't stop the growl that rumbled up in his chest. His hips thrust forward. His hiss soon followed as the scrape of Ben's evening beard abraded the damp tip of his erection.

"Behave." Ben's sharp command brushed Vance's skin as his lips pressed against the smaller white gouges and lumps left by the shrapnel he'd taken in his left side, hip, and leg.

"Quit teasing," Vance chided. *Breathe in. Hold it. Breathe out. Hold it. Rein it in, soldier. It's almost over. Time's almost up.*

"Suck it up, soldier," Ben taunted. "You still have twenty minutes to go."

"Fu—*Shit!*" More curses followed as the one thing Vance had been waiting ten minutes for happened. The warm slide of Ben's lips over his cock had him arching forward, muscles tense, hands fisting the chains above them. The slow swipe of Ben's

tongue over the sensitive crest sent a shudder of arousal through his body. With each bit of flesh Ben pulled into his mouth, Vance fought the pleas for release.

The heat, the stroke of Ben's tongue, the flex of his fingers around the base of Vance's shaft all chipped away at the ice encasing his control. His hips rocked forward, pressing his length deeper, and Ben accepted it, suckling the extra flesh even as he tugged the short curls surrounding its base before cupping Vance's sac. When Ben pulled away, Vance bit back a cry of protest before a ripple of pleasure coursed through his groin and up his spine. The wet slide of Ben's tongue along the length of his shaft sent another shiver through his body. Vance fought the desire to arch forward even though his body was desperate for the next stroke, the next caress.

He was determined to hold off. He fought against his body's urge to let go. The need was there. The attraction and desire were greater than any he'd experienced in the past.

But suddenly, even as the wet stroke of Ben's mouth over his cock sent shivers skating along his skin, Vance became aware of the subtle stirrings of power settling into place. Drawing a deep breath, he willed his body to remain still, not thrust toward the warmth of Ben's mouth. It obeyed.

Vance felt the tether slide into place. Triumph zinged through his body and mind. Ben might attempt to break his hold on his needs, but Vance could handle it. Ben could tease as much as he wanted. It was back—his control. He held the lead. The reins on his need were in his power. He wouldn't lose them again. No one would be hurt.

He felt his lips edge up at the corners. *Take all the time you want, Murphy.* For the first time in six months, Vance started to feel human again.

Ben stifled the sound of his hunger. The scent of Vance's arousal, the heat of his cock, the reaction of his body to his touch had Ben's own erection straining for release. The need to explode hovered tantalizingly close, even as he buried his nose in the curls

at the base of Vance's shaft and inhaled the unique blend of his scent and the sweat slicking his skin.

Man or woman, Ben knew the right spots to stroke, caress, and tease to heighten the need and draw out arousal to a painful necessity. In his time at the Diablo Blanco Club, he'd learned valuable lessons in various forms of stimulation. He'd even experimented with a few, wanting to know the different types of pleasure to be gained from the multitude of toys made available to Club members. The sting of the lash, for him, held less appeal than a judiciously placed flick of the tongue. The heat of candle wax could never compare to the pressure of fingers flexing against straining muscles.

Ben smoothed his hands over the bunched muscles of Vance's thighs, humming softly in appreciation at the clench and release of the flesh beneath his touch, as well as the rasp of body hair against his palms. When his fingers smoothed over the gouges and dips left by shrapnel, Ben shifted his lips to explore the scars.

Above him, Vance grew still. His body tensed and then relaxed into Ben's touch.

Ben chuckled, nipping at the flesh beneath him. "Bored, V?" he teased.

"Bored, my ass," Vance challenged as he shifted lazily beneath Ben's caress. "Not if you get your mouth back to where it can do the most good."

"Your ass is just what I was wondering about." Ben laughed. Rising, he let his body slide against Vance's, enjoying the heat of flesh pressed to flesh, the rub of one cock against another, before settling a hot, hard kiss on Vance's lips and stepping back.

Chains rattled as Vance grumbled curses in languages Ben barely recognized. This only made him laugh louder. "Turn around, Vance. Let me get a better look at your fine ass."

The slow way Vance eased around to face the leather-covered wall had Ben chuckling beneath his breath. When he'd had his mouth wrapped around Vance's cock, he'd felt the shift in the way his friend held himself. The confidence and self-possession Vance had been lacking when Ben had first voiced his challenge were back, and the thought made Ben's cock throb harder. Taking his own time, he moved to retrieve a

condom and the lube from the nightstand. After the better part of a decade wondering what the clasp of Vance's ass would feel like, Ben had every intention of discovering how close to his imaginings the sensation was.

As he drew closer, Ben didn't fight the grimace that twisted his lips. The sight of the thin pinkish white scars crisscrossing Vance's shoulders and down his spine pissed him off. Dropping the prophylactic and the tube to the floor, he smoothed his hands over each of the marks before pressing his lips to them. Beneath his touch, Vance tensed, hissing out a single breath. Then he fell silent for the rest of Ben's exploration.

The play of sinew and densely packed muscle over bone had Ben's passion leaking from the tip of his cock. Easing to his knees, Ben moved lower down Vance's spine until his hands bracketed his friend's hips and the raised welts from his whipping heated his lips. Moving his hands inward, Ben smiled against Vance's firm ass cheek before giving in to the urge to nip at the reddened flesh. The curse Vance uttered turned into a groan as Ben eased the mounds apart and teased the dark pucker of his ass with the flick of his tongue.

"How long?" Ben queried, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Since I've taken it up the ass?" Vance croaked.

"Mmmm." Ben let the motion of his tongue and the scratch of his evening beard against the inside of Vance's cheeks identify his response as a yes.

A gulp of air and a moan preceded Vance's curt, "two years."

Scooting back to don the condom and pop the cap on the lubricant, Ben asked, "How do you like it? Fast or slow?"

Chapter Four

“I don’t give a fuck.” Despite Vance having regained control, Ben’s teasing was driving him crazy. He was going to die if Ben didn’t hurry things up. Excited quivers ran through his body as the tearing of cellophane and the soft sounds of a rubber being rolled on reached his ears. The *snap* of a cap and the *swish* of moisture sliding over flesh only increased the trembling in his limbs. His fisted hands kept the vibrations from rattling the chains holding him, but he wasn’t sure for how long he’d be able to keep still.

I had no idea anticipation could be this painful. Vance shook his head at his mental discovery. The throb of his erection beat in time with the tremors cycling through his body. Need for release had reached an excruciating level, and still Ben teased. Pushing his ass back, Vance tried to tempt his friend to move faster. He’d achieved what he sought. The beast of his emotions was inside his grip, tamed. He could enjoy Ben’s attentions without fear of losing control. Like he’d said, a man was always under control.

The heat of Ben’s body against his drew another moan from his lips. The press of slick fingertips against his hole had him pushing back.

“Do you need to come? Is that why I should hurry, V?”

"No," Vance lied, biting back his body's urge to encourage Ben to work faster. The slide of two fingers into his rectum and then a third had him rocking on his feet. He could control the need now. Couldn't he?

The torture only grew worse as Ben laughed. Working the fingers of one hand deeper, Ben wrapped his free hand around Vance's straining cock. The rope in Vance's mind strained against the pressure created by the emotions pushing to slip free. Vance tried to focus on keeping it taut and in place, but the rhythmic squeeze and release of Ben's hand, combined with the stroke of fingers in his ass, had Vance chanting incoherently, "Oh God, yes, baby!" Again and again, he had to stop himself from uttering a plea for release. He may have regained control, but there was no goddamned way he was going to let Ben win their wager. But as Ben increased the intensity of his motions, Vance couldn't help begging for the feel of Ben's cock. "Ahh, God, Ben, I need it. Please, I need it now!"

"Need what, V? Tell me." The command was accompanied by the removal of Ben's fingers from his ass.

Only the slide of his hand along Vance's cock remained, and even that had slowed to a smooth caress, the fingers no longer squeezing.

"I need you to fuck me," Vance said. He pressed his hips back, sliding his cheeks against the lubed heat of Ben's flesh. "I have to feel your pole pounding inside me, Ben."

"How?" Ben asked. He moved the tip of his erection so it was snug against Vance's entrance and then stilled, seeming to wait for a response.

"Hard, Ben. Fast, baby, and hard." Vance quivered in his restraints. The pleasure and pain that coursed through his body increased the buzz of his arousal and need to a fever pitch. His breath froze in his lungs as Ben slammed his dick home, shoving past pulsing muscles to bury his length balls deep in Vance's ass.

The hand around Vance's cock kept pace with the shaft up his ass, spinning Vance's senses into the ether, stretching his concept of where he was, what he was, and

whom he was with beyond anything he'd experienced. Ben took him at his word and set a furious pace. The heat of his chest warmed Vance's back with each hard advance of Ben's length into his body, only to be followed by the steady retreat. Tingles from his building climax spread through his balls and up Vance's spine, increasing in intensity with every thrust of Ben's hips. His emotions pulled at the bonds. He struggled to hold them in, racing toward release. Ben's heated whispers barely registered in his mind.

"That's it. You feel so fucking good, baby. Hot and tight," Ben growled. His chest was plastered to Vance's back, hips pounding his ass, balls slapping against balls. "Just for me. Made just for me."

"Yes," Vance agreed. The blindfold heightened his awareness of every breath flowing in and out of their lungs. The sound of flesh meeting flesh, the drip of sweat down skin, the texture of the carpet beneath his feet as he braced himself and met Ben's every advance with the push of his hips. Needing more, his body straining for the release he refused to allow it, Vance turned his head to connect with Ben's cheek as the other man buried his face in the curve of Vance's neck.

The kiss was carnal. No coaxing of lips or teasing of tongues. Just a raw exchange of need as tongues dueled and lips pressed against each other. The scent of sweat and sex engulfed Vance's senses as he parried and thrust, never giving in to the domination of Ben's kiss. Even as they pulled apart to draw in deep gulps of air, Vance waged a war with his flesh, refusing to allow his body release, refusing to let his body dictate his passion. The control had to be his. Exerting every ounce of power within him, he fought against the explosion that tingled in his balls and twined up his spine, until Ben's teeth tugged at his bottom lip.

The squeeze and stroke of Ben's fist around his cock, the pressure of the bite, had him teetering on the edge. Ben released his hold on Vance's lip.

"Trust me," Ben whispered. "Do it, Vance. Come with me."

It was the simple command in his lover's voice that sent Vance into climax.

The wet splash of his cum against his chest and belly coincided with the heated pulse of Ben's cock within the tight confines of his rectum. Angry at his surrender at the same time every taut muscle in his frame relaxed, Vance's head dropped back to rest against Ben's shoulder. The steel-reinforced beam supported his weight even as the chains latched to his cuffs groaned at the pull of two hundred pounds of solid muscle.

Even as he abandoned himself to the feelings coursing through him, he recognized the truth in what Ben had been trying to tell him: real passion, real love, slipped free of all bindings, escaped control and spread through a person, infusing the soul with peace. He trusted Ben. He loved Ben.

Ben didn't gloat over winning their challenge with time to spare, and Vance, his mind still trying to make sense of the new realizations surfacing, didn't protest his loss. After Ben eased free of Vance's ass and released the chains on his cuffs, Vance watched Ben move to the bathroom to dispose of the condom.

After releasing the cuffs, Vance set them on the nightstand and followed Ben into the bathroom. Neither man spoke when Vance slid back the shower door and turned on the spray. Minutes later, the pounding of warm water against his back barely registered over the pleasure Vance found as he swallowed Ben's cock, working the knob to the back of his throat and drawing a curse from his lover's lips as he used his tongue and throat to tease the tip. Pulling back, he suckled its sensitive ridge, pressing his tongue flat against the underside of the shaft as his fingers tugged at the hot sac behind.

"Fuck, V," Ben gasped, hands fisting in Vance's hair as he pressed his head against the wall of the shower behind him. "You're gonna make me come."

"Fair's fair." Vance chuckled as he allowed his hands to stroke and torment his friend before he swirled his tongue over the tip again. He drew the pearly drop of precum out of the slit and savored the taste. "You made me come, I make you come. Makes us even, wouldn't you say?"

Ben didn't respond. Whatever he was going to say was drowned beneath the groan that rolled through his chest as Vance surrounded his length with the heat of his lips. Letting one of his hands drop to grasp his own swollen erection, Vance focused on bringing Ben to climax with the slide of his tongue and the suction of his mouth.

He forced down his own orgasm, defeating the niggling fear that tried to whisper in the back of his mind that any mastery of his body was merely an illusion – an illusion shattered by Ben's easy manipulation of his need, his arousal. Breathing deep, he worked his tongue over, under, and around Ben's cock, all the while forcing his mind to stand down, to ignore the taunts and clamp restraints on his sexual state. Arousal was allowed, but no coming, no finishing without permission. He had controlled that and would continue to do so now.

Ben's cry and the salty wash of his semen as it shot across Vance's tongue and down his throat was the first hurdle. Maintaining control of his arousal was the second. Suckling the last of Ben's release, Vance eased his lover's cock from his mouth and rose to face him. Leaning forward, he pressed his stiff member against the older man's belly. "Bed?" he suggested, the left side of his mouth canting upward.

Ben gave a jerky nod. "Bed," he agreed before dipping his head and pressing his lips to Vance's. The flavor of his seed still lingered, but Ben didn't seem offended by it. Vance enjoyed the way Ben sipped at his mouth, pressing with his lips and then flicking his tongue along the seam before slipping inside to play. When their breathing grew rough and the clutch of their hands around each other's waists came near to bruising, Vance pulled back.

"Bed." This time, his words were a command.

Laughing, Ben nodded and leaned into him to reach the faucet.

With the cessation of water, Vance slid the frosted glass door back and stripped a towel from the heated rod beside the shower. Slapping it against Ben's belly, he snagged the other for himself and stepped out of the stall. Ben didn't bother with drying off. Instead, he swiped the towel over his hair and strode out of the room.

Forcing himself to take his time, Vance scrubbed at his close-cropped hair with the towel before sliding it along his arms. An involuntary hiss escaped his lips as he scraped the cotton terry over the reddened abrasions that encircled his wrists. The cuffs had chafed more than usual, but he'd heal, no big. A similar sting registered when he skated the towel over his ass. The welts were receding, but he was sure to have a few bruises come morning. Again, no big: he'd had worse after the Crucible and Recon training.

Erection still at full strength, he stepped out of the bathroom. His laughter was quickly stifled by a groan that worked its way out of his chest. Ben had thrown aside the black suede comforter and turned down the matching silk sheets. Even as he approached the bed, Vance couldn't take his eyes from the slide of his lover's fingers as they prepared his own ass. Slick with lube, Ben took his time, using three fingers to smear the gel along the rim and inner surfaces of his channel. Propped on his side, he smiled as Vance stepped closer. His free hand came up, holding out the lube and a condom.

"Unless you'd like me to—"

"No." Vance gritted out the word, his voice barely recognizable to himself. Snatching the cellophane square from Ben's fingertips, he ripped it open and rolled the rubber into place. He applied the lube and tossed the tube onto the nearby nightstand as he climbed onto the mattress. When Ben would have rolled onto his belly, Vance stopped him.

"No, I want to look at you. I want to watch your face."

Understanding turned his gray eyes to silver as Ben shifted onto his back and spread his thighs wide. Reaching down, Ben spread his bottom and canted his hips upward, revealing his glistening hole. "Come and get it, babe."

Vance didn't try to stifle his amusement. God, he needed to find fun in sex again. After Aimee... He shook away the guilt and morose thoughts.

Ben fought the urge to demand what was wrong. The flash of grief darkening Vance's gaze was out of place, unexpected after the passion of the last hour. Stifling his concern, he wiggled his ass and teased again, "You know you want it."

He was happy to see Vance play along as his fingers gripped the base of his sheathed cock before settling between Ben's spread thighs. Pushing his hands out of the way, Ben could feel Vance set the tip of his erection against his anus and press forward. Grimacing at the exquisite stretching sensation, Ben gripped the backs of his thighs and pulled, opening himself farther to Vance's penetration.

Unlike Ben's hammering assault, Vance took his time, easing past pulsing muscles until the damp curls at the base of his shaft teased the underside of Ben's sac. The heat and pressure of Vance's length stretching his channel had Ben's head thrashing against the pillows.

"Fuck, V, it feels good," Ben assured him, biting back a plea for a fast, hard ass reaming.

Just as slowly as he'd entered, Vance retreated, drawing a groan from Ben's lips. A protest he left unvoiced as Vance pressed forward again. The weight of Vance's body eased over his, squeezing Ben's aroused cock between their bellies. Callused hands urged Ben to wind his legs around Vance's waist as green eyes held Ben's gaze. Vance lowered his head.

"So good, Ben. You feel so good," Vance breathed against his lips.

The look in his eyes held more than sexual need. Again Ben read grief and pain in his lover's gaze, but it was hidden away when Vance closed his eyelids and settled into a slow rocking motion. The friction of body against body, the rhythmic advance and retreat of Vance's shaft in Ben's rectum, the press and rub of skin and muscle against his rising cock, had Ben's heart doubling and then tripling its beat.

The threading of Vance's fingers in his hair sent a tingle through Ben. The brush of lips on lips then tongue on tongue increased his need for a faster coupling, but still Vance paced himself. Needing more, Ben squeezed the muscles in his ass, flexing

around the solid mass of Vance's cock, caressing and teasing his length, encouraging him to move faster, harder, deeper.

Vance's teeth nipped Ben's bottom lip, making Ben grunt in protest and pull away, but only for a moment before he latched onto Vance's mouth and suckled his tongue like a child at its mother's breast. Smoothing his hands carefully over Vance's scarred back, Ben eased one hand between their bodies and caressed his nipple. Coaxing the chocolate brown bud into prominence, Ben played with the nubbin, tugging and twisting until Vance pulled away from their kiss with a curse.

"You aren't in charge here, Murphy," Vance growled.

Leaning forward, Ben nibbled on the crest he had teased to life. "Says who, Justiss? You?" Suckling the hardened nipple, he set his teeth around it and pulled again.

This time, Vance's cock pressed forward with a firm thrust, drawing a sigh from Ben's lips.

"You want it hard, Murphy?" Vance queried, his hand dipping to the leaking tip of Ben's penis where it was pressed between their bodies.

"Oh God, yes," Ben assured him, arching into the firm clasp of Vance's hand.

"Tough shit. Suffer, Murphy. My turn. My rules. My pace," Vance informed him, his mouth capturing Ben's in a possessive kiss.

And Ben did suffer. Through the slow advance and retreat, the soul-stealing kisses, and the torturous stroke of Vance's hand on his cock, Ben ached for release even as he laughed at the revenge Vance had chosen.

Near the end, even Vance seemed to have difficulty controlling his need. The pace of his thrusts increased. The grip of his hand in Ben's hair tightened. The pressure of his kiss grew punishing, mashing Ben's lips against his teeth until they were bruised from the inside. The heave and flex of his body over Ben's and the depth and force of his penetration had both of them gasping and arching against each other.

Their eyes locked. For an instant, Ben glimpsed regret and fear in Vance's gaze before Vance threw his head back and shouted his completion, which triggered Ben's climax. Sated, Ben held Vance to him, caressing his back even as he paced his touch to coincide with the rhythm of his lover's breathing.

Having regained his breath, Vance eased free of Ben's ass, his mind conjuring images of another tight passage he'd slipped from following the betrayal of his body. He fought the memories back, refusing to sully his time with the man he loved. He would deal with the memories later, for now Ben deserved his undivided attention—his presence, both physically and mentally, in the here and now.

The past would be faced.

Later.

Exhausted in both mind and body, Vance lifted himself up. Ben's cum had dried, making their bellies stick together. He shook his head and laughed at the way Ben's flaccid penis pulled away from his belly, then flopped back onto his lover's hip before settling between his thighs.

"Shower?" Ben suggested, his voice sleepy and his eyes concerned but barely open.

Vance shook his head but rolled off the mattress. "No, but I'll get a damp cloth."

"I'll—"

He waved away his offer. "Let me, I have to get rid of the rubber anyway."

Taking only long enough to strip off and dispose of the condom, Vance dampened a washcloth and wiped himself down. Rinsed rag in hand, he returned to the bed and bathed Ben's butt, chest, belly, and cock. Vance tossed the washcloth toward the bathroom as he rolled onto his side and tugged the covers up to their shoulders.

"Sleep," Vance grunted.

Ben didn't argue. He switched off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

Chapter Five

Her slender fingers flexed against his shoulders. The tight grasp and flutter of her intimate muscles milked the length of his cock, drawing out his climax even as he gritted his teeth and fought his body for control. His body didn't care. It refused to listen to his commands and thrust deeper, setting himself firmly inside her body. His fight to deny orgasm was lost to the pleasure she experienced despite their situation. As he bathed her virgin sheath with his seed, the monster within him smiled, knowing the reaction of her body belonged to him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his lips. The apology he should have spoken echoing in his head in a quiet feminine gasp. "I didn't... It..." Her confusion was evident in her wide eyes and the shimmer of tears on her cheeks. Shame mingled with delight in her delicate features. The smattering of freckles over her nose and along her cheeks disappeared beneath her heated blush of embarrassment and sexual release.

"I'll make this right, Aimee," he promised. Knuckles bruised and swollen, the stroke of his fingers over her tear-streaked cheeks looked obscene in the murky light of the shed. The more he saw of her reactions, the prouder he was. Aimee was handling the situation better than some soldiers he'd trained with and she was barely out of her teens. Despite being raised by missionary parents, she acquitted herself well for a civilian. The click and whir of a camera were ignored as he dipped his head to press a soft kiss to her lips. "I swear. I'll make this right."

"Keep your promise." More tears filled her eyes as she stared up at him. "Tell him."

Laughter and jeers escalated around them as rough hands pulled him away from her. Angry demands barely registered in Vance's mind as he fought against the hands holding him, the hands pinioning his arms behind his back as a newcomer yanked Aimee from the dirt floor. Her hajib dropped to cover the blood and semen that smeared her thighs. His own nudity was ignored as Vance tossed commands at the man dragging Aimee toward the door, the black night visible behind them. His voice a feral growl in the shadowed room, he demanded, "She's mine. Bring her back, you son of a bitch!"

The burn of the knife against his throat didn't stop his struggles. He felt the heat of his own blood spilling from the slice made by the blade, and it only made him more determined to break free. Snapping his head back, he smashed the bridge of one captor's nose, wrestled loose from the man's weakened hold, and twisted the wrist of the second man holding the knife. He heard the crack of bone and the man's scream as Vance gained control of the KA-BAR. He buried the knife to the hilt between the second man's third and fourth ribs. Vance shoved the dead man aside and stumbled for the door. "Aimee!"

"No! Vance!" Aimee's screams were silenced by an explosion just beyond the doorway.

Vance woke, his breath frozen in his lungs. He remained in place with his body still, listening to the sounds around him. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and counted to ten before opening them. The darkness was different from the murky shadows of his dreams. Vance waited. The guilt was there. As he sifted back through the dream, Vance recognized the sensations of triumph and satisfaction he'd experienced when Aimee climaxed as being similar to the feelings he'd had when Ben came. The memory shattered the calm he'd gained.

But how could that be right? His time with Ben had been mutual and consensual, so his feelings of contentment made sense. That hadn't been true with Aimee. So why had the same emotions that came to life with Ben been stirred with her as well? How could the control he'd surrendered to the man he loved mirror his loss of control with Aimee and still be a good thing?

Vance shook his head, more confused than he'd been the night before when Ben stepped into the room, but he wasn't sure if the bafflement stemmed from the feelings churning inside him or the lassitude his orgasms had generated.

Moving past that thought, Vance took a moment to focus and fully wake up. Unsure if he was still dreaming about regaining control or if it had really happened, he took stock of his surroundings.

There were things different from his usual nightmares. A soft, comfortable bed cushioned him rather than the rock-and-sand floor of the hut. Silk sheets covered his nude frame. Even the aches he felt were altered, better. The warm body wrapped close to him helped to push the nightmare away and brought back pleasing memories of the previous evening.

Ben.

Vance relaxed into the pillows and closed his eyes as he savored the feel of Ben in his arms. The smell of sex with the faint antiseptic scent he'd always associated with the man beside him had Vance smiling in the darkened room. Shifting slightly, he eased his arm from beneath Ben's head without waking him. As he lay on his side with his upper body propped up on his elbow, he watched his friend sleep, enjoying the quiet moment before reality set in.

His morning wood made its wants known, but Vance ignored the demand. His desire, his need, was back, but with Ben's help, his ability to exert control had returned as well. Waking Ben for another bout of lovemaking wasn't going to get him any further in his plan. The ache in his left wrist and hip as well as along the bottoms of his feet only emphasized what he had to face. Through the gap in the heavy black suede draperies, he could see the first hint of sunlight. The watch Ben had left on the nightstand only made him curse beneath his breath. It was later than he'd thought.

Damn, he wanted to stay. Needed to stay. He was sure Ben would have no problem cutting through the tangle of thoughts clogging his head, but it would have to

wait. Vance closed his eyes and leaned down, warming himself with the heat radiating from Ben's body.

He needed more time. He should have met with his CO before he left for San Diablo, but Vance hadn't been able to wait, hadn't been able to stay away from Ben a day longer. Now he had to leave and didn't want to.

Suck it up, soldier. You have a mission to complete.

Untangling his legs from Ben's, making sure not to wake him, Vance eased from the bed and gathered his clothing. He needed to stop by his apartment before heading for the base, and since both were nearly an hour north of town, he needed to leave now if he was going to make the appointment he'd set with his CO.

It still pulled at his mind, the similarities between the feelings generated when he'd taken Aimee and those he'd shared with Ben the night before. Could they be a warning, a hint that he shouldn't count on the control he'd regained?

He knew his strength, his capabilities, and the thought of losing control, of not maintaining hold of his emotions, his temper, and using them against someone he loved... He shuddered.

"Won't happen," he tried to reassure himself.

But you did before.

Refusing to allow himself to dwell on that memory, Vance scanned the room one last time to make sure he hadn't left anything. Not trusting himself to keep from waking Ben, Vance hesitated near the door. His gaze fixed on the quiet rise and fall of Ben's chest. He couldn't help but grin at his mussed blond hair. It stuck up in spikes or was pressed flat to his skull, making Vance's fingers itch to smooth it out.

He shifted his feet, debating taking the few steps that would carry him to the bed when the watch on his wrist vibrated reminding him what little time he had left.

"Tell him," Aimee's voice whispered in his mind.

He ignored her and turned to the table beside the door. With the memory of Aimee chiding him, he scribbled a quick note to Ben before slipping out of the room and down to his truck.

Ben rolled over. His arm reached for his lover but found Vance's side of the mattress cold and empty. Easing onto his elbows, he glanced toward the windows. The sun had crested the horizon while he slept. He groaned at the bright sunlight snaking through the narrow opening between the suede panels and across the floor toward the bed. His groan only increased in volume as he flopped back onto the pillows and rummaged on the nightstand, searching for his abandoned watch. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut in denial of the morning.

Glancing at the watch, he cursed at the time and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He headed for the open door of the bathroom. "Damn, V, why didn't you wake—" His complaint echoed in the empty room.

It only took him a few minutes to use the toilet and wash his hands, but in that time, Ben scanned the area around him and the room beyond. The towels from the previous night were neatly folded and stacked for the housekeeper to collect. Back in the bedroom, as he tugged on his boxers, slacks, and shirt, he shook his head, trying to ease the knot at the base of his skull. The tension made his movements harsh and jerky. He sensed there was more to Vance's absence than any "morning after" nerves.

The whip and cuffs were set inside the designated container for cleaning. Nothing of Vance's remained behind. He'd even taken the half-empty bottle of scotch with him. Trepidation raised the hair on the back of Ben's neck as he pulled out his cell phone and dialed, first the other man's apartment and then his cell. There was no answer at either. The *beep* of his watch brought another profanity to his lips as he headed for the door. He didn't have time to waste. His shift at the hospital was due to begin in just over an hour, and he had to get ready.

Beneath the key on the table beside the door, he spotted a folded piece of paper with his name scrawled on it. Picking it up, he pocketed the key and read the contents of the letter. The crisp, neat lettering confirmed that Vance wrote the note, but the words inside had his belly clenching in disbelief.

Ben,

Had to check in at Camp P. Meeting with CO.

Despite whatever happens, I want you to know I don't regret what happened between us last night.

I hate that I caused her pain, but I made a promise to her.

I love you,

Vance

"Son of a bitch!" Ben reread the note. He couldn't figure out what the hell Vance was trying to get at, but he suspected he wasn't going to like the results. Even after a fourth time through, the only conclusion he could come to was the frightening thought that the note was some kind of final good-bye message. Who "she" was, he...

The safe word floated into his mind. *Aimee*. But who was Aimee?

Halfway down the steps, he stopped as the image of curly red hair and wide china blue eyes popped into his head. Was it possible Vance was talking about *their* Aimee when he mentioned keeping a promise to "her" and the pain he caused her? But how could a twelve year old missionaries' daughter they'd befriended on their unit's first mission on foreign soil have anything to do with Vance's behavior last night? Aimee had sent him a brief letter just last year, but nothing since. And Vance's note this morning? Hell, Ben didn't even know where the girl was, so how could Vance...

A quick calculation would put Aimeelya Kirk's age at around nineteen or twenty. Old enough to catch the eye of a man, even one who enjoyed both men and women like Vance did. But when would Vance have met her again? It was possible, considering Aimee's parents served their mission in some of the politically unstable countries in the Middle East, Vance could have run into her there. But how could he have hurt her?

Vance was the least likely person Ben knew to ever inflict harm on someone weaker than him, especially a woman or a child. There had to be answers. He just needed Vance to pick up his fucking phone so he could get them.

A million questions whispered through Ben's mind as he continued down the rear staircase reserved for staff use only. He returned the keys to room three to the locked cabinet behind the bar and made his way out the back to his SUV. Beneath his breath, he swore again once he saw the time. As much as he'd like to find the hardheaded bastard, tracking down Vance's whereabouts was going to have to wait.

The trip back to base had helped him clear his mind. He'd been reluctant to leave Ben's side when he woke. As he drove, Vance relived the soothing feel of his friend's arm around his waist, and the wash of Ben's breath over his shoulder and along his neck had been arousing. Regret at not allowing himself another leisurely bout of sex rippled through Vance, but this morning he'd known it wouldn't get him any further in his plans. Now, as he headed back toward San Diablo, he wondered if last night would be all he'd have to remember.

Though he'd forced himself to ease out of his lover's hold, re-dress in his slacks and shirt, and leave, a part of Vance had wanted to stay behind. He ached to ignore the task he'd completed in his CO's office, but with that step taken, the second thing he had to do had knots forming in his belly. It was becoming more difficult to face with every mile he put beneath his wheels. He'd rather be losing himself in the feel and taste of Ben. But he couldn't. He wouldn't. Not yet.

The green jacket and khaki shirt and tie of his uniform were neatly laid out across the backseat. He'd stripped out of them at a turnoff after leaving the base, which left him wearing only his olive green T-shirt and pants. When he bypassed the exit for his apartment, he knew a change of clothes was going to have to wait. Getting back to Ben came first. The catch of the inseam of his uniform slacks on the ankle holster as he shifted his foot on the gas pedal had his fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

The gun was a familiar weight, something he'd grown used to while serving overseas, but its purpose was no longer necessary. Pulling down an off-ramp, he slowed and entered a gas station. Removing the gun from its holster, he locked it in the center storage space between the bucket seats of his truck and climbed out. On autopilot, he slid his credit card into the reader, removed the gas cap, and fit the nozzle in place. Leaning against the sun-baked metal of his truck, he watched the sun hover on the ocean's edge and wondered what the hell he was going to do next for a job.

* * * * *

After reaching the office of his commanding officer, Vance had spent little time discussing his decision to resign.

"The offer still stands, Justiss." His CO had tapped his fingers against the forms in front of him. "Coronado or Lejeune could use a man with your skills and background."

"Understood, sir, and I appreciate the suggestion, but I think it's time I start looking toward the future." *A future with Ben in it, if he'll have me.*

A medical retirement had been inevitable. If he hadn't offered it voluntarily, he'd only have had to deal with a forced discharge once he'd gone through the rest of his rehab therapy and failed his fitness tests. His particular skills—languages, tactics, and infiltration—were needed, but not when they came with a bum leg and reduced strength and dexterity in his dominant hand. The shrapnel had done a number on the muscles and nerves in both.

A post as an instructor for Marine Force Recon had been mentioned while he'd been recovering, but he wanted more. Now that it had been presented, Vance had no difficulty turning

down the offer of a position as an instructor, knowing that a big part of his new life was going to include Ben. Denying what he felt for the other man was tantamount to breaking his word to Aimee.

And that he wasn't going to do.

"Well" – the officer rose and offered his hand – "you will be missed, Gunnery Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir." Vance had taken the proffered hand, confident in the knowledge that whatever came next, he could face it as long as he had Ben beside him.

* * * * *

The trigger on the gas pump snapped off with a hollow, metallic *thunk*, drawing him out of his thoughts. Vance went through the motions of returning the nozzle, collecting his receipt, and twisting the cap back into place before he climbed back into his truck. Unlocking the center console, he placed the gas receipt on top of the .38 and locked the compartment. He was still another thirty minutes from Ben's house, but the clock on the dash assured him that his friend should be off his shift at the hospital by the time he arrived. Maybe Vance would know what he was going to say to him by the time he got there.

Too angry to be exhausted, Ben didn't bother turning on the lights as he entered his house. The setting sun cast a crimson glow through the sliding glass doors leading onto the back deck. Throughout the day, he'd repeatedly tried to reach Vance on his cell but had received no answer. He'd left requests on the other man's message machine at his apartment, but the bastard hadn't called him back yet.

Text messaging and voice mails had gone ignored as well.

Stripping off his stained scrubs, Ben stepped into the shower and let the cool water calm him enough so he would be able to face Vance without wanting to pound his smug ass into the ground.

And face him he would.

As the day had worn on, Ben's fear that his lover's body would be wheeled into the emergency room after Vance had done something to end his life had dissipated. As vague as the letter had been, the eight years of friendship and what they'd shared the previous evening had forged a connection between them. If there was one thing he knew about Vance, it was that he took pride in being a marine. And marines weren't quitters.

He didn't doubt this feeling.

What he did doubt, Ben determined as he slammed his fist against the tiled wall, was his ability to keep from beating the shit out of the hardheaded son of a bitch when he finally showed up.

As Vance pulled into the driveway, the dark house faced him, and he was not sure where to go next. The sun had set when he'd hit the outskirts of San Diablo. Full darkness had fallen by the time he'd pulled into the cul-de-sac where Ben's house sat on an acre of land. Lights blazed in the other homes in the quiet section of the housing development and streetlights dispelled the shadows only as far as the front walks. After switching off his truck's ignition, he palmed the keys and contemplated his next move.

He couldn't face Ben at the Club. Not again. As much as he loved the man, he needed to tackle this next task and deal with the fallout before he could go any further. The .38 now sat on the passenger seat of his truck with the safety on, as useless to him now as it had been the first morning he'd been out of the hospital, woken from his nightmares, and confronted what he'd done. He'd admitted then that taking the coward's way out was not an option. The blued barrel and matte black grip were a sharp contrast to the tan leather.

And her voice seemed to whisper in his ear when he reached for it. *You promised to tell him.*

"I know I did, Aimee," Vance whispered in the quiet of his truck.

As if she sat beside him, he could see her eyes, so solemn, but a glint of mischief winked every once in a while. *You promised.*

It was ridiculous to think she'd let him use his gun. He'd known that long before he turned to Ben last night. Not to mention his own conscience, despite the guilt at what he'd done, would never find adequate justification to end his own life. Whether he was in the service or not, once a marine, always a marine. And marines never quit.

Shaking his head, he snagged the pistol off the seat and secured it back in its holster. "And I left him a letter," he tried to reason, but a quirk of her lips had him shaking his head.

You said you'd tell him.

"I'm here—"

The cab light flashed on, momentarily blinding him as the driver's door was yanked open.

"You've got some explaining to do," Ben snarled, the tight grip of his hand around Vance's arm barely registered in Vance's mind as the older man yanked him from his truck.

The door slammed shut milliseconds after Ben thrust Vance against the extended cab. The solid *thunk* of a fist striking metal and the resulting vibrations against the back of his skull had Vance eyeing Ben cautiously.

In the eight years they'd been friends, he'd only seen Ben lose his temper once, but his narrowed gaze and gunmetal gray, almost black, eyes had Vance evaluating the fastest and least dangerous—to him or Ben—escape route in case his lover decided hitting the truck would not be enough.

“Well?” Ben demanded. His arms crossed over a bare chest. Water beaded his skin and dripped from his disheveled hair.

Vance figured Ben had just gotten out of the shower when he arrived. A glance down confirmed it when he spotted Ben’s naked feet and the damp fabric at the waistband of his zipped but unbuttoned jeans.

“Well, what?”

“What?” Ben leaned against the truck cab, one arm braced beside Vance’s shoulder, his voice a feral growl. “Where the fuck do you get off leaving a note like this?”

The paper Ben shook in Vance’s face looked as if it had been crumpled up and smoothed out several times. “I didn’t want you wondering where I was when you woke up,” Vance said.

“And this” – Ben shook the letter at him again before pushing away from the truck – “was supposed to keep me from worrying?” Pacing agitatedly back and forth in front of him, he continued to rant. “That’s a poor goddamned excuse, V.”

Easing away from the truck, Vance pushed the button to set the lock and alarm before he tucked the keys in his pocket. “Why don’t we take this inside?” he suggested, motioning toward the house.

“Inside or out, Justiss,” Ben growled, “you better have a very good fuckin’ reason for putting me through this.”

Vance’s stomach picked that moment to gurgle in displeasure at being ignored. “Listen, let me make something for dinner while you finish drying off; then we’ll talk.”

Ben didn’t bother replying. He released a heavy, drawn-out sigh and stomped up the walk to wrench open the screen and front doors.

Taking a deep breath, Vance rolled his shoulders to try to release the tension gathering there. He really did not want to ruin what he had starting with Ben. And he feared telling him about Aimee would surely destroy it.

You promised, she whispered in his ear. The soft gust of wind carried the scent of lavender from somewhere, heightening Vance's feeling that Aimee stood beside him with her soft hand on his back as he faced the empty, open door.

"I know, Aimee," Vance sighed.

Ben slapped the screen door wide open. "Haul your ass in here, Justiss," he ordered before turning and letting the door smack the frame once again.

Inside the house, Vance leaned down to untie and slide off his dress shoes. Taking his time, he tucked in the laces and set them beside the door. By the time he made it into the kitchen, Vance knew he wasn't going to give Ben the information he wanted. His nerves were too raw from the images singing through his head – frightening thoughts of Ben turning his back on him, walking away with his face twisted with disgust – had his need for food dissipating, replaced by the hunger to have his lover close.

As his desire built and his cock swelled in his slacks, he watched Ben move to the refrigerator, pull open the door, and lean down to scan the contents. "I think I've got some leftover lasagna."

"Maybe later." Vance stripped off his T-shirt, dropping it over a ladder-back chair at the table.

"You just said..."

As Ben turned to face him, the door of the refrigerator swung closed and Vance crowded him against the counter. He didn't give Ben time to react, just pulled his head down and captured his lips in a deep kiss. He grinned at the taste of peppermint. Ben's habit of brushing his teeth in the shower had always amused him, but now it was just another reason to make his hard-on even harder.

Ben pulled away. "Damn it, Vance –"

"No." The fingers of Vance's right hand gripped the back of Ben's neck as his left moved the zipper of his jeans down. "I'm sorry." Again, Vance pulled Ben's mouth to his. This time his lips were soft as they smoothed over the other man's. "I didn't mean to scare you," he breathed against Ben's lips. Sipping at the moisture from his previous

kiss, Vance eased his tongue inside this time, seducing Ben's teeth to unclench and let him delve farther into the moist cave of his mouth.

While his lips seduced, his fingers cupped the thickening length of Ben's cock, stroking the smooth skin of his shaft before easing it free of the denim casing. Vance hummed his appreciation at the feel of his lover's need. The fact that it matched his own made Vance's body pulse with satisfaction. Even better, the grip of Ben's hands had moved from Vance's shoulders, where he'd been trying to push Vance away, to his waist. He pulled Vance closer, eliminating any distance between their bodies.

As Vance eased back, his hands dropped to the loosened jeans.

Ben shook his head. "This isn't answering my questions, V."

"But it is, Ben," Vance assured him as he lowered to his knees and helped Ben step free of the damp denim. His gaze slid over Ben's legs, lingered on the jut of his arousal before continuing upward to meet his lover's smoky gaze. His hands followed his gaze, smoothing over Ben's hair-roughened limbs, enjoying the flex of muscle beneath his touch. "I've been dying for another taste of you since I slipped out of bed this morning." He willed Ben to understand not to ask for more.

Not yet.

The gray of his lover's eyes grew dark, and Ben dipped his head in a brusque acknowledgment. "That doesn't excuse you ignoring my messages."

The weight bearing down on Vance's shoulders lifted slightly. He'd gotten the reprieve he needed. Judging by Ben's expression, it wouldn't be for long, but it was there. Returning his attention to the heated length of flesh in front of him, Vance allowed himself to smile. "Let me make it up to you." His head dipped and his lips caressed the thick head of Ben's cock, teasing the sensitive flesh with the tip of his tongue before stroking over and around it. The flex of the older man's fingers through his short-cropped hair had Vance humming.

"Keep doing that, soldier, and it just might buy you some more time," Ben assured him, his voice low and throaty with arousal.

The taste of Ben's cock skated along Vance's tongue, triggering explosions of sensation through his body and hardening his own dick more. The groans and the flex of Ben's fingers through his hair only had Vance suckling the heated flesh with increased vigor: to the back of his throat, then out, so only the tip remained between his lips. Vance nipped and teased the glans before lapping at the upwelling of seed at the very tip.

Vance's strong fingers gripped the base of Ben's shaft, squeezing and stroking upward, stimulating and teasing while his tongue slid over the head. Releasing his hold on Vance's silver-threaded hair, Ben gripped the edge of the counter behind his hips and fought the urge to thrust forward and force Vance to swallow his cock.

His lingering anger still hummed beneath his arousal. Despite the teasing he'd offered Vance, Ben knew the longer his friend avoided telling him what had driven him to write the letter, the more likely he would be to avoid disclosing the secrets hinted at in the missive. He wasn't willing to lose his lover, not after having finally gained him.

Drawing a deep breath, Ben released the counter, slid one hand over the fingers at the base of his arousal, and cupped the back of Vance's head with his other hand. He was sure every bit of the love he felt filled his eyes as he watched Vance nibble the head of his penis. When Vance's blue-green gaze lifted, Ben waited.

"More?" Vance asked, his tongue whispering along the bumps and pounding veins on Ben's cock.

Lips quirked up on one side, Ben challenged, "Let's see if you can make me forget how pissed off I am with you."

The warm grip of Vance's fingers around the sensitive flesh of Ben's scrotum had Ben moaning with pleasure. His lover's lips kissed the side of his cock before Vance moved back with a smile.

"If you're up for it, babe, I'm more than ready to make you change your mind." Vance chuckled.

His laughter vibrated around Ben's arousal, sending tingles spreading upward through Ben's belly. Ben's head fell back as his hips thrust forward and he surrendered himself to Vance's seduction. The fear of what he'd nearly lost disappeared beneath the pleasure that flooded his body.

Exhausted and body sated, Ben eased between the sheets on his king-size bed and grinned at the rumpled look of the man next to him. Hair standing in damp spikes from his shower, Vance had his arms wrapped so tightly around the pillow that Ben wondered if the stuffed rectangle would ever regain its original shape.

"You know" – he yawned, switching off the light – "you're going to have to devise another way of distracting me."

"How's that?" Vance didn't bother opening his eyes.

"You don't really win an argument by seducing the other participant."

"Seemed like – *hunh*." The yawn seemed to catch Vance unaware. He started again, his eyes firmly shut. "Seemed like a pretty good idea to me."

"That damned note isn't going away. And asshole stunts like you pulled today aren't going to get you on my good side, Justiss."

One of Vance's eyes eased open, glinting in the security lights that filtered through the window. "You've got quite a mouth on you, doc. I think you've cursed more in the last twenty-four hours than I've heard you swear in the last eight years."

"Could be the company I'm keeping."

Both eyes came open this time, and Vance reached to push the bedding aside. "Hey, I'll leave if –"

"Get your ass back here." Ben's hand gripped the back of Vance's neck, drawing him in for a rough kiss before he pulled back and pressed his forehead to the younger man's brow. "I was running scared, V. That letter..."

Vance's hand rose to smooth the mussed waves of Ben's hair. The tremor in his touch and the tone of his voice had Ben believing his lover was still uncertain about something. "I know, babe. I'm sorry."

"Sorry is one thing, Vance." Ben settled more comfortably in bed, one arm pillowing his head while the other played along the muscled length of Vance's upper arm and torso. "I was sure by the time I reached the ER I'd be finding some report or have someone mention you'd wrapped your truck around a tree or that you ate your service revolver."

Vance's body as well as his voice tensed up. "Can we not talk about this now?"

"When are you going to talk about it, V? You've already avoided the conversation once this evening."

He nodded. "Yeah, and I'd like to avoid it again." Vance's callused palm cupped Ben's cheek. "Let's just get some sleep now. In the morning you have your shift at the hospital, and I have to go collect some of my things from my apartment off base. I swear we will talk about everything tomorrow night after dinner. Deal?"

The slide of Vance's thumb along Ben's cheekbone was soothing, but the tension in his lover's body was distracting. Ben nodded, again pressing a kiss against Vance's lips. A kiss Vance reciprocated. He had to put an effort into not increasing the sexual nature of the caress.

"Deal. But no surprising me in the kitchen like you did tonight." Ben made sure Vance held his gaze for a long moment in order to understand the seriousness of his intent. "We talk."

"Swear," Vance agreed, nodding. "Tomorrow we talk."

Chapter Six

After their almost-argument the previous night, the younger man had remained quiet about his reasons for leaving the cryptic, disturbing letter. Through the shower they'd shared when he came home from work and the meal Vance had prepared, Vance made sure the topics never strayed from casual conversation. The weather, a recent basketball game, and a brief exchange of information about their old Recon team members were discussed, but never why Vance had left the note the day before.

Needing to connect with him, Ben waited until the meal was over before taking the initiative and kissing Vance. Even as his lips sipped at Vance's, Ben knew there was something distracting the other man. Vance had been forthcoming about his trip north to the marine base to tender his resignation from the corps, but he still had not explained what had his blue-green eyes so haunted.

"Why don't I clean up in here?" Ben offered, gesturing to the dishes on the kitchen table and the skillet holding the remains of their taco dinner. He hadn't pushed for the discussion Vance had promised him. After watching Vance when Ben had gotten off shift, he'd known something was eating at Vance, and pushing him to spill about his letter wasn't going to make things any easier. "Take a beer out on the porch. Relax."

Vance nodded and pressed another soft kiss to Ben's lips. Pulling him closer, Ben felt Vance's grip tighten around his waist, flexing against his lower back as he seemed to absorb the heat of his semiaroused body before stepping back. Pausing to open the refrigerator, Vance selected a beer from inside, twisted the cap off, and nudged the door shut with his hip. Ben didn't try to stifle his laughter as Vance flipped the cap into the trash with a snap of his fingers as he passed the bin.

The sound of water in the sink and the rattle of dishes filtered through the open kitchen window. The screen door kept the bugs from getting in the house, while the special candles Ben had lit earlier reduced the number on the porch to a handful. Exhaustion pulled at his muscles and weighted his eyes, but Vance fought sleep. Earlier that morning, yesterday's nightmare had replayed in his mind and driven him from Ben's arms. Worried about what would happen once he told Ben everything, Vance had left his lover's bed before the sun rose and went into the neighborhood for a hard workout. Though painful and a bit awkward, his healing hip and leg ached only slightly after his five-mile run.

While Ben had been working his shift at the hospital, Vance had driven the thoughts away through steady work around the house. He'd found room in Ben's home for the few things he'd collected from his apartment. But all the while, Aimee waited. She hovered, never pushing for his attention, always on the periphery of his mind, just waiting for him to finish the promise he'd given her.

Setting his beer on the painted planks, Vance eased the .38 from its holster at his ankle and released the cylinder. Six brass casings winked in the glow of the porch light and candles. Snapping it closed, his thumb caressed the safety lever.

Snick. Off. Snick. On.

Over and over, he repeated the deliberate move, all the while hearing the tearful words Aimee had whispered to him as he fought the anger at their tormentors, the humiliation of his helplessness, and the betraying hunger snaking through his body as

he rocked in and out of her tight sheath. It shouldn't have happened to her that way. He should have had more control, but he hadn't.

And the look in her eyes...

The gurgle of water down a drain, and the creak of the floor registered, but Vance didn't turn his attention from the weapon in his hand. At one point in time, he'd thought the gun would be his salvation. Now he recognized it as a symbol of his weakness.

The lights from the city glowed through the treetops, spreading shadows over the lawn and stretching toward the covered porch. Vance knew Ben stood in the doorway, probably wondering at the thoughts going through his mind as he leaned forward in his chair. More than likely, his lover was curious at the solemn expression on his face, but Vance sensed the moment Ben spotted the gun in his hand.

Moving carefully, Ben drew a chair next to him and glanced down at the .38. "Tell me you did *not* have that at the Club," he teased, only the thinnest thread of amusement in his voice.

Vance only nodded, directing his gaze to the expanse of lawn blending into the hillside behind the house. He couldn't meet Ben's eyes. Not yet.

"You know Halsey woulda kicked your ass for bringing that into his club."

Vance only gave a brief nod, acknowledging the breach of Club rules.

Ben waited.

"She won't let me use it," Vance said finally.

Ben stayed quiet.

"I can't make myself use it," he admitted.

Again, Ben simply waited.

Vance wasn't surprised. His lover was a keen observer of human nature. That was what had made him one of the best lookouts on the team, besides being the medic.

Vance didn't bother turning his head. Once he revealed the bastard he'd become, there would be little to keep Ben beside him.

"The first day I woke up in the hospital, I wanted to die," Vance began.

"Your leg?"

"No. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but I could handle that. It was facing what I'd done, what I'd become, that made me sick." Vance shook his head and smoothed his fingers along the barrel of the gun. "Every night I thought 'why the hell should I keep breathing?' and every morning I came up with the same three reasons not to just go ahead and pull the trigger."

"Three?"

"Yeah. First, I could never hurt you by killing myself."

"And the other two?"

"Aimee deserved better. She deserved to have me keep my promise to her. And marines never quit."

"And you're —"

"A fuckin' marine."

Vance actually smiled as they said the words together. "It took me a while to remember it, but every morning I'd wake up and those three reasons were there."

In addition to those three reasons, Vance had to admit that every time the cold steel muzzle had touched his temple, memories surfaced, as if trying to overrule his reasons not to pull the trigger. In those brief moments he would feel the clutch of Aimee's fingers against his shoulders, the burn of the whip against his back, heard the coarse laughter of their captors, the curses of the photojournalist, and her sobs.

Always her sobs echoing in his ears. Then she'd make him give his promise, and the tension in his fingers would ease.

"Remember Aimeelya Kirk?" he asked.

"From Beirut?"

Vance nodded.

“Didn’t I stitch—”

“Up her leg when she got tangled in some razor wire chasing after a damned cat.”

“That was what, six years ago?”

“Eight. My first assignment outside the US. The year I transferred into your unit.”

Lost in thought, Vance shook his head. “She was so damned tiny.”

“And that wild red hair.” Ben laughed.

“I should have recognized her the second she came scrambling over the rubble babbling about an ambush.”

Pressing the heels of his palms to his eyes, Vance tried to force away the thoughts, the images, that bombarded him. “God, Ben, the things they did—what I did! It won’t go away, and she keeps saying it was okay.”

Ben eased the gun out of his grip.

Vance let him. It was useless anyway. He dropped his hands. His snort was sardonic and lacked amusement as he watched Ben open the cylinder and empty the shells into his hand. Ben set the gun on the porch and shoved the bullets into the pocket of his slacks. Trust Ben to ensure there could be no accidents later.

“Tell me what this all has to do with Aimeelya.”

“For a nineteen-year-old raised by missionaries, Aimee was pretty damn streetwise.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, was. She’s dead.” Needing to face this first hurdle in losing the man he loved, Vance raised his gaze to Ben’s and added, “I killed her.”

There was no hesitation in Ben’s response. “Bullshit.”

The knot twisting Vance’s insides loosened. *Maybe*. He took a deep breath. Maybe this wouldn’t be as final as he’d thought. Maybe it was possible he could have more than just these last two nights with Ben. Then again, he hadn’t finished confessing yet.

He would have to reserve judgment until he'd laid bare all his secrets and Ben responded. Losing him now after having had him in his arms wouldn't just hurt—it would devastate him. But he'd learn to deal with it. No matter what happened, though, taking his own life would never be an option. Not anymore. Hell, he'd find a way to win Ben back if he had to.

"Spit it out, soldier," Ben ordered, his tone crisp and no-nonsense, just as it had been when he'd commanded Vance's unit.

"The last mission I was on had my unit searching for a missing photojournalist. Intel had him pinpointed in an insurgents' camp. I took point to meet with an informant. I had radio contact, but the rest of the unit was lying low until we confirmed."

Ben leaned forward, his elbows braced on his knees, his gaze focused on Vance. "When Mike Halsey returned to San Diablo a few months back, he told me about Simon and your involvement in getting him back. You said something about Aimee and an ambush?"

Vance nodded, rising from his chair to lean against the post that supported the roof over the porch. His fist tapped the weathered wood in a slow, measured rhythm. "I'd just made contact when this kid comes scrambling over a pile of stones and shattered wall. At first I figured it was a distraction. Then I realized she's babbling in a jumble of Farsi and English about an ambush." The tapping stopped as Vance crossed his arms and faced Ben. "Next thing I know, all hell is breakin' loose, the informant is grabbing the girl by her hair and pulling a gun, while six other bastards pop up around me."

"How do you know it was Aimee? What about your men?" Vance could see Ben's need to understand, but he wasn't sure he could satisfy him.

"I fucked up." Vance shook his head. "The second I saw her eyes, I knew it was Aimee. When she was screaming for me to run, I hesitated, and that was it. I went down."

"Where were your men? Who had your six?"

"Closest man was too far off to make a difference. They had Aimee and me bundled into a truck and two clicks down the road before my men could reach us."

"Tracking?"

Vance nodded, tapping a ragged scar along the back of his left forearm. "It was working and led the team to us, but not in time." He smiled as he remembered the irony of the kidnapping. "The bastards who grabbed us took us right to the journalist, stupid fucks."

"So, you got him out too?"

"Yeah. He wasn't in the best of shape by the time my guys showed up, but he was able to hobble out of what was left of the building on his own two feet."

"Okay." Ben leaned forward in his chair, hands clasped and dangling between his knees. "So you and Aimee get grabbed. Tangos take you to where they're holding the hostage you were sent for" – he canted his head to the side – "and?"

"FUBAR."

"Fucked up beyond all recognition?" Ben translated and then wondered out loud, "Did they find the transmitter?"

Vance shook his head, his thumb rubbing the ragged scar on his arm. "Nah. A piece of wood from the building did the majority of the cutting on my arm. Tore it up enough that my grip and dexterity are impaired."

"Well, I sure as shit know one of them took a whip to you."

He shrugged. "Not that it did much good," Vance admitted. His lips compressed as he recalled the amusement his captors had gotten at seeing his erection grow the longer they used the whip on him. "Just made matters worse," he muttered.

"How?"

"Aimee was there." Vance hoped that would be explanation enough.

"You told me that already."

"No, Ben." He looked at his friend and repeated, "She was in the room with me."

Ben didn't comment, merely waited for him to elaborate.

Swallowing, Vance forced himself to tell. "They stripped me down and started using the whip on me. And I laughed at them." Shaking his head, he snarled, "I fucking egged 'em on."

"Damn, man, the damage..."

"If they'd just kept to the whip, I could've handled it." He waited for Ben to comment, but the older man stayed silent, waiting. "The more they hit, the harder I got, and the more I taunted them. Until..." Vance glared down at his fisted hands, the knuckles white against his skin from the strength of his grip. He hated remembering this part. With the shrink in the hospital, it had been easier to say it, but this was Ben—the man he loved and respected. The man he knew respected him.

At least until he heard Vance's secret.

"Until?" Ben prompted.

"They forced Aimee to her knees and made her suck me off."

A string of curses spilled from Ben's lips.

Curses Vance remembered hurling at his captors in every one of the nine languages he knew. "Yeah." He nodded. "Those were a few of my comments. They didn't find my words particularly enlightening. So they decided to try something else."

"Quit dancing around the subject, Vance," Ben demanded.

Holding his lover's gaze, Vance drew a deep breath. "I raped her."

"Aimee?" Ben's expression was a mixture of confusion and disbelief.

Vance nodded.

"Bullshit."

"I did. I ra-raped her." The pain in his chest swelled as his mind replayed the image of her pinned beneath him, eyes wide as his body breached hers, the barrier of her virginity shredded by his assault.

“You’re fucking lying, Vance,” Ben growled, lunging out of his chair and crossing the porch to stand toe-to-toe with him. “You couldn’t—you wouldn’t do something—”

The tether on his anger snapped, and Vance shoved at the older man. “Don’t fucking tell me what I did. I know what I did, Ben!” Humiliation and pain and self-loathing twisted through him, ripping at his composure and wetting his cheeks with tears he wasn’t even aware he’d shed. “I held that little girl down and raped her with those bastards watching me. And laughing. They laughed, Ben, as I took her virginity and treated her worse than some two-dollar whore.”

Choking on the memories, Vance pushed past Ben and stumbled down the steps onto the back lawn. If he could get away, if he could find a way to turn back the clock and make the right decisions instead of the wrong...

But it wasn’t going to happen. He’d been running since they released him from Bethesda. And every time he closed his eyes, there was Aimee, eyes wide, gazing up at him. Trusting him. Counting on him.

And he’d fucking failed.

No, not just failed—he’d betrayed her. Brutalized her and let those bastards drag her away for similar treatment at their hands. An uneven patch of grass tripped him, causing him to drop to his knees. “I hurt her, Ben. I hurt her so bad, and those sick fucks laughed.”

“I’m sure she knows...” Ben settled into the grass beside him. The warmth of his arms enfolded him as Vance gave vent to the sobs racking his body.

“She watched me the whole time. Her blue eyes just looking at me. Telling me she was sorry. That she was glad it was me and not the tangos.” Vance clutched at Ben and buried his face in his lover’s side, wetting the cotton shirt with the tears he couldn’t stop. “She was so goddamned tiny, Ben. I knew it had to be hurting her, but she kept smiling at me, and the more she smiled and told me it was okay, the angrier those fuckers got.”

“You weren’t at fault, Vance,” Ben assured him.

Vance didn't want to hear it. The memories of what he'd done replayed through his mind and the beast that was his desire still stirred at the thought of having Aimee again. "I was, Ben."

"No." Ben cupped his cheeks and raised his face. Warm gray eyes held his. "Your body may have gotten hard at the use of the whip, but you didn't decide to rape Aimee. You didn't consciously choose to force sex on her."

Vance shook his head.

Ben ignored him and continued. "I know you, V. You would never willingly choose to use force for sex."

Before he could shake his head in denial, Ben continued, "What did they threaten to do to her?"

Vance drew a shuddering breath, drawing up the memories he'd tried so hard to forget. "It doesn't mat—"

Ben's lips pressed against his, stopping Vance's words before Ben pulled back and shook his head. "It does matter, V. Now tell me. What did they threaten to do to her?"

Vance forced himself to remember. "The whip. They stripped off her *sirwal* and used the whip."

"On her legs?"

Vance nodded, his eyes squeezed shut. "She didn't scream, but I couldn't let them hurt her, Ben."

"I know, baby." Ben's hands smoothed through his hair. "I know."

"They took pictures."

Ben didn't say anything, but his body tensed beneath Vance's hands. Vance eased away, settling onto the warm grass. In front of him, Ben sat back on his heels with his hands resting on his thighs, waiting.

"You need to tell me, V. You've let it fester inside, and it's killing you."

“They spit on her.” His voice was quiet in the darkness. “Said she was unclean and had no right to dress as a proper Muslim woman.” The grass scratched his fingers. “They said she was only suitable to be an American’s whore. Before they used the whip, they...they took the knife to her privates.”

Ben’s hands fisted on his knees. “Did they –”

Vance shook his head, not wanting Ben to voice the fear he’d had when he’d seen those bastards press the knife between Aimee’s thighs. “No, they didn’t cut her. They scraped away her pubic hair. And slapped her...there. And she didn’t make a sound, Ben.” He couldn’t stifle the smile of pride that he felt lifting his lips.

The fingers on his knees loosened. Ben shifted onto his backside with his knees up and arms draped over them. He nodded. “Sounds like our Aimee.”

“She watched me, Ben.” Vance scooted closer, needing Ben’s body heat to dispel the chill that was trying to gain a foothold in his chest. “Every time they used the whip on me, she screamed at them. Begging them to stop hurting me, but when they turned on her, she didn’t say a word.”

Ben stayed quiet, waiting.

“When they told me to take her, I refused. They used the whip, and I still wouldn’t do it.” Vance shook his head. “And Aimee cried. They used the knife on her, they hit her, and they used the whip, but she didn’t make a sound. Even when one of the men began to take off his pants, she said nothing.” He raised his eyes, wanting, needing Ben to understand. “But I couldn’t let them hurt her.”

Ben opened his arms, and Vance moved in tight. Sliding his legs beneath Ben’s, he tucked himself close and buried his head against the other man’s shoulder. Inhaling the warm scent of his skin, the hint of astringent or antiseptic and taco seasoning that clung to his shirt, Vance let the rest spill out.

“I tried to be careful. I swear I did. She was so tiny I thought for sure I’d crush her.” The memories kept coming. “I touched her, tried to ease the sting they’d caused with their slaps and the knife. She kept thanking me for not letting them hurt her.”

“They thought I was taking too long so they used the whip. I made sure they couldn’t touch her, but she cried, begged me to just do it so they’d stop hurting me. I tried to tell her it would hurt, that if she’d let me, I could make it better. That the whip didn’t really hurt, but she kept crying, Ben. And those sons of bitches kept laughing.”

Cool fingers kneaded his scalp and his nape, but Ben remained silent.

Vance continued. “One of the men grabbed my arm, said if I wouldn’t satisfy the little slut, he would. Aimee begged me. ‘Please,’ she said. ‘Just do it, so they’ll stop.’ So I did.” His fingers flexed against Ben’s back. “I pushed inside her, and she cried out. And the bastards laughed.”

Chapter Seven

"It wasn't your fault, V. You didn't touch her intending to do her harm."

Ben's quiet assurance twisted the knot in Vance's belly. He'd told his lover most of what happened, but he hadn't revealed just what kind of bastard he'd become when he forced himself inside Aimee.

"No, I didn't intentionally hurt Aimee," Vance agreed, pulling himself from Ben's arms. He needed to let him go. To step away so that the pain of Ben's hatred, his retreat once Vance told him what he'd done to Aimee, wouldn't hurt as badly as Vance knew it would. Taking his time, not wanting to see the disgust in Ben's eyes, Vance stumbled to his feet and turned to face the house with his back to the older man.

Behind him, he could hear Ben rise to his feet, but still he remained silent.

Thrusting his hands deep into the front pockets of his jeans, Vance fingered the bit of jewelry he'd carried away from the mission to remind himself of his failure. The length of silver and stone had been pulled from Aimee's ankle when her loose cotton pants had been stripped away by their captors. Stroking the stones and bells brought him a little peace, but it made him more determined to keep his needs under control. To control the beast that was his desire. Again, he said, "I didn't intentionally hurt Aimee." He took a deep breath. "But I did come inside her."

This time he turned to face his best friend and the man he loved, needing to see his reaction. "I didn't just rape her, Ben; I climaxed. I found pleasure in the feel of her body around mine, and I climaxed. Now, what kind of sick fuck does that make me, Ben? That I can come inside a terrified kid while other men are watching, taking pictures. Huh?"

"It makes you human, Vance."

"Are you outta your fuckin' mind? Human? I held her down. I pushed her legs wider and I pounded into her like some goddamned stag in rut, and you call that human?"

"And you kept her from being raped by two terrorists that wouldn't have cared if she was wet or not."

"That has —"

"Stop, dammit, just stop, Vance." Gripping Vance's face in his hands, Ben stared down into the younger man's eyes and let him see the emotions he'd kept hidden. "There is nothing you've ever done to deserve the kind of punishment you've set yourself for. The whip, the gun—nothing you did to Aimee would justify you killing yourself."

"You don't know..."

Ben shook his head. "No, Vance, I don't know what it felt like to hold that kid down and do what you had to do to keep her alive. But I do know you."

"How —"

Pulling him close, Ben pressed his forehead to Vance's, hoping in some way to get the man he loved to understand. "You tried to make sure she was wet, didn't you? That's why the tangos were using the whip on you."

"Yes, but —"

“And I’m betting the entire time you talked to her. You told her you would take care of her, that you’d make it right. That you’d never let those bastards touch her. Right?”

Vance didn’t bother to speak, he just nodded.

“Did she come, V?”

“What the fuck kinda question is that?” Vance pulled out of his hold and stomped up onto the porch. He grabbed the beer he’d left on the floor beside his chair. Ben watched him drain half the bottle’s contents in one gulp.

Ben asked again, needing Vance to hear the answer more than he did. “Did she come? Did Aimee climax?”

The answer was soft and reluctant. “Yes.”

“And she did so before you did, right?”

This time Vance only nodded.

“And you are disgusted by that?”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t be?” Vance’s distaste was evident in his tone. “A man that can find pleasure in the abuse of a woman isn’t a man. He’s a bastard. A monster.”

“But you didn’t find pleasure in abusing Aimee, V. You found satisfaction in bringing her pleasure. At a time when she would have known only pain and degradation, you showed her something different.” Ben moved to the candles and blew them out.

“Are you condoning what happened as a good thing?” The confusion and disbelief in Vance’s voice had Ben shaking his head.

Returning to Vance’s side, he collected the .38 from the porch and wrapped his free hand around the back of the other man’s neck. “No. Rape is a violation that no one should ever be subjected to. But you didn’t set out to rape Aimee, nor did you make it the violent, penetrative act the terrorists would have made it. You’re a soldier. Doing a job. You aren’t Superman.”

Pressing his lips to Vance's, he caressed the soft surface before tasting the tang of the beer mingled with the man's own deeper flavor. Stepping back, Ben finished, "You can't kill all the monsters, and you need to stop punishing yourself for the lives you couldn't save." Reaching down, he took Vance's free hand and tugged him toward the house.

Vance resisted, pulling away, unsure how he could justify his past acts the way Ben just did. Then Aimee's soft voice whispered in his head, *You should tell him how you feel.* At the memory of pain that colored her cobalt gaze, Vance allowed himself to remember the words Aimee had said while he held her in his arms: *"Love is the one emotion that is the purest form of God. God doesn't sit in judgment of who you love; He only cares that you do love. Denying those emotions is denying Him."*

In front of him, Ben waited, gray eyes cautious, wary.

"I love you." The words spilled out of his mouth.

"Come show me how much." Ben smiled, holding out his hand.

Vance took his hand and followed him inside. Together they locked the back door and shut off the lights. Ben led him through the living room and down the hall, past the two guest bedrooms and the smallest bedroom that functioned as an office, and into the master suite. The king-size bed was situated beneath the east-facing window. To the left of the bed stood two wide French doors that led onto the porch that wrapped around the house. In the dark, Ben moved to the walk-in closet, where he set the gun and bullets in a cabinet and locked it before returning to Vance's side.

"You don't have to worry that I'll use it," Vance assured his lover, his hands working the buttons of Ben's shirt loose just as Ben's were doing his.

"I'm not. You already said you had three good reasons not to." Ben grinned. "Besides you're—"

"A marine."

"Yup."

"Not anymore." Vance tugged Ben's shirt from his jeans.

"Not anymore, what?"

"I'm not a marine anymore. I signed my separation papers yesterday, remember?"

Ben winked at him. "Sorry, V, but once a marine always a marine."

"Plus, I made a promise."

"A promise?" Ben's hands smoothed the shirt over his shoulders before his mouth dipped to tease the pearly bud of Vance's nipple.

Vance moaned, "Yeah. I promised to make things right." Taking less care with his lover's shirt, he shoved it off Ben's shoulders and down his arms so he could indulge in the feel of Ben's skin beneath his fingertips. Vance eased his hands lower, dipping under the waistband of Ben's jeans and boxers to explore the feel of his ass.

"How – *yeah, right there...ahh* – were you going to make things right?" Ben arched into his touch.

"By telling you I loved you." Vance tugged his hands away from Ben's ass and moved to the fastening of the other man's jeans. "She made me promise to tell you I loved you when I saw you again."

That made Ben pull back. "How did she know?"

"I told her." Moving his lips from Ben's throat to his chest, Vance eased to his knees, dragging the jeans and boxers to rest around his lover's ankles.

Feet bare, Ben stepped free of his clothing. "When? When did you tell her?"

Still kneeling, Vance explored the planes of Ben's abdomen with his lips. The sleek muscles and sprinkling of hair had him nipping at the tanned flesh, enjoying the musk of arousal that emanated from Ben's body. "When I first touched her, she apologized and asked if I would be breaking any vows by touching her."

"God, that sounds like Aimee." Ben laughed. His amusement was heavily touched with sadness, as if he'd suddenly remembered the girl he was thinking of was dead.

“Yeah. When I told her no, she gave me the strangest look and then said, ‘But you love someone, don’t you?’” Vance pressed his lips to the soft skin, peppered with hair, beneath Ben’s navel. Leaning back, he looked up to make sure Ben was watching him. “I told her I did, but I hadn’t told him yet.”

“That musta shocked her.”

Vance chuckled. “Nah, she just looked at me and said, ‘Promise me you’ll tell Ben when you get home.’”

Ben’s fingers threaded through Vance’s close-cropped hair as Vance moved his mouth farther south. The tiny pearl of precum glistened in the slit of his erection. Cupping his hands around Ben’s shaft, Vance licked the bead up, savoring the taste of Ben’s arousal as much as he reveled in the scent. “I did tell you, that first morning at the Club.”

“No, you di—”

“In my note,” Vance reminded him.

Before Ben could protest, Vance rolled his tongue over the head of his cock, lapping up the new pearls of seed. Dipping one hand lower, he fondled the sac dangling between Ben’s legs, playing with his balls while he took the first few inches of him inside his mouth. The heat and scent of his body and the taste of his cum aroused Vance.

Locked behind the zipper of his own jeans, he could feel the tip of his penis leaking, desperate to feel Ben’s hands around it, his mouth devouring his flesh. Drawing a deep breath saturated with the smell of Ben’s excitement, Vance tamped down his need, driving his desire under control, and continued his enjoyment of Ben’s shaft.

He pulled Ben’s cock out of his mouth with a soft *pop*, ignoring the curses and demands being spouted above his head. Instead, he focused his attention on lapping up every inch of the thick stalk of flesh, starting at Ben’s scrotum. With the tap of his hand, Vance had Ben widen his stance, opening his body to his touch. Taking his time, he

licked at the dusky flesh, noting the fine hairs that covered his balls were different from the coarser ones surrounding the base of Ben's cock. Once inventoried, Vance tested to see which touch had the most impact on his lover.

He started with a gentle lapping, over and around the sac, a tickle of the perineum that had Ben clutching at Vance's head.

"Oh God, baby. Do that again," he gasped, but Vance ignored him.

Next, instead of licking, he tried nipping. First at the edges of the flesh, close to where Ben's sac connected to his groin, then between the two hard knots contained inside. Nibbling led to sucking, which inevitably led to mouthing. The moment his lips closed over Ben's balls, Ben swayed. Vance clutched his ass to hold him upright, but Ben saved his balance by grabbing hold of the bedpost behind him.

"Fuck, please," Ben begged.

Again, Vance ignored Ben's plea. Moving his attention from his balls to the base of his shaft, Vance laved the heated pole with his tongue, enjoying the quiver of excitement that coursed through Ben's body. The pulse of his blood vibrated against his tongue and lips. Saliva pooled in his mouth and dribbled over his chin as he stroked his tongue over the thick length to the broad head.

Sucking him inside his mouth, Vance used the moisture coating the shaft to smooth the slide of his fingers. Up and down, he gripped the flesh tight as he drew inch after inch into his mouth until the head tickled the back of his throat. Exerting only the slightest pressure, he scraped his teeth along the sensitive flesh as he pulled back and then eased forward again. Ben hissed above him.

Keeping his tongue flat against the underside of Ben's shaft, Vance teased the thick vein echoing with each heavy thud of Ben's heart.

"I'm gonna come, V. Shit, baby, I need to come."

Vance pulled back. "Not yet, wait." At Ben's nod, Vance suckled his cock, drawing it deep as he coated the fingers of his left hand with the spit glistening on the shaft and dripping from the corners of his mouth. Timing his motions, he worked first one finger,

then two, and finally a third past the tight ring of muscles of Ben's anus. Feeding them in then out as he advanced and retreated his mouth along Ben's penis, Vance waited, his fingers searching until he found the spot he was looking for. Once detected, he squeezed the base of Ben's length one last time, looked up to meet his lover's silver gaze, and nodded to give his permission.

Ben exploded with a primal growl. His cum jetted out, splashing against the back of Vance's throat, coating his tongue with the salty flavor before he swallowed it down once more. Pressing against the knot of Ben's prostate, he pushed his lover into a second, less intense orgasm. Suckling Ben's softening erection, Vance enjoyed the pleasure swimming in Ben's gaze as they watched each other. The muscles gripping his fingers fluttered and pulsed as the climax eased, and Vance carefully pulled his digits free.

Finished and replete, Ben stumbled backward and dropped onto the bed. Vance stripped out of his jeans and boxers and reached for the lube and protection in the nightstand. His curses brought Ben's head up off the mattress.

"What's wrong?" he croaked.

Vance held up the empty box of condoms. "None left." His fingers flexed, crushing the black cardboard in frustration.

"It's okay."

He met his gray gaze. "Have you ever...?"

Ben shook his head. "I'm clean. What about you?"

"Me too. I've never gone bareback." Vance paused, then added, "Except Aimee."

Ben nodded, not seeming to need any more explanation. "Then we're good." Vance saw something flash in his friend's gaze. "I want you to come inside me, V."

Vance's fingers fumbled the lube, barely getting the cap open before Ben reached out and slid his fingers over Vance's cock.

“I need to feel what you feel like as you fuck my ass just as much as I want to feel what it’s like to explode inside you with nothing between your skin and mine.”

Vance groaned and laughed at the same time. “You keep talking like that, babe, and I’ll blow my wad right now. Fuck gettin’ inside you.” His hands trembled as he squeezed the lube into his palm. Closing and tossing the tube back onto the nightstand, he pushed aside Ben’s touch to spread the gel over his pulsing length.

Ben didn’t wait for direction. He rocked back on the bed, his feet braced on the edge of the mattress, hands spreading his cheeks, exposing the wet hole for Vance’s attention. Stepping between Ben’s spread thighs, Vance stroked Ben’s waking arousal, shifted his balls aside, and set the head of his cock where he wanted it most.

“How do you want it, Ben?”

“Hard.” Ben smiled. “Hard and fast.”

And Vance did just that. After taking the time to press past the first ring of muscles, Vance gave Ben what he asked for—a hard, fast fucking. In and out, he slammed, cursing and praising the clasp and grip of Ben’s channel, both aloud and in his mind. “So good, Ben. So fucking good. Tight and hot.”

The force of his thrusts shoved Ben farther onto the bed, making Vance crawl onto the tangled bedclothes and crouch over him to maintain the heated connection of their bodies. Ben’s legs wrapped around his waist as Vance bent to hover over him. Vance’s lips nipped and caressed Ben’s, tangling their tongues even as he pulled the older man’s hand from his hair. Lifting up just enough to meet his gaze, Vance pressed their hands, fingers intertwined, into the cool sheets above Ben’s head.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

Ben’s lips quirked up on one side. “Tell you what?”

A rumbling growl rolled through Vance’s throat as he leaned down and clamped his teeth into the sensitive curve between Ben’s neck and shoulder. Pressing hard enough to leave a sizable bruise, but not enough to break the skin, Vance waited.

"Ow, watch the teeth, V." Ben laughed.

Pulling up, Vance stilled the pistoning of his hips. "Say it, or no more fucking."

Ben arched beneath him. "Oh God, not that." This time his tone was serious rather than teasing.

"Say it."

"I love you. Is that what you need to hear?" Ben held his gaze, the emotions in his velvet gray eyes clear to see.

"Yeah." Vance nodded. The thrust of his hips began again, this time with a faster, more urgent pace. "Yeah," he repeated. "That's just what I needed to hear, baby. That's all I needed to know."

Lifting his head from the bed, Ben brushed his lips over Vance's and whispered it again. "I love you."

With those three words, Vance cried out. The climax swelled, spreading from his balls through his belly. His heart seemed to freeze then resume its frantic beat as his seed gushed forth, filling Ben's ass. Between their bodies, Ben's renewed arousal erupted as well, coating their chests and bellies with his cum. Their entwined fingers clutched and flexed as the waves of pleasure coursed through them, joining them, changing them from the isolated men they'd been to a single soul.

Epilogue

A few weeks later, the Diablo Blanco Club hummed with activity. Ben served drinks to the customers and chatted with the regulars seated at the bar. It was busier than usual for a Thursday night, and the Club members present seemed more interested in conversation than playing out their favorite fantasies for an audience.

When it had finally begun to slow down, he started prepping for the transfer to the relief bartender. After counting down his till and completing a quick bottle count, he handed over the keys but stuck around to help out with the customers. Wiping down the polished teak, he offered a grin to a slender blonde approaching the bar.

"LaTreace, long time no see, doll," he greeted. "What can I get for you?"

"Pomegranate martini, please." Settling onto the bar stool, the woman leaned forward, offering a clear view of the assets exposed by her low-cut blouse.

"No problem." Ben grabbed a glass, ran a slice of lemon along the rim before dipping it into a dish of sugar. Setting it aside, he filled a shaker with ice and mixed up the drink. After pouring it, he garnished the glass with a twist of lemon and set it on a coaster in front of the model. "On your tab?"

She nodded, took a sip, and purred, "Yum."

The door to the storage area swung open behind Ben just as the model leaned forward and stroked her hand over his. "When are you going to give in to me, Ben?" LaTreace offered a smile that had graced the covers of magazines around the world.

"Give in to what, LaTreace?" Ben grinned, remembering the numerous advances the sexy model had made to him over the last nine months.

"What we could be together." Her blue eyes twinkled with intent.

"Well—" Ben started, but the slide of warm arms around his waist halted his words.

"You ready to go?" Vance settled a soft kiss on the side of Ben's neck before propping his chin on his lover's shoulder.

Ben leaned into Vance's hold and asked, "You all finished, babe?"

Vance nodded and moved to lean on the bar close to LaTreace. "Yes. Stock's all counted and put away. Den has the towels folded and shelved, and the kitchen's been shut down."

LaTreace leaned back, a sexy pout turning her lips downward. "I thought I heard you were back in town, Vance."

"A few weeks ago."

"And you're working here?" LaTreace's gaze moved back and forth between Ben and Vance, disappointment visible in her bright blue eyes.

Vance nodded. "Tending bar and security. I'd heard you were in France. When did you get back?"

"Not soon enough apparently." LaTreace chuckled. She finished the last of her martini and pushed the empty glass toward the other bartender.

Tossing the damp cloth into the bin near the door leading to the hallway and storage area, Ben watched Vance smile at the disappointed model. Moving to the side of the bar, Ben lifted the hinged section of wood, and he and Vance stepped to the other side.

"I should have never gone to Paris," LaTreace sighed as she slid off her bar stool, her purse tucked under her arm.

"It wouldn't have mattered," Ben offered, dropping a soft kiss on the woman's cheek. "I told you months ago, I've always been a one-man kinda guy, hon."

"True, but a girl can dream, can't she?" she sighed.

"Yes, you can." He motioned over his shoulder toward Vance. "Dreams are what kept me going while this one was playing soldier."

"Who was playing?" Vance raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"Are you sure I can't tempt you, just a little bit?" LaTreace teased Ben, her fingers tracing the edges of a button on his shirt. "We could be magic together."

"I belong to Vance." Ben shook his head. "Ask him."

LaTreace turned her gaze toward Vance.

"Sorry, hon." Vance smiled. "I don't share well." He wrapped one arm around Ben's waist and used the other to reach out and pat her shoulder consolingly. "But you are right about the magic. And it's all mine."

"Ours, V. The magic is all ours," Ben reminded him, his gaze holding Vance's before he dipped his head and sealed their mouths together in a heated caress.

 THE END 

Qwillia Rain

Qwillia Rain grew up loving books. From an early age she was creating stories to go with the pictures. By high school she was penning romances for her friends and shocking them with the graphic nature of the love scenes. After leaving her home in Las Vegas, Nevada for Anchorage, Alaska, Qwillia discovered there were other authors who enjoyed throwing open the bedroom doors and exploring the darker side of human nature. She left Alaska for Billings, Montana, but the travel bug struck again. Currently, Qwillia resides in Raleigh, North Carolina, drawing inspiration from the history, scenery, and rich diversity of the South.