

Aftermath

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Chapter One

"Do you have any idea how many votes are locked up in the gay community, Strenlich?"

Chief of Detectives, Frank Strenlich, rocked wearily back in his chair, rubbing the fingers of his free hand across his furrowed brow, his hand fisted around the phone receiver. He had no idea how many votes there were in the gay community, but he was quite sure Commissioner Graham was about to rattle off the same vital statistics.

Well, not quite. "A lot," Graham said. "A hell of a lot," he added as if that narrowed it down further. "And I'm getting a lot of flack about these attacks. Something needs to be done. And done now. And since they're occurring in your district, I just thought you might be the one to handle it."

Smear just a little more sarcasm over it, Commish, Strenlich thought sourly--and silently. What the hell do you want me to do, send one of my people in as a target?

"I think, Frank--" Uh, oh, it was getting chummy. Look out for the hook buried under all that bait. "--that you should send one of your people in as a target."

"You're kidding," Strenlich protested, cutting a quick glance around the room to see if anyone were overhearing his thoughts and relaying them to Graham. "You want me to set up one of my men to get beaten to death? Just to protect some local bar-hoppers?"

"They're not bar-hoppers, Frank," the Commissioner soothed, "they're voters. And citizens. Citizens who deserve your protection. Remember, serve and protect?"

"If I'm reading the reports right, Commissioner, the victims in these incidents haven't exactly been pillars of the community. Or very smart. If people were being beaten and sexually assaulted in the club that I frequented, I think I'd have enough brains to find another playground for a while."

"Put one of your people under, Strenlich." The camaraderie had vanished.

"Surely, you have people there in your precinct who can protect themselves and handle a little undercover work."

"Commissioner," Frank protested, "there's a profile that has to be filled here if I want to put anyone under. And it's severely limited if you want to attract the right element. Just how many people do you think I have who can fit this particular bill?"

"You'll think of something, Frank." The angry buzz of an abandoned phone line punctuated the sentence.

Frank glared at the receiver, then dropped it into its cradle. Just when Strenlich needed him as political backup, Blaisdell had decided to take in a seminar in Cleveland. There was no convenient lap to dump this into with the Captain absent and the mantle of authority falling squarely on the chief's shoulders.

He didn't want this decision.

He did, in fact, have a man who fit the profile, at least as far as physical attributes went. And it was the last person he wanted to send in under these circumstances.

"Kermit."

Kermit Griffin looked up from his latest foray into the installation and application of illegally obtained software with a sour grimace. He hated to be interrupted.

"My door was shut, Chief," he pointed out, peering over the rims of his green sunglasses.

"Well, now it's open," the chief noted. Unrepentant at his intrusion, Strenlich dropped to a half-hitched seat on the corner of the cluttered desk. Kermit kept no extra chairs in his office--the better to discourage visitors--but it seemed to no avail if he counted up the number of precinct asses that tended to find a resting place on that particular corner of his desk.

Without bothering with amenities, Strenlich asked, "What have you got on the Midnight Lady Club incidents?"

"Just what you gave me," Kermit said, settling back in his chair as he angled the monitor screen away so that it wouldn't reflect in his glasses' lenses. For some reason he believed that was more efficient than removing the omnipresent glasses. "Gay club. Reputedly local meat market. Four men, early to late twenties, beaten, raped, dumped in an alley behind the club. One dead." He lifted the edge of a manila folder on his desk, peered at the page. "Sean Ackerman. Twenty-five. Died of massive internal injuries and a skull fracture according to Nicky's autopsy. No IDs. No witnesses willing to admit to recognizing anyone who might be involved."

"You got three surviving victims," Strenlich said. "Any chance of an ID through any of them?"

Kermit grunted. "According to them, they saw even less than the non-existent witnesses."

"Scared silent."

Griffin nodded.

Strenlich heaved a sigh. "Commissioner wants me to send a man in undercover."

"Let me guess?" Kermit retorted with an exaggerated scowl. "You've got just the man for the job."

"I don't want to," Strenlich said.

"Then don't."

"We're getting increasing heat from the Commissioner's office. If we don't provide some results soon, he's made it clear that the Mayor's office will be dragged into it as well. Then it'll be taken out of my hands and I'll have no control over the operation. This is one time I want to have all the say over conditions and backup."

"Wish Paul was here. He'd put the kibosh on this asap. And the Commissioner would listen to him."

"I wish he was here, too. But he's not. He's off on one of his mysterious jaunts." Strenlich huffed to a stand, cramming his hands into his pockets. "I don't have a whole lot of choice."

Kermit grabbed at his sleeve as the chief turned to leave, skimmed his fingers over the cloth, then dropped his hand back to the keyboard. "Get someone else, Frank."

"Who?" Strenlich snorted. "Can't hardly send one of the women into a gay bar posing as a customer. Who am I gonna send? Blake? Yeah, right. You? You radiate 'computer geek' not 'pretty boy'. Besides," he added, unable to resist the jab, "you're too old to play the part. Who else do I have in the right age and looks range?"

"They'll eat him alive, Frank."

"No they won't. I'll make sure his ass is covered." Finally, Strenlich grinned. "In every way possible."

"Caine! My office!"

"Shit," Peter Caine whispered with a sidelong glance at his sometimes-partner, Mary Margaret Skalany. "What do you suppose I've done now?"

"Don't look at me, partner," she said with a huge smile on her lovely face. "He has that 'I'm going to eat you for breakfast' look on that bulldog face. Better you than me."

Peter shot her a half-hearted glare and then levered himself out of the chair. With a fatalistic sigh, he headed for the beckoning door of the chief's office.

Blake stood off to one side of the tiny office, fiddling with his ever-present tangle of wires and bugs. He unwound one black cord out of a snake-pit of wires and started tracing it to its source.

Kermit was slouched in a tattered desk chair propped under the filmy window that was only half-shuttered against a blazing summer sun that threatened to leak in and overpower the air-conditioning.

Peter sidled in through the door, his expression wary. In the seconds it had taken him to wend his way through desks and bodies to get to Strenlich's office, he had run through his recent antics and had come up blank for anything that might get him in hot water with the irascible chief. That, of course, didn't mean that Strenlich didn't have him pegged for an earlier offense that had just come to light. With Blaisdell out of town, Strenlich kept a tight rein on Peter as if he were personally responsible for keeping the young detective out of trouble in the absence of his foster father.

Which merely meant that Peter got away with nothing.

"You wanted to see me, Chief?" he ventured, plastering his most innocent smile over deceptively young features.

"Got an assignment for you, Pete," Strenlich said, shuffling through a stack of papers on his desk. He ferreted out the one he sought and pushed it over to his detective. Peter picked it up with a barely audible sigh of relief and flipped through it.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes skimming mostly familiar information and an array of reports. "I heard about this one. I thought vice was assigned to it."

"As of last night, we got it," Strenlich informed him. "One of the victims died after being in a coma for a week. Now it belongs to homicide."

"Want me to check it out?" Peter asked with a half-glance at Kermit, obviously wondering why the computer expert was part of this briefing.

"I want you to go undercover and find out who's doing this," Strenlich corrected him.

"Undercover?" Peter glanced at him, then at Blake, then back at Kermit. His face reddened slightly as he considered the possible angles of this case. "Undercover as what?"

"Think about it, Pete," Strenlich said. "Young guys, about your age. Nice looking. Are going into a gay bar wanting a little action and they're getting a hell of a lot more than they ever bargained for. Now, use that keen imagination we all give you credit for and tell me what you think I want you undercover as."

"Frank..." Peter's face was scarlet now. He waved one hand vaguely, then dropped the offending folder back to the chief's desk. "I wouldn't...I don't...you aren't serious..."

"Serious as a heart attack, kid. The Commissioner is on my back on this one. And you know how the chain of command works. He gets on my case. I put you on his case. Simple mathematics."

"You want me to go into a gay bar and pick up other guys?"

"That's the gist of it."

"Just pretend they're ugly girls, Pete," Blake suggested from beneath his pile of paraphernalia.

"Last time I looked, you were a homicide detective, Caine," Strenlich said. "That right?"

Peter nodded hopelessly, knowing he'd lost the argument before he'd even gotten a shot off.

"This is a homicide case. I'm assigning you to it. End of lecture. Got the picture?"

"Got it, Chief." Peter scuffed one booted toe into the carpet, swallowed, made a conscious effort to banish the blanket of red that was still creeping up his face, and said, "When do I go in?"

"Tonight's as good a time as any. They seem to be hitting about once a week, usually on a Friday or Saturday night."

"Let me get you 'bugged out', Pete," Blake suggested, holding up a tiny black microphone and a wad of wire.

"Wire's the first thing that gets found, Blake," Peter countered. "You know that. If they're down to killing people, I don't think I want to tempt fate by going in wired."

"Oh, I can hide it," Blake assured him. "There are other parts of your anatomy--"

"Forget it!"

Strenlich raised a hand between them as if separating fussing children. "Don't worry about the wire, Blake," he said. "Just put a tracer on him. We'll be on this so hot and heavy--" He grinned at Peter, perversely enjoying the way the kid squirmed at the choice of words. For the resident hunk, Caine could be charmingly shy. "They won't be able to shoehorn him out the bathroom window without us knowing about it. I want you on this, Kermit. Take Skalany, Powell and anyone else you need. Peter, you watch your ass on this. I mean that. Figuratively and literally." Strenlich grinned at his own pun.

Peter scowled through another helpless blush.

Chapter Two

Maybe if he inflicted some of the precinct's infamous coffee on his stomach, Peter could stop worrying about tonight's little foray into the alternate lifestyle scene.

He dropped the file on the stained table, considered a day-old donut, heard his stomach protest in earnest and settled for the coffee. He poured two creamers into it; waited for it to change color. When it didn't, he added two more.

"Peter."

A glance over one shoulder identified Kermit as the speaker. The ex-merc was standing in the doorway of his office, one finger twitching in the universal 'beckoning' signal. Peter retrieved the file and the cup of rancid coffee and headed that way.

Kermit watched him approach, slowly and reluctantly as if he expected more of the ribbing he'd endured in Strenlich's office. Griffin's thoughts were far removed from harassing the kid. There was no doubt that Peter fit the victim profile. Young, good looking, fine featured, thin build, dark hair. The ideal bait. And he knew that the young cop could be just as lethal as a twenty-year veteran. Maybe more so with his training having been delivered at the hands of both his Shaolin father and Paul Blaisdell. But Peter Caine, growing up as an abandoned child, joining the police force on the strength of an innocent naivete that told him he could save the world, was no match for this assignment. Strenlich should have been able to see that.

He closed the door behind Peter and took the file, leafing through it. The attacks had grown progressively worse, with no motive attached to any of them. The victims had been too frightened or humiliated to testify or even provide leads. The investigating officers had been stonewalled in all instances. Even the young man who had died hadn't been able to provide any useful information. He'd been close to death when he'd been found, had never regained consciousness, simply slipped deeper into a dreamless sleep.

He dropped the file on his desk, then sank into his chair. Peter's hip settled naturally on the corner of the desk, just like Frank's had earlier. Kermit wondered briefly if there was a vacancy sign somewhere on his desk.

"You wanted to see me?" Peter finally asked when it seemed like Kermit didn't have anything to say after all.

"I want to talk to you about this undercover assignment. You think you can do it?"

Peter's face reddened slightly, his jaw clenched. "Sure," he said. "It's just another assignment. Piece of cake."

"You ever even been in a gay bar?"

"Well..."

"Didn't think so. Your tastes are kinda limited from what I've been able to observe."

"I never thought of it as 'limited' before, Kermit," Peter said.

"Look, Peter, I can help you get through this." With the ever-present sunglasses, it was impossible to tell if Kermit was serious or still enjoying Peter's discomfort.

"What do you mean?"

"I've had a little experience. I can walk you through some of it. Tell you what to expect."

Peter opened his mouth, shut it, then tried again. "Experience? You mean...experience?" He had no idea just what it was that Kermit was offering and wasn't sure he wanted to guess.

"Look, kid, when you're out in the field for months at a time, soft, female companions can be few and far between. Sometimes you take comfort where you can get it. Even if it's in the arms of your male partner. And as far as that goes, there are some assignments that demand it."

Nervous reaction pushed out an ill-considered, "Yeah, right, Kermit."

Smiling, Griffin got to his feet and took the single step that separated him from Peter's perch on the desk top. He ran the backs of his knuckles lightly down Peter's cheekbone, tracing the skim of flush that followed the contact of his hand across the lean face.

"When you're alone," he continued, his voice low, as intimate as the touch of his hand on Peter's face, "when you're hurt, cold, with no way of knowing if you'll make it to morning...when you've been surrounded by 'animals' for weeks on end, with no relief, sometimes you need a warm pair of arms to hold you, shield you from the cruelty of the world around you." Pleased that Peter didn't shy away from the continued caress of his hand, Kermit traced the sharp line of his jaw, strolled the fingers down to his neck. "At

times like that, all that matters is that the arms belong to someone who cares about you. Nothing else is important."

An unbearable loneliness tinted the gently spoken words, a vast desert of emptiness that Peter couldn't even imagine in spite of the terrible losses he'd suffered in his own life.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't...I didn't think...know..."

"It's okay," Kermit said, dropping his hand away, breaking the mesmerizing hold he'd established so easily. He grinned again and tapped one finger at Peter's nose. "So, you want my help?"

Peter considered only a second. "Please."

"There's just one more thing."

"What's that?"

"This conversation stays in this room. If it ever gets out, I'll have to kill you in your sleep."

The sun had died in a bath of crimson an hour earlier. Night was fully settled in, humid and gravid on the air.

Peter Caine sat in the Stealth, the engine cut off, the only sound he could hear the tick of the cooling engine. He fingered the tracking button that Blake had positioned within the fold of his cuff. His link to backup.

Kermit's advice, confession, admonitions, replayed in his mind, restlessly tumbling through a flutter of nervous anticipation.

"Don't try to overcome your shyness," Kermit had said right off the bat.

"Don't even try. Just do what's natural. It's endearing, anyway." He'd cautioned him to let the others make the first move. Catalogued some of the 'types' he'd encounter. The small, mousy guy who would approach him so tentatively that he wouldn't even be sure he'd been hit on. The clumsy, sincere ones. The loud, macho type who would try to establish the pecking order in the first few minutes. The angry ones, who wouldn't ever seem quite sure who to direct their rage at, themselves or the people who attracted them. He had closed his little 'lesson' with the promise that he'd be there, only a few yards away. Peter let the words replay their assurance through his mind: "I'll take care of you, kid. I promise. You won't be alone."

Peter took a final glance across the darkened street. The van was still there, a reassuring bulk looming in the shadows. Blake's surveillance equipment lined the gutted interior of the van, protection against anything that could happen within the depths of the Midnight Lady. He took a final, deep, cleansing breath and got out of the car.

Neon snaked across the front of the recessed entrance. Garish purple and cerulean blue outlined "Midnight Lady" across the marquee. Ten concrete steps descended toward the black leather double door and Peter took each one of them with considerable reluctance. For once, he wished Paul was around to protect his 'baby boy' from the coarser assignments, in spite of Peter's constant insistence that he neither needed nor wanted special treatment.

Sometimes it was a plus to be related to the boss. But, evidently not when the boss was snoozing through a series of boring seminars in Cleveland, Ohio, and wasn't around to oversee the assignment of undercover stints at the One-oh-One.

Strenlich was enjoying this entirely too much.

He hadn't even had the unspoken support of his father's presence. Caine had been gone on one of his sabbaticals with no sign of when he intended to return. If he intended to return. Peter shut off the thought as too terrible to entertain. After believing his father dead for fifteen years, he wasn't ready to consider doing without him again. If he'd just send some kind of word...a postcard... He shook off the thought. His father didn't 'do' postcards.

Taking a deep breath, Peter fidgeted with the tiny tracer button tucked away in the cuff of his silk shirt, then pushed through the door.

Smoky air and the cloying scent of colliding aftershaves and colognes assaulted him as he stepped into the interior of the club. The dance floor was directly in front of him, flanked by the band alcove, now absent of any live music. Murky jazz filtered in through speakers set in strategic locations around the large room, the music at least at a tolerable level that seemed capable of supporting conversation. The dress code was evidently early Yuppie with a few more exaggerated forays into gay-oriented couture. Or at least what Peter figured was gay couture. One young man, lounging near a table, bent over to carry on an intimate conversation with an older man--silver haired and impeccably dressed in a three piece suit--sporting a leather vest, leather pants and little else. Peter winced when he noted the nipple rings joined by a metal chain that the older man was lightly toying with. A silk shirt and dress pants were as far as Peter was willing to go in the wardrobe line. Except for that young man, he seemed to fit in better than he had expected.

A few couples shifted to the music on the polished wood dance floor, their hands roaming in intimate patterns on their partners' bodies. If he squinted his eyes, he could almost imagine it was a normal dance floor with sensually swaying couples answering the age-old beat of slow music.

An upper tier off to his left was crowded with candle-lit tables, most of them occupied. The right tier held more tables abutting the long, polished expanse of bar. Peter headed for the bar. Might as well fortify himself.

The bartender glanced at him, then took a second look before sidling over. "What'll it be?" he asked. He was tall, his body an advertisement for anorexia, his hair white-blond and close cropped. The skin on his face was stretched thin over prominent cheekbones, nearly translucent in the artificial lighting that reflected from the full length mirror behind him.

Peter considered his 'on duty' status, then shrugged. "Martini, just a breath of vermouth."

"Got it," the bartender said, his hands fiddling beneath the bar, coming up with a bottle of gin that Peter recognized as 'the good stuff'. True to the request, he barely passed the vermouth over a generous portion of gin, dropped in an olive, a swizzel stick and handed it to Peter. "Run a tab?" he asked, evidently assuming Peter was here for the long haul.

"Sure," Peter agreed.

"Don't worry," the bartender said, leaning closer as if relaying a secret between them. "You won't have to pay for your drinks for long. Take it from me."

Peter barely caught himself from asking what he meant. He swallowed the question and a flush of embarrassment. It was never that easy to pick up women in The Agrippa. Hardly seemed fair.

"What's your name?"

"Peter." Eppy had drilled it into his head to always use his real first name whenever he was sent undercover. It was too easy to fail to respond to an unfamiliar name and that, Epstein assured him from the lofty vantage point of his years' experience, was the Achilles' heel that cost most cops their cover. He hadn't bothered to choose a last name. Somehow, he doubted it would come up in the conversation under these circumstances. With one finger, he absently tapped the olive deeper into the clear liquid. It bobbed to the surface. Peter poked it again.

A hand on his shoulder turned him.

The man standing close enough to envelope Peter in a cloud of faintly familiar aftershave was forty, forty-five. He could have passed for a George Maharis clone. Carefully maintained tan, dimples that probably required a q-tip to clean, even, unnaturally white teeth, every hair in place. Peter immediately dismissed him as his quarry. The man hardly looked like the type to mess up a hundred dollar manicure by beating up other men in dark allies.

"Buy you another?" the man offered.

"No, thanks. Just got this one," Peter said, then stepped past him, sidestepping to avoid the second reach for his shoulder. He was halfway across the table-studded floor when blunt fingers deftly lifted the martini glass from his hand. Before he could protest, the glass was set carefully on a table and Peter looked up at the man who had just divested him of his liquid composure.

"Jack," the man said. "Jack Latham."

First and last name. Not a good sign for this set-up. Peter doubted he was going to be introduced to a possible murderer, especially not in the first ten minutes he was in the place. He was about to repeat his semi-polite turn down, when Latham asked, "You dance?"

Peter followed his glance to the sparsely populated dance floor, then shook his head. Even though he'd already discarded the man as a suspect, he ran a mental file through his head, lining up appearance with recent mug shots. Six-three, late thirties, bulked up, huge hands, one of which was presently smoothing up and down Peter's bicep with totally unwelcome familiarity. Long, silky blond hair that framed a face just a little too rugged to be handsome. He had on a T-shirt that emphasized the corded muscles of his upper arms, jeans that strained around massive thighs. Blue eyes that didn't seem to blink. Like a reptile's eyes. Open, judging, considering, faintly intimidating. Peter had no desire to meet this guy in a dark alley. Or on the dance floor.

"Can't dance," he said with a half-apologetic smile.

"Sure you can," Latham said, his fingers completely encircling Peter's upper arm, staking his claim with the slightest increase of pressure.

Peter gave in even as every muscle in his body tensed in protest. He'd blow the entire assignment if he started a brawl over a spin around the dance floor. Just pretend he's an ugly--a very big--ugly woman, he repeated Blake's suggestion as if it were a mantra that could offer him a modicum of comfort. He was suddenly very, very glad that he was 'traced' rather than 'bugged'. If Skalany and Kermit could overhear him being hauled onto the dance floor by a man who could pass for a lumberjack, he'd never hear the end of it. The only reprieve he was offered was that the song was nearing its end before they ever set foot among the gently swaying couples intertwined in each others' arms. Latham's arms wrapped naturally around his waist and he tugged Peter forward into his embrace, his massive body already moving to its own inner rhythm. Peter had only a second to wonder who the hell was supposed to lead, when he found himself trying to follow the other man's movements without tripping over his own feet. He felt scarlet wash into his face as one huge hand drifted lower down his back to rest cupped around one rounded buttock.

His tension must have translated, for Latham grinned down at him. "Relax, kid," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. Unless you like that sort of thing."

"No," Peter said too quickly. "I mean, I don't. Like that, I mean." Great, he thought sourly, I would attract a fan of the Marquis de Sade. How the hell did Frank talk me into this? Mercifully, the music ended, but Peter wasn't about to be released. With one hand still wrapped possessively around Peter's upper arm, Latham guided him back to the table where he had previously abandoned the martini. A light pressure put Peter in the chair. With a sigh, he retrieved the drink and downed it. His breath caught in his throat as the drink, almost all gin, burned a trail down his throat. It tasted as bad as Lo Si's 100 proof Earl Grey. When his eyes cleared, he glanced at his companion.

Latham sank into a chair next to him, his face smooth and still friendly. Peter wondered how friendly it would remain if he tried to make an escape. He was just about to test the theory when he caught a glimpse of the big man's hands.

Raw abrasions marked the surface of each knuckle. A large ring squatted on the third finger of his left hand, a skull with an elaborately carved silver snake twined around it, its sinuous body protruding from one empty eye socket. One of the identifying marks on two of the victims had been torn facial skin that the Medical Examiner, Nicky Elder, attributed to a large, sharp-edged ring. Peter doubted the man got the bruised and abraded knuckles by accident. Absently, he fingered the sleeve of his shirt, reassuring himself that the small tracking device Blake had imposed on him was still in place. For once, he was very happy to know that backup was waiting just outside and ready to respond to his faintest squawk of danger.

Bracing himself, he reconciled to playing this one out. If he had stumbled on their perp this fast in the game, he wasn't about to lose him on a technicality. He'd have to force a move with himself as bait if they hoped to get a conviction.

Latham poked one finger up into the air. "Jamie!" The finger wiggled in invitation, and a dark haired, stocky man wove his way over to the table.

Brown hair, dark eyes and a faintly Hispanic cast to the face. Peter was cataloging everyone he came into contact with now that he was certain he was on the right track. A compact body, but with an air of grace. "Jamie" grinned at them. A mole, small, dark, moved as if suddenly animated when he spoke. "What can I get you, Jack?" he asked.

"Want the same again?" Latham asked Peter, who managed a quick nod.

"Martini for--what's your name, kid?"

"Peter. Peter Griffin." Oh, well, it beat coming up with something original.

"A martini for Peter and the usual for me." His eyes, glittering blue and clear as the summer sky that had just recently faded into the blackness of early night, rested on Peter for a second longer, then flicked up to Jamie. Peter thought he caught the slight tip of Latham's head at the waiter, a half-gestured nod, but the other man was gone to fill the order before he could be sure that anything had passed between them.

The drinks were delivered seconds later and Peter wondered only briefly what passed for small talk under the circumstances. He'd never knowingly been in a gay bar before, though one of his father's friends was a gay man that Peter genuinely liked, so he didn't have any experience to fall back on. And chit chat with a suspected murderer wasn't outlined in any of the manuals he had studied at the academy. He simply waited for the other man to take the lead.

"So, what do you do, Pete?"

Damn, Peter thought, it was just like any other pickup line he'd ever heard. Next they'd be exchanging astrological signs.

"Computers," he said, inspired by his theft of Kermit's name. Might as well abscond with the Hundred and First's resident geek's occupation as well.

"Program them or sell them?"

Peter backpedaled quickly. It wouldn't do to have to come up with technological knowledge he didn't possess. "Uh, sell them." He took a long swallow of the drink. "How about you? Jack? What line of work are you in?"

"Insurance."

Peter took another drink. The Dating Game in the Twilight Zone. "Thought you might be a boxer or something," he ventured.

"What?" Latham looked genuinely confused. He sipped at his own drink.

Peter nodded at the abused knuckles. "You look like you've gone a few rounds."

"Oh," Latham laughed. "Just a misunderstanding. A guy I met wanted my wallet. I wasn't finished with it. We had to come to an agreement."

"Hate when that happens," Peter agreed. He glanced around, at a loss now that he had exhausted his repertoire of come on lines. He covered his hesitation by draining the martini and fingering out the olive. He bit into it. It tasted funny. Slightly sour. He never really liked olives anyway. The silence pushed at him until he finally said, "So, what now?"

"You haven't been here before, have you?" Latham asked, his tone strictly conversational. "I haven't seen you before and believe me I'm a regular."

"Oh." Peter glanced longingly at the bar. Maybe another drink would roust the butterflies out of his stomach. He wasn't convinced he should chase a third martini down so quickly, though, if he was going to remain alert. He was strictly a two beer man

usually. "No. I haven't. I mean, I just got in town a couple of days ago. I have to travel. With the company, you know."

"Look," Latham said, leaning forward, "let's get down to it. You interested in a little private party? I could make it worth your while."

This was going way too fast. The music started up again, louder this time, discordant. The lights dimmed, neon washing out to a faded purple haze. The candle on the table flickered, a halo of reflected light encircling it, dancing in a dizzying spiral. Peter's eyes clouded, his mind drifted. He'd only been here a half hour and he'd already drunk too much. Great undercover cop he was.

He forced his thoughts into some semblance of order. "What kind of a party?" His voice sounded slurred to him.

"Just a few friends." Latham's fingers were back on his arm again, kneading into the soft flesh. "You, me, a couple others. Just a nice, relaxed time. I'll take care of you. I promise you, you won't be disappointed."

"I don't think..." The thread of thought vanished. Peter's vision blurred, his eyes lost focus and he slumped lower in the chair.

A shadow moved beside him. He opened his eyes, blinked, and vaguely recognized the waiter--what was his name--Jamie?

Peter tried to shrug away from the tightening grip Latham had on his arm but the grasp had mutated to steel. He felt like he was trying to wade through deep mud.

"Come on, Peter, you're going to enjoy this," Latham whispered, his breath fluttering over Peter's face, ruffling the fringes of his hair.

Peter ordered his body to move. Nothing responded. His arms were leaden, his legs rooted to the floor.

"Hold it." A second voice broke in and Peter had a moment's relief that Kermit had discarded the plans and come in early. "He was fooling with his sleeve a few minutes ago." The voice faded into unfamiliarity, then Jamie moved into Peter's limited range of vision. Hands plucked at his wrist, fumbled with the cuff of his sleeve. "He's wired."

"Not a wire," Latham's voice countered, dwindling into a muffled distance of nearly meaningless sound. "Just a tracer." He took it from Jamie and slipped it out of sight, affixing it to the underside of the leather covered table. "How'd you notice that?," Latham asked Jamie.

"I'm ex-Army," Jamie said with a lopsided grin. "That's where we always stuck them."

Latham smiled, the expression without humor. "Thought you said computers, Peter? Maybe you meant cop? No problem. You'll do just fine now that you're 'out of touch'."

Jamie got to his feet, then ducked down and slid an arm around Peter's waist. Latham took hold of his arm on the other side and together they lifted him to a shaky stand. His knees threatened to buckle, but they got him moving, his body suddenly on automatic pilot while his mind tried sluggishly to make sense of what was happening. He tried to say something, protest, but the effort was too great, and the thought slipped away. He didn't notice the trip to the back of the club, past the bar, down a dark corridor that led into an underground parking garage. Only when humid air cut through the fog enshrouding his mind did Peter stir himself out of his stupor.

He yanked backward, nearly toppling Jamie, but Latham's hold on his arm didn't budge. Instead, the huge man twisted his elbow and jerked him closer. His free hand grasped the back of Peter's neck, squeezing painfully enough to penetrate the dizziness.

"This can be easy or you can make it real hard, kid," Latham advised him in a purely conversational tone.

Latham's fingers tightened into the tensed muscles of Peter's neck. Nausea teased at the back of his throat and the room tipped crazily. His balance vanished and he stumbled backward into Latham's arms. Only then did he see the waiting van. For a crazy, lopsided moment he thought it was Blake's surveillance van, then the color registered. Blake's van was black, this one was light blue.

Only one thought made it through the murky confusion in his head. He was not going into that van.

The side door swung open with a protest of metal against metal. Peter slammed an elbow into Jamie's unprotected stomach. The man, howled, gagged, and went down. Latham was another matter altogether. Peter tried to spin out of the huge man's iron grip only to find himself catapulted into the side of the vehicle. His forehead cracked against the door frame and he fell forward into space. Hands reached for him, pulling him inside. He struggled against the clutching fingers, kicking blindly out, hitting only air. He was thrown face first onto the carpeted floor of the van and only vaguely realized that Latham clambered in after him.

New hands wrestled him back to the floor when he tried to break free and a knee smashed into his lower back knocking the air out of his lungs, stunning him. His face pressed into the carpet, he fought for air. His arms were wrenched behind him and he felt the unmistakable clatter of handcuffs against the bones of his wrists. They clicked shut, biting into his skin, pinning his hands behind him.

Latham tapped on the back of the driver's seat and said, "Go, Sammy!" The engine barked to life and the vehicle rocked into motion. Latham turned back to their prisoner.

"I told you we could make it hard for you, Peter. Keep it up and you're going to be sorry."

Another wave of nausea threatened to take Peter over into blackness, but his stomach wrenched in a spasm of agony, then relented and he was left gasping and pale, breathing in gas fumes and nearly smothering in the deep pile of the carpeting. A hand wavered into his field of vision, then cupped his chin, turning his head sideways. The knee remained pressed into his back, holding him to the floor.

Latham's voice carried from somewhere above and behind him. "What do you think, Thomas?"

Another face jolted into focus and Peter squinted up into two chocolate eyes. The man, who must have been Thomas, last name or first name it wasn't clear, peered closely at him, a slight smile parting his full lips. He released his gentle grasp of Peter's chin and smoothed his hand over the cop's sweating, pallid face. "Nice," he intoned. "Very nice."

He looked vaguely familiar. Even through pain, dizziness and fear, Peter tried to place the face. Early forties, caramel skin, a dazzlingly white smile, large perfect teeth. A Chambray shirt fit snugly over leanly muscled black skin. His voice was a gentle, deep purr of sound.

"Very nice indeed," he repeated, again with the oddly comforting smile.

"Glad you approve," Latham snorted.

Too late, Peter wished he'd allowed Blake to place the damn wire anywhere on his body that he wanted to. The little tracer bug was sitting back at the club, blithely emitting reassuring beeps to the surveillance team who would be sitting in the air conditioned comfort of the van without a clue that Peter had been spirited away through an underground garage. He knew only that he'd been drugged and was being driven over rough roads. Sick and scared, he tried to focus his erratic thoughts. His father could snap the handcuffs without the slightest effort. He should have been paying attention to that particular lesson. Must have played hooky that day. Even in the muggy warmth of the mid-summer night, he shivered beneath the hands that still pinned him to the floor. He wished his Pop was here. Or Paul. Or Kermit. Damn it, Kermit. Please find me. Somehow, find me. I can't do this."

Chapter Three

"It's been too long."

"Relax, Kermit, there's no way to even guess if the people we're after are on the scene tonight," Blake countered the worried statement. "Give the kid some time. I'm still reading the signal loud and clear. He hasn't left the club."

"It's been nearly three hours."

"I've had nights when five hours weren't enough," Mary Margaret said sourly.

"We're not talking about your luck or mine, sweetcakes," Kermit retorted.

"We're talking about Peter here. We should have only had to dangle him for ten minutes to get a bite."

"Might not hurt to take a stroll through," Blake offered thoughtfully. "See how he's doing."

"This should be good," Jody Powell said. "Blake and Kermit, arm in arm, strolling through the Midnight Lady."

Blake was offended. "We could always send you in to check up on him, Powell."

"I got the wrong set of attributes."

"You and Mary Margaret stay here," Kermit cut in. "Come on, Blake, let's just check this out. Keep an eye on that signal, ladies. We won't be long. It'll only make Peter nervous if he sees us inside."

To Blake's consternation, Kermit was hit on twice before they finished an unobtrusive search of the room. He was wondering what Griffin had that he didn't when Kermit finally said, "I don't see him. You still getting a reading on that toy of yours?"

Blake looked down at the tiny black box in the palm of his right hand. "According to this he's right here," Blake said with a shrug. "Maybe he's in the john."

"Zero in on him."

"I thought you didn't want him to see us."

"Right now all I want is to see him. Find him."

Blake shrugged and concentrated on the receiver. Within seconds he'd narrowed the path of search down to a single table off to one side of the recessed bar. The table was empty.

"He's not here, but the tracer is," Blake announced, the first hint of concern roughening his voice.

Kermit sat in one of the chairs, considered a moment, then ran his hands beneath the table. He found the tracking button on his second sweep. Tugging it free from the undersurface of the table, he held it out to Blake.

"You said this damn thing was foolproof."

Blake shook his head. "Nothing's foolproof, Kermit. You know that. Damn." His voice dropped to a whisper. "They've got him, don't they?"

Griffin nodded, a curt shake of his head.

"He still wearing that watch you gave him for his birthday?"

"Oh, yeah," Kermit said.

Peter didn't miss the fact that they were using names in front of him. They didn't plan on his walking out of here when they were through with him, thus no need to conceal their identities. Evidently the game plan had altered since the first assaults. Even with the scarcity of information the cops were able to get out of the first three victims, it was clear that they had never been able to eyeball their assailants. They spoke of druggy, half images of hooded men, unidentifiable voices against a backdrop of confusion and terror. None of the four men had even attempted to conceal their features from Peter. Not an endorsement of his chances by any stretch of the imagination.

The road surface changed, the van rocking over potholes and gravel that crunched beneath the slowly moving tires. Eventually, it eased to a halt and the engine died at the flick of a key. Thomas helped him sit up, his hands gentle, supportive. Peter realized then that he could quit running mug shots through his druggy mind. He recalled why the man looked familiar. Some actor he'd seen at Stratford years ago when Paul took him to Toronto. Played Iago or somebody. The same cultured, refined face. The same well-modulated voice, a feline grace that belied his lithely muscled bulk.

For a moment, Thomas supported him while the interior of the vehicle swirled in a dizzy eddy. He brushed tousled hair out of Peter's face, his hand silky smooth against the flushed skin.

"Take it easy," he said with what could pass for genuine concern. "Don't worry. Everything will be over soon. You'll be all right."

He nodded at Jamie who approached cautiously, obviously having second thoughts after being nearly impaled by Peter's elbow. He still had a half-sickly pallor in his face. He reached for Peter's legs to pull him out of the van.

Without gauging his chances beyond a faint glimmer of hope, Peter kicked out at Jamie, smashing him in the mouth with one boot heel. Blood splayed across Jamie's face and he vaulted backward to land on the ground with an explosion of air and reckless cursing. Latham dropped out of the van and grabbed Peter's ankle before he could try for a second kick. Within his massive fists he wrenched the leg forcing Peter to turn toward the floor.

Somehow he ended up in Thomas' lap, but before he could attempt to move,

Latham pulled him, face down, toward him, grabbed his belt and pulled him to his feet. His arm instantly encircled Peter's neck, choking him, forcing his head back.

"One chance's all you get, Pretty Boy," he growled into Peter's ear. "Try that with me and we'll be needing the coroner sooner than we planned. You got it?"

He eased the pressure just enough to get a minimal response from Peter, then snarled at the cowering Jamie. "Get cleaned up. Let's get this done before he causes any more trouble."

Sammy, the driver, stayed out of the fray. He let Latham and Thomas manhandle Peter into the warehouse and across to the small room where they had their equipment set up. In the meantime, Sammy set about checking out the camcorder that was already set up on the tripod and adjusting the sound equipment. He fancied himself a film-maker, even though he was presently engaged in a very limited--though lucrative--market. One day he was going to be on the other side of a camera for real, not for sleazy porn movies that pandered to one very rich, very twisted customer who went into realism in an increasingly morbid way. Sammy Baxe was going to be a name that was recognized.

This was going to be the first real 'snuff' film they'd made. But the ante had gone up considerably when the client had first suggested it. Sammy had thought they'd inadvertently made him one already when that kid, Ackerman, had nearly died while they were filming. That he did finally die a week later didn't count. The client wasn't willing to pay for a death that took place off camera.

The first film had gone pretty routinely. Pick the guy up at the club, beat on him a little, just enough to get him scared enough to cooperate, then keep filming until Thomas and Jack got tired of 'performing'. They'd been paid well for their efforts. They'd gotten still more for the second shoot. This one was a little rougher. The young guy they'd chosen had put up more of a fight and had lasted longer under the attentions of his two 'co-stars'. The client had been pleased. But he'd really been forthcoming with the big bucks with film number three. This time they'd nearly beaten the kid to death right on screen. Now the client wanted to be around for the finale.

Should be interesting. This young cop was already more trouble than any of the others. He might just outlast them all. Maybe Sammy would pocket the proceeds from this shoot and try to go legit. He had to make the move sometime or he might miss his opportunity. He could always fall back on private filming if he had to.

"Think you can control him?" Latham asked with a sidelong glance at Thomas.

The black man smiled, his arm linked with Peter's cuffed hands, half supporting the younger man when he swayed on his feet.

"I got him," Thomas said. Latham nodded and went to help Sammy finish setting up and testing equipment.

Peter fought off the most recent wave of dizziness that assaulted him, and squinted to try to get the dimly lit room into focus. He was nearly blinded when strobe lights suddenly flared to life, casting the room into stark brightness. He could see the camera equipment then, the amplifiers, recording gear. It didn't take too much imagination to come up with a pretty good idea of what was about to happen. His stomach twisted in revulsion. He frantically willed his mind to clear enough to try to think of something to do. Anything. Anything but stand here and allow this to happen.

Thomas' hand patted him gently on the shoulder, then rubbed a lazy stroke down the length of his arm. "Kicking Jamie," he said, "that wasn't too smart, kid. You gotta be more cooperative. Every time you try something like that it's gonna cost you. I don't want to see you hurt. This doesn't have to be that bad."

"You can't do this," Peter said, wondering why he was bothering to register even a weak protest with this man. Even as he spoke the objection, Thomas was easing him closer to the camera area and into the circle of light. His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might lurch right out of his chest. He could feel himself starting to hyperventilate but couldn't organize his thoughts enough to try to stop it or the dizziness it fogged his mind with.

Ignoring the plea, Thomas positioned him next to a single, metal support pole in the center of the room. "Just relax and let it happen, Peter," he said as he retrieved the handcuff key from his pocket. "I can make it easy on you if you just let me. I can even make it feel good."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" The question was rote by now, the only thing his terrified mind could produce.

Thomas shrugged. "The money's good. The work's...enjoyable." He smiled, a lift of dark lips that contrasted sharply against pearl-white teeth. "Besides, I like beautiful things...statues, paintings, men."

Latham rejoined them just as Thomas slipped the key into the cuffs and released them. Before Peter could react to the illusion of freedom, he was spun around to face the metal pole. His hands were stretched on either side of the pole and the cuffs slipped back over his wrists. Too late, he tried to pull away, but the handcuffs caught at his wrists, scraping the skin raw, drooling a thin line of blood down one arm. Latham took him by the shoulders from behind and pressed down. Peter started to pull away, but a kick buckled

his knee with a distinct, sickening snap. Then a blow lanced into his lower back and he dropped to the floor with a cry of pain.

"Make it look good," Latham grunted to Thomas. "This one is worth a little extra effort. There's more money in it."

"You ready?" Thomas asked over his shoulder, going to one knee beside Peter.

Sammy's disembodied voice called back, "Ready."

Latham grabbed Peter by the hips and wrenched him over onto his back. The handcuff chain squealed against the metal pole and twisted Peter's wrists. He was still gasping from the blow to his back. Thomas' hands were suddenly on his face, running through his tangled hair, sliding down the smooth column of his throat. He gasped and tried to arch away from the gentle pressure of the unwelcome hands, but Latham caught his legs before he could strike out with either foot and shoved him to the floor. The grip on his left leg sent shivers of agony all the way up to his hip.

"It's gonna be all right," Thomas kept reassuring him, his voice soothing and persuasive. "Just let it happen. Don't fight it, baby. I won't hurt you if you don't fight me."

His fingers moved down to Peter's chest, then started working on the buttons of his shirt. Peter squirmed, trapped by the implacable grip of Latham's massive hands on his thighs. Thomas' hands continued their relentless seeking. The shirt slipped open. Peter's chest heaved with panicked gasps as Thomas took the luxury of a slow, gentle, sensual exploration of his chest and belly.

Backup. Where the hell was his backup? He'd gone by the rules this time. Kermit had promised...he had promised...

Peter arched against Thomas, tears of frustration and humiliation forming in his eyes, slipping down his face. Thomas let his teeth nip gently while his hands trailed across the flat planes of Peter's abdomen. His fingers encountered the waistband of Peter's jeans, fumbled with the belt buckle, then freed it. Peter writhed helplessly beneath him, Latham's hands digging into the tensed muscles of his thighs in the strain of holding him still. Thomas worked the snap of the levis loose, then drew the zipper down.

Up to now, until that single, decisive action, Peter had harbored some shred of hope that this was going to end. The terror edged one step closer to an overload that was sure to shatter his sanity.

Thomas's hand eased its way past denim until he contacted the thin material of briefs. His fingers prodded with exquisite gentleness, kneading softly as, to his helpless horror and revulsion, Peter's body traitorously answered the forced stimulation.

"How are we going to track him?" Powell demanded when Kermit and Blake had returned to the van with their tale of woe.

"His watch," Blake answered, plundering in a file cabinet that was piled full of greasy wires and cable.

"Peter has a bad habit of going off half-cocked," Kermit explained as he watched Blake search out the equipment he'd need. "Last year for his birthday, I gave him a watch with a little modification Blake made up for me."

"He's effectively 'bugged' every time he puts that watch on," Blake added. "I fitted it with a transmitter just in case we lost track of the kid and he failed to report in, which he does with distressing regularity."

"Peter Caine, on tap," Jody said. "I like it."

"Works for me," Skalany agreed. "Now will it find him for us?"

"Give me five minutes," Blake said, up to his elbows in unidentifiable gadgets.

"Damn, you got good hands," Latham grunted appreciatively as he watched

Peter unwillingly responded once again to the relentless pressure. Peter groaned and squinted his eyes shut against the betrayal of his own body. His mind reeled in helpless protest, still clouded and bewildered by the lingering effects of the drugs, distracted by pain as his bruised back was ground into the cold cement beneath him. For an instant he imagined Kelly's hands on him as he felt his pants dragged down the length of his legs, the soft, silky feel of her slender fingers as they stroked a path of pleasure over his responding flesh. The image cleared, faded, then vanished as he forced his eyes open to meet only the intense gaze of Thomas. For a second he wasn't sure where he was.

He vaguely recognized Thomas' finely planed face and tried to twist out from under the suffocating weight of the other man's body.

A flicker of impatience flashed across Thomas' face at the weak struggle and he suddenly reached up and slapped Peter across the face, a hard, stinging blow that split his lip and rocked his head against the concrete floor, stunning him, blurring his vision. Peter teetered on the edge of consciousness, then was brought back by the melodious sound of Thomas' voice.

"Don't make me hurt you, baby. Stop fighting me. It's your choice. Pleasure or pain."

"Go to hell," Peter ground out through clenched teeth.

Thomas backhanded him, and for an instant Peter was granted the release of unconsciousness. It didn't last more than seconds, however, and he woke to Thomas' uninterrupted, coercive manipulation of his body.

"Do him," Latham said, rearranging his grip on Peter's legs, twisting him over onto his stomach. His left shrieked a protest of pain at the change of position and he clearly felt bones grate together.

Pure panic raced through Peter as he was repositioned and felt the weight of Thomas' body settling over the backs of his thighs. He squirmed uselessly as Thomas ran his hands over the tensed, lean muscles of his back.

It would stop now. It had to. He tried to will the words out through a throat gone desert dry, a plea that would touch them, make them stop. But layer by layer his mind was shutting down on him. He couldn't think, couldn't speak, couldn't even scream.

His legs were spread and Thomas entered him, taking his time, gently but unrelentingly invading Peter's objecting body.

The pain was an unbearable shock to an already overloaded system and the scream finally came.

"I'm going in," Kermit said, checking out his gun, then clenching into the palm of his hand.

"Not until backup gets here," Blake cautioned.

"They could kill him before Strenlich gets here," Kermit countered.

"Wait here if you want, Blake," Skalany said, checking her own weapon. "I'm not leaving my partner in there a minute longer than necessary."

"Okay, okay," Blake said. "I was just trying to follow procedure."

He trailed the three other cops out of the surveillance van, which he'd parked just around the corner from the darkened warehouse. They skirted around the blue van, Jody and Kermit running a quick reconnaissance on it to be sure it was empty. Kermit nodded toward the far end of the building and Skalany and Blake followed his unspoken direction. They ghosted into the shadows and headed for the side entrance.

Kermit waited with one hand on the door knob, straining for any indication of noise that might pin down the location of their quarry. He could hear nothing in the eerie silence except the faint hum of a moisture-laden breeze that stirred the trees and rustled leaves against the brick wall.

He took a deep breath before he tentatively tightened his grip on the metal knob.

Chapter Four

Thomas achieved his release; it arced like an electric spark through his body, draining his strength, sapping his heightened desire. He stilled, his hands absently caressing the soft skin of Peter's back, no longer finding tension in the lean muscles as Peter had succumbed to shock and surrendered to the inevitable assault.

Thomas let his heart rate slow, then slid away from the motionless body to let Latham take his place. A zipper rasped in the silence as Jack readied himself and moved closer to Peter. He reached down, tangled his fingers in Peter's hair and forced his head back. His eyes were open, but glazed, unresponsive. Latham caught him by the shoulders and flipped him over onto his back. Peter no longer fought the rough treatment, didn't even respond to the rasp of broken bones in his leg. The metal cuffs scraped at his already raw wrists, tearing the skin, locking his hands together. He moaned, but didn't struggle.

Latham considered him for a second, then rammed a fist into his unprotected belly. Peter grunted, tears of pain filled his eyes. He tried to make out the shadowy form looming over him, no longer sure where he was, not wanting to know what was happening to him. His terrified mind had had enough.

"Come on, Peter," Latham urged. "Wake up. I want you to feel every minute of this." He slapped his victim across the face, waited for a reaction, then gave up when Peter merely moaned at the strike.

With Thomas' renewed interest and help after sufficiently recovering from his exertion, Latham turned Peter again and settled over him. His style was considerably different than the relatively gentle Thomas. He positioned himself and rammed in, his hips slamming against the soft cushion of Peter's ass. He found his rhythm quickly, a violent thrust and withdrawal that brought agonized moans from the man trapped beneath him.

Oblivious to the pain being so ruthlessly inflicted, Thomas continued to stroke Peter's head, twining his fingers in the silky hair, his delicate touch a direct contrast to the brutal assault of his partner.

It was over mercifully quickly. Latham caught his breath and withdrew, panting slightly.

"I'm gonna do him now," Jamie spoke up, twisting a lethal looking knife in his grip, letting the strobe lights glitter off the long blade.

"Not yet," Thomas protested. "He's got a lot more in him. Take your time."

"No," Latham interjected. "Go ahead, Jamie, and do it. We've got enough. Just take your time with it. Make it slow."

"Don't worry," Jamie assured him. "I owe this kid." He rubbed his swollen jaw, teased at a loose tooth with his tongue. "I can make this last a long, long time."

He edged closer to Peter, then traced an imaginary line down his back with the sharp blade, leaving a thin, faint trail of blood in its path. He skimmed the blade over smoothly curved flesh, down to the hollow of the lower back, then onto the swell of one buttock. Peter's only reaction was a slight flinch as the blade lightly pierced his skin.

At that second, all hell broke loose.

The door they had entered earlier splintered open. A single, perfectly placed gunshot shattered Jamie's wrist, flinging the knife out of his hand to clatter halfway across the room. Jamie screamed, vaulted to his feet and made a dive for cover. His gun was in his hand as he hit the floor rolling. A second shot exploded into his chest and he was flung like a discarded doll onto the filthy floor.

A second door crashed open and two, shadowed figures flitted inside, guns at the ready. "Police!" Blake shouted. "Put your hands where we can see them!" He glanced at Skalany. "Always wanted to say that," he said grimly through clenched teeth.

Thomas darted to his feet, yanking a gun from the back of his waistband. Jody's first shot took him in the leg. He dropped to his knees with a scream of pain. From behind the camera, Sammy squealed, "I'm not armed! Don't shoot! I don't have a gun!" He threw his hands in the air.

Jack Latham flung an arm around Peter's throat and yanked him back against his chest. He fumbled with the key to the handcuffs, stabbed it into the lock and freed one of Peter's wrists.

"Back off!" he said, hauling Peter to his feet.

"Get away from him," Kermit demanded. He felt rather than saw Jody move up beside him, her own gun leveled in both hands. Commotion at the warehouse door told him that backup had arrived. Footsteps filtered into the room, then halted as the arriving cops sized up the situation and correctly evaluated the danger to one of their own. They backed off slightly, weapons at the ready.

Strenlich was the only one who approached them.

Peter sagged in Latham's grasp, his eyes half-lidded and unseeing, his face ashen, expressionless. Blood trickled from a split lip, bruises marked his ribs and abdomen, his naked body ghostly white in the harsh light. Latham tugged the collar back on his gaping

shirt, yanking it down his back, forcing his arms behind him. Shielding his own body with Peter's, he stepped backward.

"Make a move on me, man," Latham said, "and I'll snap his neck. I can do it, too. Don't try me."

Kermit leveled his elephant hand gun at the retreating man. "I said, let him go," he said. "Now, or I swear I'll kill you."

"You'll never get out of here," Strenlich put in.

Latham ignored him, his eyes pegged on Kermit, classifying him as the direct threat. He couldn't have been more right.

Peter suddenly sighed, then his knees buckled and Latham had to adjust his grip to keep him upright. The shift positioned Peter at his right side, leaving his left side and the middle of his body exposed.

"I'll let him go," Latham agreed, "as soon as we're out of here. Try to stop us and he's dead."

"Wrong answer," Kermit said calmly and pulled the trigger.

The bullet smashed into Latham's crotch. The man's eyes bulged, his mouth opened, but nothing came out. He released his hold on Peter and went to his knees.

Jody darted forward and managed to catch Peter as he collapsed. She slid to the floor with him, her arms wrapped around him. He folded into her embrace.

Beside her, less than two feet away, Latham looked down at his ruined body, glanced up at Kermit, then fell sideways without a sound. Kermit stepped up to him, felt for a pulse, and announced with grim satisfaction, "He's alive, but I bet he'll regret it."

He dropped to a squat beside Peter and Jody.

She looked up at him with tears streaming down her face. "Oh my God," she whispered. "Peter. Oh my God."

"I know," he said, then shrugged out of his suit jacket and laid it over Peter's trembling body.

Strenlich moved over to them after being sure everything was secured and ordering an ambulance. He looked at Peter who appeared to be unconscious, and sighed, "Damn, kid, I'm sorry. I'm so damned sorry." He looked back at Latham's motionless body, then at Kermit. "Good God, Kermit, what the hell did you think you were doing?"

Kermit's eyes never left Peter's still face. He stroked a hand down the pallid cheek. "Keeping a promise, Chief. Just keeping a promise."

The ambulance siren made it difficult to indulge in any form of conversation.

Kermit, sitting across from the gurney where Peter lay, silent and motionless, and already hooked up to an IV and heart monitor, didn't figure Strenlich had much to say anyhow.

The burly chief sat on the bench at Peter's head. He had one hand resting in the center of the young detective's chest and he was staring at the opposite wall of the vehicle, carefully looking anywhere but at Peter's face. Against procedure, the paramedics had allowed both of them to ride along. Maybe it was the implacable glare on Strenlich's face that convinced them that it was okay to dispense with policy just this once. Maybe they just wanted the support if Peter woke again and put up another struggle like he had in the warehouse when he'd ventured into a brief moment of semi-consciousness and felt the first hand that was placed on him. The tussle had been mercifully brief but violent.

An idea filtered through the weariness of Kermit's brain and he asked, "You gonna call Blaisdell?"

Strenlich nodded, then sighed, and let his gaze wander to Peter. "As soon as we get to the hospital," he said. "I don't want to tell Annie until Paul gets back here. I don't want her seeing him like this."

"He might need her," Kermit pointed out. At Strenlich's blank look, "Peter..." he elaborated, "he's gonna need his mother."

Strenlich glanced at him, sighed again. "You're right. I'll send a car after her. I just hate to have her know what the sons of bitches did to her son."

"Yeah, I know."

"How the hell am I going to tell Paul?" The question was evidently rhetorical, for he didn't pause. "It's my fault. I sent him into this. Just because I was getting flak from the Commissioner. Over damned votes. I sent him into this over votes."

Seeing the other man's pain, remembering that Frank had known Peter since he was a fifteen-year-old kid, Kermit stomped on his own resentment. He, too, more than a little, blamed Strenlich. "You sent him in as part of his job, Frank," he said. "There's always a risk. Peter knows that. He won't blame you."

Strenlich looked back down at Peter's expressionless features, noting the unnatural stillness. "That doesn't help," he said. "That doesn't help at all."

Right now he would rather be anywhere than standing here, shuffling from one foot to the other, in front of this all-too-familiar door. But there was no way in hell he was going to send anyone else in to give this particular news to Annie Blaisdell; he just hated that Paul wasn't there to buffer the pain for her--and if he was honest about it, for absolution for himself.

It was a job. Nothing more. An assignment that could have fallen to any of his officers. It was no more risk than any other undercover cop faced on a daily basis.

Only this was Peter Caine. Frank had known the insolent brat since the day he had stormed into the Blaisdell family twelve years ago; had watched him settle in, too wired, too sensitive for his own good. Seen Paul Blaisdell beaming as the kid wore the uniform for the first time. Watched him promoted too soon for his own good to detective, earning both reprimands and commendations, seen him make career out walking a thin line between reckless courage and sheer luck.

But tonight--tonight he had seen too much and no amount of rationalization could convince him that he, himself, was not responsible for every mark on Peter's body, every scar on his soul that was inflicted on him in that warehouse.

And now he had to face his mother and tell her what had happened--what he had let happen. There was going to be no way to soften the blow either. Annie had to know...everything. Or there was no way to prepare her for Peter's first reactions to consciousness. The kid had already tried to take on the paramedics for a brief but memorable few minutes. The trauma team had been forced to restrain him to prevent his injuring himself more as he fought memory and terror. There was no way to guess what kind of condition he would eventually wake up in when the drugs wore off. Annie had to be ready for anything.

It took almost more effort than he possessed to rap his knuckles against the door. It hurt and that felt good, shifting a tiny flicker of stress out of his tense shoulders. He knocked again, harder.

And then she was there, sightless eyes asking all the questions he didn't want to answer.

The temporary reprieve wouldn't last long. Annie Blaisdell had used her inner eye long before Kwai Chang Caine had entered their lives and introduced them to the theory.

Frank kept cutting anxious, guilty glances over at his silent passenger as he negotiated traffic on the long drive to the hospital, wishing she would say something, dreading that she would.

It was almost a relief when she finally spoke.

"What aren't you telling me, Frank?" she asked in her gentle, soft voice, only the barest hint of a tremor betraying her emotions. "You said he's hurt. Tell me if it's worse than that. Is he dead, Frank?"

"Oh, God, no, Annie!" Frank sputtered. "No, honey, honest, I swear to you that he's alive. It isn't anything...like that." Quickly he lost the assurance he'd dredged up into his voice, once again lost the nerve to explain fully, to tell her what she had to know.

But she wasn't about to relent. "Tell me what happened." It was a demand, not a request and Frank couldn't ignore it.

"He went undercover..."

"Oh, Frank," she interrupted him, "you know he can't do undercover."

He instantly felt the need to justify. "He was the only one we had for the job, Annie." And then the need, just as strong, to condemn himself. "I was the one who assigned him to it, Anne. I sent him in there."

"What did they do to him, Frank?"

A deep breath filled his lungs but did nothing for the rapid pounding of his heart. "They assaulted him, Annie." He shook his head, perversely angry with his evasion. "They raped him. They beat him and they raped him."

Colors swirled into a muddy kaleidoscope, hands pulled roughly at him. He tried to pull away, but the handcuffs caught at his wrists, scraping the skin raw, drooling a thin line of blood down one arm. Rough hands took him by the shoulders from behind and pressed down. Peter tried to pull away, but a kick buckled his knee, and he heard a sickening snap, then a blow lanced into his lower back and he dropped to the floor with a cry of pain.

The hands returned through the murk of pain scratching paths of fire across his skin. The room blurred, faces leered at him from a maze of foreshortened vision, then light, impossibly bright, blinded him and he heard a scream from far off. He didn't recognize it as his own voice...

Annie Blaisdell had nearly fallen asleep in the bedside chair when movement beneath the splayed fingers of her right hand brought her back to a harsh awakening. Peter's hand spasmed within her grasp an instant before he screamed.

"Peter," she pleaded as his body thrashed and twisted against the sheet and blanket that pinned him into the bed. She felt warm fluid wash over her hands and knew that he had torn out the IV needle. "Peter, it's all right, sweetie," she said, her voice lost in the

whimpering moans that flooded out of him as he fought his way out of the nightmare that had been inflicted on him, trying desperately to return to the nightmare of reality that lay in ambush beyond the screen of drugged sleep.

"No, no, don't...please don't..."

She could hear the confusion in his slurred words and she reached for him again as he flung himself away from her hands. She heard the heard the rasp of the cast that trapped his broken leg at the violent movement, tried to reach for his face, force him to see her and not whatever terrible dreams that had followed him up out of sleep. Before she could touch the familiar planes of his face, she was grabbed from behind and gently but firmly pulled away from the bed.

"No," she protested, suddenly angry at her own blindness, her inability to see what was happening to her son. She lost her sense of space and location as she was hustled out of the room. Annie Blaisdell was not a vain woman, but she was proud of the fact that she seldom felt lost and confused in her world of darkness; but, now as she was gently lowered into a chair somewhere outside Peter's hospital room, she truly felt blind.

There was absolutely nothing she could do except sit, her hands twisting together in her lap, and listen as her son fought against the hands that sought to restrain him.

Chapter Five

Looking at the computer screen as it flashed the arrival times, Kermit prayed that Paul's would be late, giving him more time to think of a way to tell his long time friend why his son was in the hospital.

The noise and crowd that surrounded him prevented him from escaping into himself. Debarking off one plane was a group of men who casually walked hand in hand with each other. A few of the men would lean over and give their escort a kiss. "What is this, some sort of gay convention in the city?"

Watching the men brought back the fresh memories of what had happened and Kermit felt an uncontrollable urge to hit something. Seeing only other people waiting to board planes or on those flying in, Kermit knew he had to find a place to vent his frustration and anger.

The concourse was divided into three sections, two were in use, with the third being closed. It was only open in the daytime when the short hop flights flew between the larger cities. After 5 p.m., all those flights were diverted to one of the other two sections.

Kermit found solace there and a wall that took the punishment of his fists. There were no witnesses to his assault on the inanimate object, no prying eyes to see him loose the control he had always strove to maintain. Only the security camera's allowed the security teams to monitor activity and Kermit had made sure that he was out of line of their sight.

No matter how many times or how often he looked at his watch, Paul Blaisdell couldn't get time to move faster. It had been almost two hours since he had been notified of Peter's admission to the hospital. The short conversation with his Chief of Detectives had left a lot of questions and worry in the Captain's mind.

The city spread out below his plane, the runway lights showing the straight course the plane was to take. Other flashing lights sent signals to the pilots of planes coming in. The sign for all passengers to replace their trays and buckle up came on as the final descent was started.

Disembarking, Paul looked for Kermit in the crowd. He finally spotted Kermit and felt his heart stop. The normally ever-present sunglasses were gone from Kermit's face. Paul met his friend's gaze and found his feet glued to the floor, blocking the other passengers from leaving the airport. A nudge from a stewardess and her offer of assistance had him moving again, albeit, slowly.

Kermit walked over to meet Paul. "He's still with us."

Letting out a sigh of relief, Paul said a prayer of thanks. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you out in the car. We need to get your baggage?"

"No. My roommate was going to make sure my bags get here. I had about ten minutes to catch the flight or I'd have had to wait another eight hours."

Both men walked quietly down the concourse and to the parking deck. Kermit was true to his word, he didn't say anything until they each sat in the car. He put the keys in the ignition and was turning the key when Paul stopped him.

"Tell me now, Kermit." Paul's steel blue eyes narrowed as he prepared himself for the information he needed though dreaded. "I want to hear all of it."

Defeat brought Kermit's arm down to his side. During his duke out with the wall, he had not thought of a better way to tell Paul the story, no better way of softening the news. "Frank was getting a lot of flack from the powers that be to stop the assaults on men in the gay community. Peter fit the description and was chosen to go undercover. Frank didn't have a choice in it. We did everything we could to keep him safe, but I guess they found out. Shit!" Kermit took out the slowly rising anger on the steering wheel, causing the horn to go off. "I should have stayed with him. They never would have got him if I'd been in there. Then I waited too late to check on him. By the time we found him..."

Paul watched and listened to Kermit's story, fear kept him quiet. When the end of the story never came, Paul pushed. "What did they do to him, Kermit?"

Kermit was unable to look at the anxious father. Instead, he stared at the hood of his car. "They raped him and beat him. God, Paul, I saw them doing it to him. It was worse than

anything I've ever seen in any third world country. The look on his face...I could see him begging me to end it. Accusing me of not protecting him."

"Does Annie know?"

"Frank told her when she got to the hospital. We figured the kid would need her there. And you. I'm sorry, Paul." Past, the present, and future.

Stunned at the news, Paul felt nothing. His mind was numb as he pictured what he had just been told.

Kermit knew, as his friend sat quietly, that this moment of peace would end. Starting the car, the two drove to the hospital in silence. Each man contemplating the lent fit of anger would be close on its heels. It had only just begun.

"Don't," Peter said, his voice groggy, his tongue thick and uncooperative in his mouth.

"Don't what?" Paul Blaisdell asked.

"Don't ask me how I feel. If one more person--"

"I won't," Paul said quickly with a faint ghost of a grin, holding his hands up in a surrender gesture.

"Sorry," Peter muttered.

"Don't apologize. You're allowed to." Suddenly at a loss, Paul shrugged, then sighed at his own feelings of inadequacy, his fear of being unable to help his foster son deal with what had happened to him. He had no desire to push Peter for revelations or psychiatric breakthroughs. There were people better suited for that than he was. In fact, there was no way Peter was going to be able to avoid seeing the precinct crisis counselor. The department would demand it after an attack such as he had suffered, or he'd not be allowed back on duty. It didn't help that Paul knew the threat of being off the streets would probably be the only thing that forced Peter to accept counseling sessions. He knew from painful past experience that the young cop would much rather try to bury it all under the protective cloak of denial. Like he had so much in his past, only to be ambushed by the inevitable nightmares.

"Peter..." he ventured, pausing to try and gather his thoughts into some semblance of order. All he wanted was to take Peter's bruised body into his arms and soothe away all the pain, but his first tentative attempts to touch his son had resulted in a reactive flinching away that hurt them both. "I just want you to know that...when you're ready...I'm here. Your mother and I...we're both here. We love you and you don't have to go through any of this alone."

Peter ducked his head away, obviously not willing to deal even with that much yet. He was saved from having to reply when the door squeaked open.

Kermit stuck his head in. "Anybody home? Am I interrupting?"

"No," Paul quickly assured him. "I have to get back to the station anyway." He looked at Kermit with a question written clearly in his eyes. "You stick around here a while?"

"Sure."

Paul glanced back at Peter, started to bend toward him, then obviously reconsidered. Instead, he carefully patted his foster son's hand and said, "See you later, kid. You get some rest and leave the nurses alone, you hear me?"

"Yeah, Paul," Peter said with what seemed like a genuine smile. He watched Paul leave, not turning his attention to Kermit until the door wheezed shut. "Aren't you supposed to be at work? Crunching numbers or punching keyboards or something?"

"Don't change the subject."

Peter lost eye contact quickly. "I can't talk about it," he said. "Not yet."

Kermit smiled slightly. "Relax, kid. I have no intention of making you do anything you're not ready for."

A thought flashed through Peter's face. "Will I have to testify?" There was genuine terror in his expression.

"No," Kermit quickly reassured him. "You'll have to make a deposition, but Paul will be in charge of that. You'll only have to make it to him. They've turned evidence against the buyer and are pleading guilty. There won't be a trial."

"Did they bargain it down?"

"A little," Kermit admitted. "But Latham won't ever forget it. I promise you that."

Peter winced at the memory of the gruesome wound Latham had suffered. He wasn't sorry, not really, just enduring a lingering horror about the entire incident.

Kermit watched the play of emotions across the expressive face, then said, "I'm not going to make you talk about it, kid, but I want you to understand one thing. You aren't going to have to go through this alone. I'll be there. Just remember that."

Peter looked away, his face flushing beneath the bruises. He stared out the window and just when Kermit had decided that he wasn't going to say anything, he said, "I know."

Chapter Six

"Peter?" The voice was soft, well modulated, and pleasant. It broke gently into Peter's dream, tugging him up out of the foggy images that had been toying with his sleeping mind for the last hour.

He figured it was another doctor or nurse here to jab and prod him with varying degrees of skill and gentleness. The exam that had been imposed on him yesterday was an experience he never wanted to repeat. Maybe if he feigned sleep...

"Peter, come on, wake up. I'm not stupid enough to fall for the feigning sleep routine."

This one wasn't going to go away. Unwillingly, Peter opened his eyes.

Had to be another doctor, he decided. No whites; instead she wore a silk blouse of a delicate rose shade, grey jacket, grey skirt that reached just below her knees. Her blonde hair was just beginning to grey, ice-chip-blue eyes, a kind face that would have made a great poster child for doctor of the year. Because she was seated, it was hard to gauge her height, but she was slender and gave the impression of being tall. She smiled at Peter's sleepy expression.

"Sorry to wake you," she said with what sounded like genuine regret. "But your captain is very anxious to know how you're doing. Fathers are like that," she added with a soft smile. The pinned up hair framed an attractive face that was just beginning to show the passing of years.

Okay, Peter decided, this one knows enough about me to realize Paul's my foster father. Now what does she want and where does she intend to poke me? The nursing staff had been concerned and genuinely caring, but their tests and examinations had been intimate and intrusive and often painful. Not to mention frequently embarrassing.

He wasn't quite sure he was up to a female doctor yet either.

"My name's Beth." She occupied the chair Annie had scooted up to the bed during the long night that she'd sat with him, fending off nurses and visitors alike. Peter missed his foster mother. She had been a tiny oasis of normalcy and comfort. But, eventually, even mothers had to go home and get some rest. "Beth Evans," the woman continued, riding over Peter's wandering thoughts.

"You a doctor?" Peter guessed, trying to ease up against the pillows, hating the defenselessness of being flat on his back with so many strangers.

"Lie still," Evans cautioned. "Yes, I'm a doctor."

"I've had enough needles," Peter said.

Evans smiled. "I'm not that kind of doctor." She waited for the expected question, but got only a blank stare. The young man's eyes were half-lidded and sleepy with pain meds and sedatives. She'd reviewed Caine's chart; noted the seriousness of his injuries. Just enough to keep a healthy young man like this confined to bed for a week. Probably not much longer. The injuries Evans was concerned with weren't going to heal so fast. "I'm a psychiatrist. I do some work for the police department. Captain Blaisdell asked me to come see you."

Peter's face flushed scarlet. "I don't need a shrink," he said, his voice sharper than he'd intended, anger and denial flooding in to cover mortification. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"Wait a minute." Evans raised a hand, the smile shifting just slightly on her face. "That's the point. Of course you haven't done anything wrong. But the fact that you responded that way only points out that you're confused about what happened to you. You need some help dealing with it."

"I'm fine."

Evans steepled her fingers, her eyes never leaving Peter's face. "You don't look 'fine'."

"I'm a cop. Cops get hurt in the line of duty. I'll get better. On my own."

"You know the department isn't going to see it that way."

"You saying I have to talk to you? I don't have any choice?"

Evans rocked back in the chair, granting Peter the illusion of a bit more 'space'. "You don't have to talk to me, Peter. But..." She raised a hand when he started to deny her help. "But, you are going to have to talk to somebody, or they're not going to let you go back on duty. And from what your captain says, it's going to be very important to you that you get back on the job as soon as possible."

"I was just doing my job. That's no reason to...to suspend me."

"You're not suspended. You're on sick leave. In case you haven't noticed, you're tethered to a hospital bed." Evans nodded at the I.V. needle sunk into Peter's right arm. "Peter, I have no intention of dragging you through an intensive course of psychoanalysis right now. Maybe not ever. But you have to talk about this. You need help and you have to accept that."

Peter looked away from the steady gaze. "I'll deal with it."

"You're already not dealing with it or you wouldn't shut me out without at least giving me a chance. Want to reconsider?" Evans waited, got no response, only the intractable line

of profile as Peter studiously avoided looking at her. "Or do you want me to notify your captain that you're not willing to cooperate with me?"

That brought Peter's attention around. Evans noted the spark of fear that lit the hazel eyes and hated that she'd put it there. She'd spent her life helping people. On the rare occasion when she had to inflict pain or inspire fear, she felt like a bully. "I'll pull rank on you, Peter, if you force me to. I'd rather try to walk you through this and make it a little easier on you. That's my job. That's what I want to do."

"I don't know what you want from me."

"I want you to talk to me. Tell me how you feel."

"How do you think I feel?"

"I don't know. That's what you're supposed to tell me. Do you know what happened to you?"

Peter stared at her, incredulous. If this woman thought he was going to make an oral report on what had been done to him, she was going to wait a hell of a long time. Evans waited him out. The silence pushed Peter into saying, "Of course I know what happened. I was there, remember?"

"Tell me how you feel. How you're going to handle it."

"I know how to handle it." Peter ducked his head, then brought his eyes up, a light of defiance sparking into his face. "I've had all the courses. I've read the books."

"It's hardly a textbook case any more," Evans pointed out. "How did it make you feel that you couldn't do anything to stop it? That you were helpless?" She hadn't missed that he was skirting around the issue of the extent of the assault, the true nature of it. She expected that.

Peter's breath caught. He shifted uneasily in the bed. With an effort and a wince at the pain caused by the movement, he straightened up until he was sitting against the mound of pillows. He felt a little better to be on eye level with the doctor. He couldn't find an answer.

"You couldn't fight back, Peter. How did that feel?" She was pushing it, she knew, but this kid wasn't about to open up on his own. That much was obvious. He was going to have to be forced into it. And it would either come as tears or an explosion. Evans was betting on an explosion.

Nor did Peter disappoint her. He jerked up straighter, ignoring his body's protest to the sudden movement. "How the hell do you think I felt?" he demanded. "I couldn't do anything about it. I'm supposed to protect people. Not become one of the victims."

"You resent being the one who needs help?"

"I don't need help."

"Sure you do. You just don't want to admit it. Tell me, Peter," Evans pressed, "how did it make you feel to be raped?"

Before Evans could react enough to try to prevent it, Peter yanked the I.V. needle out of his arm, sending a tiny spray of blood over the white sheets. His face blanched.

"I don't have to put up with this shit," he snarled. "There was no rape."

She simply stared at him. Now the gauntlet was thrown and she at least knew what she was up against--total denial.

"I was beaten up. I've been beaten up before. I don't have to stay here."

He threw the blood-splattered sheets back and started to get out of the bed, clumsy with trying to haul the awkward leg cast over the edge of the mattress. Dizziness washed over him and he swayed.

Evans reached for him, steadied him, felt the flutter of reaction as Peter fought the weakness.

"Get your ass back in that bed!"

The barked directive turned both Peter and Evans toward the door. Peter, who had made it to a shaky stand, sagged toward Evans, caught his balance, and said, "I'm leaving."

"The hell you are," Kermit Griffin said, crossing the room and grasping Peter by the arm.

Evans released her hold on Peter and sat back to see who was going to win this particular battle of wills, the angry young man or the sunglasses-wearing man with the set line to his jaw.

"In the bed."

"I'm okay." Peter's voice dropped into helpless petulance.

"Don't try to bullshit me, kid. Get in the bed or I'll put you there. And you know I can do it."

For just a second, it looked like Peter was going to try to make it past him. Then his energy seemed to desert him. When Kermit pressed him toward the bed, Peter didn't fight back. He didn't exactly cooperate, but he didn't protest when Griffin lifted his legs onto the bed and pulled the covers up over him.

"Guess you must like being stuck, kid," Kermit said, "since they're just going to have to put that I.V. back in."

"Well," Evans said, getting to her feet, "it looks like you've got everything under control here, Mr. Uh?"

"Griffin. Detective Kermit Griffin."

"If you need back up, just call me." She grinned at Kermit, then leveled a look at Peter. "Just so you know the rules, Peter, I will be back. And we will talk. But there's one thing I want you to know. It gets better. It hurts, and it hurts for a long time, but it will get better. That's a promise." She nodded at Kermit, then left.

Kermit took over the vacated chair.

"Go to sleep, kid," he said. "You look like hell." Notifying the nurses about the I.V. could wait. Peter looked like he'd gone a few rounds with his father.

For a second, it looked like Peter would attempt a retort, but finally he just sighed and lay back against the pillows, his face nearly as white as the sheets. Just as he teetered on the brink of sleep, he heard Kermit's final comment.

"You know, it doesn't matter how you handle the doctor--just so long as you realize that you're jeopardizing your chances of getting back on the job if you fight her--but I want you know one thing. You are going to talk to me."

The threat/promise followed Peter into a restless sleep.

Dr. Evans left the disgruntled detective's room, sure that he would not talk with her if she were the last woman on earth. That didn't bother her too much, considering what she knew he was going through. She'd seen enough victims of abuse to last her into eternity, and it wasn't getting any easier to deal with them. The odds of a complete recovery were lousy. When the patient was categorically denying the rape, those odds took a definite nose dive.

Slumping into her well-worn office chair, she verbally ticked off her rather limited options. "One, I can talk until I'm blue in the face while he erects brick after brick of impenetrable barrier between us. Two, I could try and get him to open up to me, take the agonizing emotional trip back to sanity. Okay, scratch the first two. The first wouldn't do him any good and would only make me mad. The second would probably never happen. I've seen his personnel and medical records. Peter Caine gave stubbornness a bad name, or at least a new dimension.

"Third option? shit. He needs someone who has been where he is. I could kill Blaisdell for getting me involved in this. Though I'm not too sure about a male talking to him either. Okay, back on track. Third, get him to open up to others in a therapy group. No, wouldn't happen, unless..."

Talking to herself had become a deeply ingrained habit, but it worked. It helped her to see what was before her with the added clarity of the spoken word. "Maybe if he was one on one. Let them run into each other and open up. Yes, I think that might work."

Paul Blaisdell stood at the open doorway, watching and listening to the doctor as she hashed out her ideas to her invisible audience. He shifted from foot to foot, hoping the gentle noise would bring her attention around to him without having to resort to the clearing-the-throat technique.

As if flagged down by his thoughts, she turned and noticed him. It had been more than a few years since she had seen Paul Blaisdell and at least some of those years had not been kind to him. He was thinner, almost gaunt. His mouth was drawn into a worried frown, his heavy brows knitting themselves into the lines of his forehead. Dark smudges of weariness underlined his eyes, probably the remnant of lost sleep as he waited for his son to return from the anesthesia of surgery to repair the shattered leg.

She nearly stood to greet him, but settled back into the chair. "Captain Blaisdell, come in."

Paul forced a smile, then stepped into the room to sink an obviously weary body into the plush chair across the desk from her.

Might as well step right into it, she thought. "I met Peter today."

The barest hint of a warm smile spread across his lips at mention of his foster son, then flitted away as cruel reality pushed it aside. The physical and mental pain he knew Peter was enduring was unbearable to him. What must they be doing to Peter?

He obviously scoured a tired brain for a way to approach the unthinkable. "What did you think?"

"I think he's in trouble if he doesn't open up to someone, and soon. He's passing this off as something normal, just a hazard of the job. He's blaming himself for what happened, which unfortunately is a natural reaction." She settled deeper into her chair, mirroring some of the weariness of the man sitting across from her. "Like most rape victims, he thinks it is somehow his fault. He should have stopped it. Prevented it. He's feeling impotent, scared and angry."

Paul listened though the words barely penetrated past the ache inside his chest. He blamed himself as much as anyone else. Frank Strenlich was living through self condemnation for assigning Peter in the first place. Kermit Griffin was eating himself

alive for not preventing the assault. And now, Peter...Peter, who shouldered the blame for most of the pain around him, Peter was telling himself that he was supposed to stop this, prevent it. Paul shook off the reflection and admitted, "He has always blamed himself for what occurs around him."

Beth wasn't up on reading minds, but she was sensitive and empathetic to the needs and anxieties of others. And she knew Paul Blaisdell. "Something tells me that he comes by it naturally." She couldn't help but smile as Paul reluctantly pulled himself out of his own churning thoughts and met her gaze, confusion replacing the anxiety of seconds before. She pushed a little deeper, "Why do you blame yourself?"

His protest was almost as fraught with denial as his foster son's had been. "I don't. I wasn't even here."

She nodded, hearing all the words he wouldn't say, all the self recrimination he was presently stuffing into his own personal guilt bag. Almost unconsciously jotting down notes on the pad she never failed to have at hand, she again ran through her mental check list of options of treatment. Now she knew the first step at least. She would have to start with treating those he worked with, and those who loved him.

"Paul, your son has been put through a horrendous event that affected not only how he sees himself, but also how he feels others see him. If you or anyone else wallows in self blame, it's only going to make him feel more guilty for not being able to prevent the rape. Now, I'm going to recommend Peter be put into group therapy."

Paul shook his head. "He won't go for that. He's always been a private person."

She pinned him with her eyes. "Are you aware that he is denying that rape occurred. He is quite convinced that he was 'injured in the line of work'? Nothing more?"

She got the expected response. He paled dramatically, raised one hand as if to ward her off, then quickly dropped his gaze. She could almost see his mind search feverishly for a defense. It wasn't long in coming. "But that's normal, isn't it." It was a statement, not a question. Perhaps even a plea for confirmation. "I mean, denial, that's part of the process."

"Yes, it is." She offered him the small bone of hope. "But it is not normal for the victim to categorically deny what is obvious to everyone around him. He's already tried to get out of the bed, leave the hospital."

Anger flared in Paul's face and Beth could see that the intensity of the emotion was almost a relief to the man. "I'll see to it that that doesn't happen again if I have to put an armed guard on his door."

"Detective Griffin stopped the escape attempt," she with a smile at the memory of Peter's mutiny being so quickly squashed. The young cop had made it pretty clear that he'd step

over her body if necessary to escape from the hospital, but he obviously wasn't sure of his success with the other man.

She returned to her proposal. "The group I've selected will be diverse; all men who suffer the same problem. Do I have your permission to use whatever tools I feel are needed?" She didn't want Paul to balk on her idea, so she had left a few details out - until she had his word, which she knew he would never break once it was given.

"Just get him well. I don't care what or who you use."

Standing and offering her most reassuring smile, Beth relented enough to vaguely explain her plan. "Good, I expect you, your chief of detectives, Kermit Griffin and Blake to meet with Peter and me in five days. It'll take me that long to set up the sessions."

In spite of his capitulation, Paul couldn't repress the question. "And how is that going to help him? He's not going to admit anything and he's certainly not going to talk in front of anyone." His face flushed away the earlier pallor and his hands clenched into fists at his side.

Her only answer was a smile as she held the door, indicating it was time for him to leave. When he stood his ground, she sighed and said, "Look, I don't tell you how to catch crooks so don't tell me how to do my job. If you want to help your son, not just an employee, you WILL have those men here in my office in five days at 5 p.m. sharp. Understand?"

His face captured his anger, his frustration, but he was outgunned and he knew it. He nodded and left the room.

Chapter Seven

It was like a tickle at the back of his throat. Irritating. Demanding.

Even the last infusion of morphine hadn't dulled it. Like an itch he couldn't scratch, a loose end he couldn't tie off. Just a casual mention of a name when he was supposed to be safely drugged to a dreamless sleep. An accident.

And now there was simply no way he could ignore it. He had to know, had to find out, had to look into the hooded eyes just once more. And there was no way in hell that anyone in the hospital from the doctor to the shrink all the way down to the janitor that was going to let him have that look. He was still tethered to the bed by the IV, the morphine pump, and about ten pounds of cast that encased his leg from his toes to his knee, not to mention the pain that rode every ill-considered breath or move. Both Evans with her deceptively gentle voice and Kermit with his trademark growl had hinted at dire consequences if he dislodged another IV needle and Annie, with all the blackmail her position as mother allowed, had pleaded with him to behave himself so he could heal.

Well, there was healing...and then there was healing.

Peter wasn't quite sure why it was so important that he actually see Latham trapped in a hospital bed just like he was himself, but it was nagging at him like the drug-dulled pain his body was inflicting on him. Memory woke, the feel of rough hands, the terrible tender/harsh touches against his skin. It flooded back into him, black and white, like a frenetic video tape...

A tremor rocketed through his body and Peter shook the memory off with a violent wrench of his head. Pain strobed through his ribs, arced up his plastered leg and shuddered through his head. It took a long few seconds for the flickers of light to dim from his blurred vision. At least the pain had chased the too clear mental image away. He stabbed at the morphine pump button and felt warmth drench his body; the pain dulled, receded like water from the shoreline, and he could breathe again.

The momentary respite from the blunter edges of pain decided him.

That image, those terrifying, degrading hours, would never release him, not until he had faced some part of it. Latham seemed the logical first step.

It didn't take much to silence the IV pump--a little trick Kermit had unwittingly taught him when making one of his own unscheduled discharges--then the twinge as he tugged the needle out of the vein. Getting the casted leg out from beneath the tangled blankets was a greater feat, and he was gasping for shallow breaths of air by the time he had both legs swung over the side of the bed. Another moment while some of the dizziness faded, then he eased off the mattress.

The first step was a killer.

Fortunately, the wheelchair that the nursing staff used to transport him to Xray and other unpleasant places was still parked in a corner of the room. All he had to do was drag his useless leg that far. By the time he dropped into the chair he was trembling with exhaustion and shivering in a cold sweat. It took long minutes for the nausea to subside enough to venture to the second step of his great escape. The pain in his leg began to ease but the first turn of the wheel pulled at his chest and shoulders and reminded him brutally of broken ribs.

Gritted teeth and Peter Caine stubbornness got him out the door and down dimly lit corridors, eerily empty at this hour.

With his luck he had assumed a squeaky wheeled chair but for once fortune was with him and he glided unnoticed past the two nurses' stations between his room and the target room. Now all he had to do was figure out a way to get past the police guard he was certain would be posted at Latham's door.

What he was going to do once he got in there, he had absolutely no idea. Maybe he simply wanted to see the other man--take his face out of the realms of nightmare and fantasy. Even just to see for himself that Latham was in the same amount of pain that had been inflicted on him. Then what? he chided himself, suffocate him with his pillow? Hire Kermit to shoot a little higher this time? Or maybe just strangle him with his own hands?

The thought of touching the man woke a surge of nausea that he barely managed to swallow down. Maybe Kermit would be open for a night job.

As he wheeled past the last nurses' station he finally admitted at least to himself that when he really wanted to find in that bed was a cold, dead body, the limbs rigid, the eyes open, pearly white and staring at nothing.

He knew that wasn't what he would find even if he got past the police guard.

He almost wheeled right past the room, lost in his ambivalence and caught off guard by the absence of a uniform stationed at the door. For once, Peter was grateful for the mayor's budget cuts and her theory that the venomous streets were safe enough with too few cops.

327.

He stared at the numbers almost dispassionately as they blurred and cleared, blurred and cleared.

The sound of footsteps sent a jolt of real terror rushing through his heart. He was so close and just about to be taken out of the game.

A blue uniform rounded the corner and Peter actually felt his heart skip a beat. He recognized the cop at first glance--had worked with him on a couple of cases. He wasn't going to be persuaded to let Peter in to see this man who had raped and nearly murdered him.

Two steps into view the cop jolted to a stop, snapped his fingers and turned back to vanish down the other corridor. He hadn't once looked up.

Peter let out a hitched in breath and would have collapsed had he not been sitting in the wheelchair. Indecision blanked out now that he knew he had precious little time before the cop retrieved whatever he'd forgotten.

Taking a harsh, deep breath that spasmed pain across his injured ribs, he nudged the door open with the chair. He was all the way into the room as the door swished shut before he could drag his gaze up from the floor.

Latham was watching him with a serpent's gaze.

An overwhelming wave of helplessness flooded through Peter as he was snared by the unblinking eyes. Stupid, he growled to himself, stupid to be afraid. He was the one sitting up in a wheelchair, Latham was flat on his back trapped in restraints. Totally vulnerable...

...and Peter was rooted in place by fear.

It would be so easy. No effort at all. If there were no Latham, there would be no nightmares he would be forced to confess to some department shrink. He could close his eyes and sleep without feeling hands on his body, without a crimson tide of humiliation and terror coloring his dreams.

Latham's eyes finally blinked and Peter felt invisible chains drop away from his body. The confidence didn't last long though.

"What's the matter, kid, you liked it so good you had to come back for more?"

The blood rushed out of Peter's face, leaving him ashen and sweaty. The voice as much as the words knifed through him. He was not ever going to hear that voice again. He had picked up more than a few skills from Paul Blaisdell, not to mention the memories of his training at the temple that were filtering back with his father's return.

He hauled himself up out of the chair, his entire body protesting. The wheelchair slid backwards slightly--Peter hadn't thought to engage the brake--and almost dropped him to his knees. The casted foot clunked against the tile floor and pain shot up to his hip. He bit down on the inside of his mouth damned if would let Latham see his pain. The metallic taste of blood washed down his throat and he had to make a concerted effort not to vomit it back up.

Latham was quicker to recover than Peter. His voice was even and uninfected and chillingly cold. "Looks like it's gonna be a while before I can get in the mood, Peter." The oily smile slipped across his face. "Seems your buddy sorta fucked me up for a while."

Peter took the first step, good leg first--a mistake as his weight shifted to the broken leg. He bit down on his lower lip.

"What are you gonna do, Pretty Boy, kill me? Well, come on, you little shit, I'm lyin' here tied down and helpless."

"Shut up." Thoughts hammered through Peter's brain. What the hell was he going to do? Kill the man in cold blood? He took another painful step toward the bed.

Latham wasn't about to shut up. "But then you know how that feels, don't you, Caine? Tied up. Held down. Fucked up."

One blow to the bridge of the nose. If it landed just right, Latham's brain would be permanently pierced by bone and cartilage. Just as quickly as Peter decided to commit murder, his conscience kicked in. He started to turn back to the wheelchair, to escape Latham's wheedling voice when the door whooshed open.

Half-turned, Peter expected to see the uniformed cop bursting in, gun in hand. Instead it was Kermit Griffin, his face rigid with his patented "I'm gonna break all your fingers, Peter" grimace.

Mid-turn, the broken leg gave way and Kermit barely managed to cushion Peter's fall.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kermit demanded, shaking Peter's shoulders, knowing it hurt, meaning for it to hurt. He watched Peter go parchment white, his eyes glazed over, then closed. He gave up his struggle with vertigo and collapsed forward. As the door opened again, Kermit found himself with a 170 lb. armload and a uniformed cop going for his service revolver.

"Jesus, Griffin," Matt Holton breathed as he dipped his gun back into its scabbard. "I almost put my gun on you."

"You ought to be grateful you didn't," Kermit snapped. "Help me get him back in the chair."

Holton helped wrestle the near dead weight back into the wheelchair. "What's Peter doing here?" he grunted with the exertion.

When they finally had Peter slumped basically upright in the chair, Kermit said, "The question is why weren't you here?"

Holton flushed. "You know, man, sometimes you gotta take a break."

"Not when you're on this door, Holton. Never when you're on this door."

"Leave him alone, Griffin."

Kermit turned with agonizing slowness.

Latham pushed his luck. "The kid musta liked it, Griffin. He came back for more."

Holton braced for a lethal explosion. Instead Kermit's voice was remarkably low and steady. "Well, since you've been neutered, I don't expect he'll have much problem with you."

If there was a retort, Kermit didn't wait for it. His control was on a very thin thread.

Peter was absolutely and unnaturally silent as Kermit pushed the chair back to his room. A nurse bolted out the door and nearly collided with them, obviously on her way to report her AWOL patient. She backed off and let Kermit push the chair into the room.

"Let me help, Mr. Caine," the petite blonde nurse tried to insinuate herself between the angry man wearing sunglasses in the middle of the night and her disoriented patient.

"Get out." It was a guttural growl and momentarily stunned her into silence.

"I said, get out," Kermit repeated and this time he let the glasses slide enough for her to see his eyes.

She backed up, still uncertain, then said, "I'm getting the doctor."

"You do that." It was an obvious dismissal.

She wasn't quite ready to be bulldozed out of her patient's room. "He needs to be in restraints if he's going to try stunts like this."

She suddenly found herself nose to nose with a pair of sunglasses.

In a near whisper, "Being restrained and assaulted is the problem, Florence Nightingale, not the damned solution. And you can take that straight to your doctor."

She backed away in earnest then and fled room, firing one last salvo, "I'm going to call Dr. Evans."

Kermit went to one knee in front of the wheelchair, penning Peter in with a hand on each arm rest. He didn't for one second trust Peter not to try to get up on his own. He allowed the simple, intimate gesture of parking his sunglasses on the bedside table. That was the extent of the implied sympathy, though.

When Peter tried to look away, a hand clamped over his jaw and jerked him back.

"I can sit here all night, kid. How 'bout you?"

A sullen, "Leave me alone," was the only response.

"Ain't gonna happen, Peter. You may have your family running scared but it doesn't work on me. I want to know just what the hell you thought you were doing in that room."

Peter's eyes dropped away but the hand on his chin kept him in place. He glanced up, and Kermit noted the glitter of unshed tears welling in his eyes, readying for the glide down pale cheeks.

Peter made an attempt at an answer, but the words stuttered out, confused, mumbled. "I-I-I had to...I needed to...I-I..."

"Had to do what, Peter?" Kermit tried to anchor him on this side of reality by the pressure of his hand on the bruised jaw, the use of his name. "What did you have to do?"

He caught sight of a slight motion from the corner of his eye, saw a slender, well dressed woman slip just inside the door. The threatened Dr. Evans, no doubt. He completely ignored her and she made no effort to interrupt or even let Peter see she was in the room.

Peter was still trying to ferret out an answer from the chaos of his mind.

"I had to see."

"See what?"

This time hazel eyes did meet brown and the tears spilled over the dam of his forced control.

"That-that-that he was real."

So now I'm a Freud wannabe, Kermit thought sourly. This is way over my head. All he could offer was, "I want to help you, Peter. All of us do. We just don't know what to do."

Silence was the only answer, silence and the track of tears down an ashen face.

Kermit tried again, feeling like he was fumbling his way through the dark. He was both grateful for and angry at the doctor's non-interference.

"Peter, you have to talk. You have to get it out."

The tears were a flood now, silent and unchecked. This time when Peter tried to turn his away, Kermit allowed the escape.

* * *

Dr. Evans sat at her desk, contemplating patient confidentiality, then reasoning that really, she wasn't breaking the oath she had sworn so long ago.

Picking up the phone, she dialed a number to a volunteer who, in the past few months, had helped several victims come to terms with their emotions.

"Hi, this is Dr. Evans," she introduced herself as the other party answered the phone. "I was wondering if I could get you to help me with a young man. He's stubborn and I'm afraid he's not going to open up to me. Yes, his family is supportive, but the man just

will not admit anything happened. Can I get you to meet with him? Oh, yes, tonight would be nice. He's at the hospital. No, not in his room, we need neutral territory. Yes, in the fifth floor chapel. That's fine. I'll have him there at 5. Thanks."

Dr. Evans smiled as she hung up the phone. "Now, to get Mr. Caine to the chapel."

"I'm tired!" Peter argued when Dr. Evans asked him to go with her. "I've been poked and prodded all day today and I'm starting to feel like a pin cushion."

"Look, it won't take long, OK? I just need five minutes of your time, I promise."

Figuring it was the only way to get rid of the shrink before 6 p.m., Peter agreed. Getting into the wheelchair was a chore that left him weak and out of breath.

Rolling him down the hall, she wasn't surprised that he was sullen and quiet. He was the same when she left him alone in the chapel.

"I'll be right back. The person is supposed to be here. Let me go check and see if they've changed their mind." Leaving the small room and its pews and altar, she closed the door to the outside.

"Oh, good. You're here." Dr. Evans ran into her friend. "Listen, I'll be back in a minute. He's already in there and a bit sullen."

Dr. Evans watched and wished she'd be a fly on the wall, but Peter couldn't suspect anything if this was going to work.

Peter's back was to the door as he sat staring at the candles that flickered and burned on the altar.

Hearing the door close behind him, he tried to ignore the intruder. He didn't want to meet this person...this stranger. He knew what the doctor was up to and it wasn't going to work. Peter set his mind and heart behind a wall, reminding himself the doctor had promised only five minutes.

"Hello?" a female voice asked. It was familiar, but Peter continued to watch the candles.

"Hi. Please, I know you're in here. I can hear your breathing. Would you talk with me?"

Peter's face drained of color as he heard the fright in his mother's voice. He turned to meet her, "M-M-Mom?"

"Peter?" Annie followed the stammering voice; all fear leaving her, replaced with a mother's worry. "Dr. Evans wanted me to...Peter, what are you doing in here?" She felt of his face when she approached him, her fingers touching his features, taking note of every line there.

"I-I was s-supposed to meet s-someone." Peter tried to calm himself, to relax his facial muscles, but they wouldn't respond. Instead, they told the story of his panic as the tender touch he always relished now repulsed him. He licked at drying lips, praying she wouldn't pick up on the rapid breathing or feel the perspiration from his panic.

It was a prayer that would not be granted. She felt the tremor, though faint as it was, and the lines at the corner of his eyes as he squeezed the lids tight against the intrusion. Realization struck her, causing her to catch her breath. "Oh, my baby." She cradled him in her arms and stroked his hair as the dam he'd been holding back burst.

The tears of anger, abandonment, self-loathing, doubt and pain poured out. He couldn't escape the touch or the arms that held him tight. A part of him wanted to run as far away as he could, but another part kept him planted firmly where he was - in the loving arms of his mother.

After what seemed like years, Peter pulled away, wiping at his eyes and nose. He was thankful that Annie couldn't see him, it was easier to bawl like a baby in front of someone who couldn't see you or the tears.

"I thought there was something that Paul wasn't telling me. Beth told me I was meeting with a man that...that couldn't admit he'd been...attacked. Peter, can...can you tell me...what happened?" She waited for him to answer. All she got was his sniffles and a brief squeeze of her hand that he now held. Knowing her son wouldn't open up, she decided to share her experience with him. "You know, when Mike West had me beaten, I felt so alone. Like no one else knew how I felt. Even when Paul would touch me, I could feel that man's hands on me, and the attack would happen all over again. At least in my mind it did. I just wanted it to all go away, but it didn't. Beth helped me through most of it. I still see her once a month. Sometimes it helps to have someone to talk to. Someone that isn't going to judge you."

They sat in silence, holding hands. "I...I couldn't stop them," Peter whispered. Swallowing the lump that had grown in his throat, he continued. "I...I tried to stop them, I-I thought that-that nothing w-would happen. Th-they," swallowing again as he closed his eyes against the instant replay that showed in his mind, he told what he could. "I-I couldn't fight them. Oh, Mom, it was so...I was so scared."

And Annie Blaisdell could do nothing more than hold her son through his shuddering confession and let her strength flow into him and help the healing begin.