



Loose Id

*Thaw
in
Winter*

KATE STEELE

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Loose Id.®

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Dedication

*To all the readers who gave d l mercer the encouragement and chance to emerge as
Kate. Thank you.*

Chapter One

“Who knows? Maybe something exciting will happen today.”

“Oh, sure. Like maybe you’ll catch a bear shitting in the woods. Be sure to take your camera,” advised the voice on the other end of the phone line before it dissolved into laughter.

Rolling his eyes and shaking his head at the sentiments of his coworker and best friend, Charlotte Adams, Mark Bartel chuckled and then continued to stuff a thermos of coffee and a couple of sandwiches into his backpack. “Very funny.”

“Seriously, Mark, you should have stayed in town. We could have done stuff together, like go shopping -- I know how much you love browsing the used bookstores -- or we could have taken in a movie or a play. Oh, and that new Thai place opened. I hear it’s really good.”

“Char, we always do those things. The whole point of coming out here was to get away to somewhere quiet for a while and just relax. Besides, I’m on vacation and you’re working. I’d still have had mounds of time on my own.”

“I *know*, and I also know how much you love it there in the boonies -- even though just the thought of the great outdoors makes me shudder.”

“Can’t see yourself roughing it, huh?”

“Honey, my idea of rough is going two weeks without a manicure. Oh, crap, there’s a call for me on the other line. Listen, you have fun, but be careful. I’m counting on you for the Madison project. I don’t want that prick Swenson anywhere near it; if I end up having to work with him, I won’t mourn you, even if you *do* get eaten by a bear.”

Mark suppressed a small shudder, not at the mention of bears, but of Derek Swenson, a colleague of his and Char’s who had made suggestive remarks to him more than once. The man had even gone so far as to deliberately seek Mark out, seeming to go out of his way to find reasons to touch him -- none of which had been welcomed. Swenson gave Mark the willies.

Pushing such unpleasant thoughts aside, Mark replied, “Gee, thanks. Nice to know how much I’m appreciated. ’Bye, Char.”

“Bye.”

Mark ended the call, shouldered his backpack, and whistled for his dog Chip, a big English setter. Once outside, they found and followed a favored trail, hiking some distance into the national forest/wildlife refuge that bordered Mark’s property.

The breaths of man and dog were clearly visible as they traveled. Crisp and cold, the air was enough to invigorate, but not so frigid as to burn the skin at its touch. The entire area that surrounded them was beautiful, even this far into winter. All of the deciduous trees had pretty much shed their leaves, but the stark display of bare branches was relieved by the plentiful presence of evergreens. On the ground, autumn leaves were fading from reds, oranges, and yellows to rusty brown. They rustled underfoot as Mark and Chip marched briskly along the trail.

They’d seen a few deer and other, smaller examples of wildlife such as rabbits and squirrels. A well-trained Chip remained at his master’s side, sometimes quivering with the obvious desire to give chase. Mark let him flush a few birds, quail and pheasant, just for practice and as a reward for his pet’s obedience. Mark wasn’t a hunter, but Chip had been

trained to point and retrieve, so Mark gave him rein to do his thing, knowing the dog enjoyed the excitement.

Mark was contemplating stopping for his midday meal when he caught the smell of woodsmoke. Fearing that a fire might somehow have broken out, he and Chip followed the scent, eventually emerging into a small clearing where someone had set up a camp. They were a good two-day hike from the park's visitors' center.

A tent had been pitched on the leeward side of a closely packed stand of pines, and a small fire burned merrily in a shallow pit near the center of the camp. A short distance away, an underground spring had made a random aboveground appearance. Sparkling water trickled over and formed a small pond around a jumbled grouping of rocks. Mark was wondering where the camper had disappeared to when a man emerged from the tent as though in answer to his thought.

Mark's breath caught in his throat at that arresting sight. The stranger was tall, exceeding Mark's own five-foot-nine-inch frame by four or five inches. Dark blond hair, long and caught back with a band at the nape of the man's neck, gleamed beneath the bright sunlight, the bulk of the locks falling over one broad shoulder as he ducked through the tent's entrance. A few shorter strands that had escaped the band fell artlessly over his wide forehead. Streaked blond brows and long lashes shaded deep blue eyes. Below them, the camper's nose was straight, with a slight downward curve at the end that drew the eye to a pair of lips that had Mark licking his own. His firm jaw was accented by the barest hint of sexy stubble. An open coat revealed a tucked-in tee as well as an unbuttoned flannel shirt over a pair of jeans, accentuating what appeared to be a slim, yet muscular body. A well-worn and rugged-looking pair of hiking boots completed the outfit.

Despite the shadowed and preoccupied expression that rested upon his fine and faintly patrician features, this modern-day rendition of a rugged mountain man was one of the most devastatingly attractive males Mark had seen in a long time. He had the distinct impression

he might've seen this man somewhere before, but had that truly been the case, surely he would have remembered where. Someone who looked like that would not be easily forgotten. Regardless, his stomach clenched, and he inwardly cursed at how just the sight of this stranger sent his pulse racing.

Momentary surprise crossed the camper's features when his blue-eyed gaze turned in Mark's direction, but he quickly recovered and offered Mark a tentative smile. "Oh, hey, I wasn't expecting to see anyone out here." His voice was rich and smooth, the almost husky timbre like a warm caress down Mark's spine.

Mark repressed a shiver as his toes curled inside his hiking boots. "Sorry. My dog and I were out hiking and I smelled your smoke." He grimaced. "I mean the smoke from your fire, not cigarette smoke. I didn't mean to imply you were smoking. Not that there would be anything wrong with that, although it is bad for your health." Mark felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment and wanted to kick himself for his rambling, tongue-tied explanation. "Do you have any idea what I'm getting at here?"

The stranger chuckled. "I think I do. You thought something might be burning. It was considerate of you to check." He came forward and offered his hand. "I'm Joe Moning."

Admonishing himself to get a grip, Mark reached for Joe's hand. Startled by a spark and snap, he snatched his hand back. "Ow!"

Joe's rumbling laughter broke out. "Sorry about that. I've been zapped a couple of times myself this morning. It's the blasted static electricity from the dry air -- either that, or it's your electric personality," he added with a teasing wink.

Mark raised a brow, giving Joe a slightly scornful scowl that he diluted with a half smile. "Yeah, right," he scoffed. "Better stick with the dry-air theory. I'm Mark Bartel. Pleased to meet you, Joe."

"Same here. So what brings you to the great outdoors?"

Mark indicated the dog who sat obediently by his side. “Just getting some exercise, me and Chip. We’re on vacation and staying at my cabin about five miles north of here. Thought I’d take advantage of the weather and get some hiking in before that snow the weatherman’s calling for starts flying in a couple of days.”

“Good idea. I plan to be out of here myself before it hits.” Joe turned a puzzled frown on Mark. “I didn’t realize they allow private homes in the park.”

“Oh, they don’t. My land and the park share a boundary.”

“Um, you’re lucky. I wouldn’t mind having a home around here.” Joe’s face took on a somewhat melancholy expression. “I love this place.” He seemed lost in thought for a moment, then returned his attention to Mark. “I was just about to fix some coffee. Care to join me for a cup?”

Mark accepted with a smile, squelching the memory of the thermos of coffee that rested in his backpack. He wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity to spend a little time in Joe’s company. It wasn’t every day that he stumbled across a gorgeous man in the woods.

It’s certainly better than a shitting bear. Wait till I tell Char, Mark thought with an inward smirk. He followed Joe toward the fire pit, releasing Chip to run free for a bit.

The two men continued to chat as Joe fixed the coffee. Mark surreptitiously watched the man’s every move, trying hard not to be obvious about his attraction -- especially when he noticed the gold wedding band on Joe’s left hand.

He heaved a mental sigh. *He’s married.* Not that Mark had expected anything to come of this unexpected meeting, but still, it would have been nice to not have had that momentary fantasy disrupted by reality. *He’s probably got a sweet, beautiful wife tucked away somewhere, waiting impatiently for him to come home. Hell, if he was mine, I’d never let him leave home without me.*

As the men’s conversation continued, Mark was surprised to find out Joe lived near a small town that wasn’t far from the city where Mark resided and worked. Joe revealed that

he was a carpenter; in addition to working on homes, he designed and sold handmade wood furnishings. Apparently, he had quite a queue of clients lined up and was kept constantly busy with the demand for his work. His eyes lit with enthusiasm as he described the pleasure he derived from taking simple, raw wood and creating pieces of furniture that were not only functional, but beautiful as well. Joe also mentioned a weekly show on the public broadcast system in which he taught woodworking skills.

“Oh, my God, I’ve seen that show! *Now* I know why you look so familiar to me.”

Joe smiled. “You do any carpentry, Mark?”

“Not really. I’m an architect, no hammer and nails for me. My work gets done on paper. I rarely have time for any hands-on building, but I’ve caught your show a few times while channel surfing.”

“And I haven’t managed to entice you to the dark side?”

Mark chuckled. “I’m afraid not.” *But if anyone could, it would be you.* He had watched Joe’s hands as the other man had spoken about his work and wondered what it would be like to have them touch him with the care Joe clearly lavished on his projects. *It would probably be breathtaking.*

Mark felt a twinge of regret and a frisson of jealousy but managed to smile at his odd emotions. Jealous of pieces of wood? *Pathetic, Mark.* However, as he again found himself focusing on Joe’s hands, his chest tightened. *Not that I know what it’s like to be touched by a lover.*

“That’s too bad. I have a feeling you’d like it.”

Lost in his musings, Mark’s eyes widened in shock as Joe’s comment brought him back to earth with a thump. Had the man managed to read his thoughts?

His gaze flew to Joe’s, and the two of them seemed to connect somehow, generating a near-tangible tingle of awareness. An intense and searching look on Joe’s part caused Mark’s

heart to beat faster. His cock gave an interested twitch. Breaking the eye contact, Mark rushed to fill the silence, alarmed at how exposed and uncertain he felt.

Of course he didn't read your thoughts, dummy. He was just following the thread of our conversation but...is he coming on to me? The idea was exciting, yet it filled Mark with trepidation. This was the kind of situation he wasn't prepared for, the kind of thing he'd avoided for so long, that now, when he really wanted to act, he didn't know how.

Not really wanting to hear the response, but desperate to shift the focus elsewhere, Mark kept his eyes averted and spoke. "I noticed your ring. Does your wife not care for camping?"

When Joe didn't immediately answer, Mark chanced a glance in his direction. Joe was looking at his wedding band, his face bearing a look of ineffable sadness. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand gently rubbed and twisted the polished gold ring. Finally, he said, "I don't --"

Chip's frantic barking interrupted his words.

"Oh, crap!" Mark jumped to his feet. With Joe on his heels, he followed the noise to find Chip standing on his hind legs, front paws braced against the trunk of a tree. In the branches above him, a squirrel chattered angrily at the barking dog, looking for all the world as though he was royally cussing out Chip. As the men approached, the squirrel relinquished his façade of bravado. Tossing a final indignant squeak at the trio, he took off.

Laughing at the antics of dog and squirrel, the men collared Chip and returned to Joe's camp. Mark glanced at his watch, and noting the time, reluctantly realized he needed to start for home or risk being lost in the dark.

He held out his hand as he took his leave with a brief explanation. "It was nice meeting you, Joe. Thanks for the coffee."

“Hey, you’re welcome. I enjoyed your company.” Joe’s hand was warm and slightly rough as he shook Mark’s. The simple, innocuous touch made Mark’s nerves tingle. There was no static shock this time, and yet, Mark felt a jab of sensation all the same.

Asking out someone he was attracted to was something Mark had had no experience with, but he wanted to extend their contact. He squelched his fears, swallowed the lump in his throat, and did something he’d never dared before. Mark invited Joe to dinner. “As long as you’re going to be here tonight, I’d like to return your hospitality. I’m no gourmet, but I can offer you a decent meal.”

“Damn, I sure appreciate the offer, but I’ll be heading out early tomorrow. I filed my itinerary with the park service, so they’ll be expecting me back. I don’t want there to be a hue and cry if I don’t show up, you know? I wish...well, anyway, thanks.”

Mark nodded stoically, disappointed as Joe turned down his invitation, but he took comfort in the fact that Joe’s regret seemed as genuine as his own. Perhaps the desire behind that earlier significant glance wasn’t just his imagination working overtime, after all.

Is Joe feeling the same attraction I am? Not that it matters. Mark forced his gaze back to the ring adorning Joe’s finger. The possibilities between them took a backseat to the significance of that small circle of gold. Taking a deep breath, Mark offered a final good-bye, whistled for Chip to join him, and headed home.

They’d just gotten out of sight of the clearing, when Mark heard Joe calling his name. Stopping, he swung around, nervous tension filling his body at the image of Joe striding purposefully toward him. The man moved with a smooth grace that belied the rough terrain he crossed. Mark could see the fluid bunch and release of his thigh muscles, a visible testament to the man’s fitness. From his thighs it was only a short jump to the man’s groin, which Mark focused on momentarily before snapping his gaze away -- but not before he noticed the rounded curve that hinted at what lay beneath Joe’s zipper. An insistent throb

took up residence in Mark's own groin; he gritted his teeth against the heavy pulse of need that threatened to make his wayward cock rise.

Joe reached him and held out a business card. "Glad I caught you. Listen, since we live in the same neck of the woods, so to speak, how about you give me a call? I'd like to share that meal with you sometime soon."

Mark accepted the card, regretting the fact that the slight touch of their fingers was so fleeting, and glanced at it. The small rectangle contained Joe's name and contact information, including a handwritten phone number.

"The number I wrote down is for my cell. I always keep it with me, so you should definitely be able to catch me with that one."

Mark nodded, pocketing the card. "All right, I'll do that. Thanks." He looked up into Joe's luminous blue eyes. What he saw there made him lose the battle against his rising erection. Joe was apparently making no effort to hide what appeared to be heat behind eyes that had darkened to the color of fine sapphires. Mark actually felt his cheeks flush, even as his cock thickened painfully against his zipper.

Joe moved a few steps closer until he was seriously impinging on Mark's personal space. Mesmerized, Mark watched Joe's hand rise, his fingers coming to rest against Mark's hot skin. A slow smile, seemingly consisting of equal parts gentle amusement and predatory desire, curved Joe's generous lips. "Has anyone ever told you how cute you are when you blush?"

While his stomach did a swooping flip-flop, Mark shook his head.

"Lord, what fools these mortals be," Joe quoted softly, before leaning in to cover Mark's lips with his own.

Stunned, Mark stood rooted to the spot, a small, husky whimper of surprise dying in his throat. Eyes closing, he gave in to the melting sensation of skin against skin as Joe's mouth melded with his. Heat spiraled up his spine, and suddenly the air seemed thin and

inadequate to the task of filling his lungs. Instinctively seeking more, he parted his lips, but instead of air, he received the gift of Joe's tongue sliding into his mouth. The slightly acrid taste of coffee flavored their kiss, along with a sweet yet piquant tang. The taste was vibrant, drugging, and was most assuredly uniquely Joe's.

Moaning softly, his equilibrium rocked by the dizzying swirl that took up residence in his head, Mark grabbed Joe's shoulders and held on. The other man's tongue caressed and coaxed until Mark's danced with it. A low growl of satisfaction rumbled from the depths of Joe's chest, and his arms wound around Mark, pulling him closer.

Mark felt the jolt of that rough sound all the way to his balls, which tightened at the staggering sensation. The world disappeared in the wake of the pleasure Joe's kiss brought. Mark had no idea how long the embrace went on. For all he knew, it could have continued forever, but Chip whined and pushed against Mark's thigh, demanding his master's attention. The big dog was clearly uneasy about the stranger's actions toward his owner.

Brought back to reality, Mark felt a shard of panic take up residence in his gut, growing with each passing second. He pushed against Joe's shoulders, freeing himself.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded, panting lightly. The realization that it was one thing to fantasize, and a far different thing to have the fantasy grab you for real, came as something of a shock.

"Offhand, I'd say it was amazing. You didn't like it?"

Thrown off guard, Mark told the truth. "I didn't say that. It was just...unexpected, is all."

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. That blush was just too compelling."

Not sure what to say in the face of such candor, Mark took a step back. "I...I really need to go."

"Look, I didn't mean to spook you," Joe gently apologized. "Back at camp you seemed receptive. I'm sorry if I was wrong. It's been a long time since I..."

“No problem,” Mark hastily interrupted. “I, well, I haven’t...oh, crap.” He took another step back and then another. “Look, I have your card. I’ll call, okay?”

“All right, but don’t disappoint me. Hmm?” Joe’s smile was coaxing.

Unable to resist, Mark managed a small smile of his own. “I won’t.”

The curve of Joe’s mouth turned into a grin. “You don’t know it, but you’ve managed to turn a trip I’ve been dreading into something special. Thank you.” He closed the distance between them to softly kiss Mark.

Mark once again moved away, then laid his fingers against lips that tingled from the other man’s touch. Unable to stop himself, he asked, “Why do you keep doing that?”

Joe shrugged. “I don’t really know. I’m not usually this aggressive, but meeting you like this, out of the blue -- it’s like I was drowning, and you threw me a lifeline. I haven’t been this happy in a long time. Besides, you get to me; there’s something in your eyes, and you’ve got this adorable, all-American, boy-next-door thing going on.”

“Adorable?!”

“Hey, don’t knock it. I’m turned on all to hell. You don’t mind,” Joe concluded with a husky murmur, “do you?”

Uncertain, Mark shook his head. “I...I have to go.”

“So you’ve said,” Joe teased. “Be careful.”

“Uh, you, too.” Breathing hard, Mark spun around and started walking, refusing to look back. Surprisingly bold, the carpenter was a temptation the likes of which Mark had never dealt with. How could such a short encounter with a stranger stir him so deeply?

Once he’d put a good bit of distance between himself and Joe, the tension within him slowly eased until he was able to truly relax and let his muscles fall into their natural rhythm. It felt good to tramp along effortlessly, instead of feeling stiff and robotic. Chip gamboled happily around him.

He cursed softly as he found his thoughts returning to Joe. He'd been naïve to ask why Joe had kissed him; perhaps the better question was why had he allowed Joe to do so? Derek Swenson had tried, but the thought of kissing him made Mark's flesh crawl. Derek was a good-looking man whom Mark had known for a couple of years, whereas he'd known Joe for all of one hour or so. What was it about Joe that made Mark's heart race and his blood heat while Derek left him cold?

He couldn't deny his desire for Joe, but what of the mysterious wife? Who wore the mate to the ring Joe openly sported, and did he want to embroil himself in such a tenuous situation?

The business card in Mark's pocket suddenly took on the proportions of a tiny Pandora's box. He bit his lip as he traveled, the unanswered questions and consequences of acting on his attraction or not swirling in his head.

After a solitary supper, Mark wandered into the living room where Chip was curled up on his pillow near the hearth. Mark flopped down on the sofa, breathing a satisfied sigh as he was surrounded by the warmth and familiarity of the cabin. He'd spent the better part of his formative years living here with his grandparents while his career-driven parents had worked jobs that involved extensive travel.

In fact, it was in this very house during the summer he'd turned fourteen that Mark had first acknowledged to himself that he was gay. It had been an admission that had left him feeling alienated and afraid. At school, he'd seen some boys teased and bullied about being gay. The words "faggot" and "queer" were bandied about in such a way that a heavy weight had settled in the pit of Mark's stomach. He'd been desperately afraid that someone would notice a change in him now that he knew the truth about himself.

Deeply troubled, Mark began spending more and more time alone. He went for long walks in the woods, trying to sort through his confused and jumbled thoughts. It had been an

exercise in futility that left him exhausted and, more often than not, seated in the grass under the trees, rocking in distress, while tears silently spilled down his cheeks.

His grandfather found him on one such occasion. Without a word, the old man eased down beside Mark, putting his arm around him. "Tell me what's troubling you, son. I know you've been hurting over something for a while now."

Horried, Mark shook his head, surreptitiously dashing away his tears. "I can't. You'll hate me."

"Mark, I could never hate you. You're my grandson. I'll always love you."

"Not if I tell you."

"I see. Maybe I can help. You remember my brother Leland? A couple of years ago, he came to visit from California for a few days."

"I remember."

"When we were growing up, Lee and I were not only brothers, we were the best of friends. Then something happened the year he graduated high school. I'd never really paid much attention to Lee's love life, and by the time I was old enough to think about such things, I was too busy chasing girls to realize that he wasn't. But Lee did have a special friend he hung out with a lot. Richard Whitmore. I didn't suspect a thing until I caught them kissing in the barn one day.

"That day I did some things I spent years regretting. I called Lee terrible names, told him I hated him, and refused to speak to him unless I had to -- right up to and including the day he left home after enlisting in the Marines. Our parents never did understand the rift that developed between us. The one good thing I did was not telling them what I'd found out. I think, even though I was angry with him, my love for Lee kept me from going that far. I was afraid of what might happen if they knew. Our father was not exactly a gentle man," Mark's grandfather admitted. "Anyway, I let years go by without contact with my only brother because I was too pigheaded to admit I was scared and confused by what I'd seen.

“All our lives, we’d been taught by society and by the church that things were supposed to be one way. Men desired and loved women and vice-versa; any other combination was an abomination, they said. I couldn’t understand why Lee’d want to be with another man. I never realized how hard it must have been for him to go against all that. How bad he must have felt being told that everything he was, everything he needed, would be looked upon with abhorrence.”

Mark had tensed under his grandfather’s arm, until the older man continued speaking.

“I found out what I’d been taught was wrong.”

“How?” Mark breathed.

“I went to college. It’s amazing the things you learn, the people you meet, the possibilities you discover. A whole new universe presents itself to you...if you’re willing to see it. I think a part of me wanted to know more, wanted to understand my brother. The long and the short of it is, I came to understand that things aren’t always black and white or right and wrong, the way they’re represented to us.

“There’s a world of diversity out there, and it all falls under God’s creation. God doesn’t make mistakes. He’d created my brother and had given him the need to love another man rather than a woman. Who was I to judge and cast stones just because my brother and I had different desires?”

“So you made up with him,” Mark stated softly.

“I did. It was one of the happiest days of my life.”

“Grandpa?”

“Yeah, son?”

“I...I think I’m gay.”

“I had a feeling you might be.”

Dismayed, Mark pulled away so he could look his grandfather in the eyes. *"How? Do I look different from other guys? Do I act strange?"*

Shaking his head, his grandfather chuckled. "No. You look and act like any other fourteen-year-old boy. Remember when we had the electrician out to rewire the kitchen a couple of weeks ago?"

Mark nodded, ducking his head to hide his blush. How could he forget? The man was seriously gorgeous. Mark had jacked off that night and others since, thinking about him.

"I happened to catch you looking at him. It was just a short glance, but it put me in mind of Lee and how he'd look at Rich sometimes."

Scrunching his eyes closed against the humiliation, Mark drew his knees up and laid his forehead against them.

His grandfather laughed. "Now, there's no need to be embarrassed. You have good taste. Even I'll admit he was a damn fine-looking man. But that does bring me to another point. You're going to have to be very careful, son. There are a lot of people who don't accept homosexuality. They fear it -- and what they fear, they hate. There are those who aren't above tormenting, even physically trying to harm, folks they know or suspect are gay."

"I know. At school, guys pick on other guys mostly because of how they look. It's not right."

"No, it's not." The old man heaved a sigh. "I wish I could make things easier for you. You've been given an extra hard row to hoe, and as unfair as it is, there's not much that can be done about it. Just remember to be the best man you can. Nobody can ask more of you than that, and when you've accomplished all that you can, hold your head high, because you'll know without a doubt that you're just as good as the next man."

Mark smiled and nodded. For the first time in weeks, he felt the ever-present weight lift from his shoulders. "I will."

“Come on, then. Let’s go eat. Your grandma sent me out here to fetch you for lunch. She’s probably wondering where the dickens we’ve gone off to. You’ll have to protect me when we get back, son.”

Laughing, the two of them had returned to the cabin. Mark’s grandfather had remained true to his word. He and Mark’s grandmother continued to love him always and accepted him just as he was. In time, the older folks had moved to Arizona for the drier climate and deeded the cabin and the surrounding thirty acres of land to him. Mark knew there was no other place he’d rather spend his time than here. He regretted the fact that his chosen profession forced him to live closer to the city.

Mark had followed his grandfather’s advice and, combined with his own natural caution, had kept his sexual orientation to himself, although it had been difficult at times. To avoid making excuses about why he didn’t date, he did go out with the occasional girl, but never more than once. Mostly he kept himself buried in his studies, and then later, his career. The result of this self-imposed isolation had made him somewhat reticent in social situations.

When it came to his work, however, Mark was confident and very much in charge. He was sure of his designs and ideas and not afraid to voice his opinions and comments. He dealt with his clients effectively and efficiently.

On the other hand, situations that called solely for socializing were uncomfortable. His solution was to retreat behind his professional façade and to keep people at arm’s length. They never saw the kind and gentle dreamer, the man who liked to laugh and joke, the insecure man who sometimes lost the fight to fear and loneliness. Mark longed for a strong lover, one who would see him, take him, and yet let him be his own man, with his strengths intact, his weaknesses buoyed, and his love returned.

The one person who’d broken through the barriers was Charlotte. She knew he was gay, and although they discussed life, love, sex, and almost every other subject under the sun,

Mark was less than forthcoming about certain things, like the fact that he was inexperienced. Char had made some very astute comments and observations that had led Mark to believe she understood that he had hidden insecurities. Still, it was a testament to the depth of their friendship and their mutual respect that they accepted what the other wanted to share and didn't pry for secrets neither wished to reveal.

Mark sighed as he came out of his somber and solitary reverie, his gaze focusing on the dancing flames behind the fire screen in the hearth. The fire reminded him of the one at Joe's campsite, and his breaths grew slightly labored as he recalled their meeting. Running his tongue over his bottom lip, he relived their kiss and the swiftly rising heat and desire that had made him dizzy. Thoughts drifted randomly as he remembered not so much Joe's words, but his voice and the way the sound had spread warmth and lust throughout his body.

Mark's cock began to fill, a pleasurable ache taking up residence in his groin. He pulled his tee shirt off, loosened the tie of his sweats, and eased his hand under the waistband. His fingers wrapped around his demanding flesh, slowly stroking the hot, silky skin. He groaned with the steadily building hunger.

Trapped within the confines of his pants and fingers, his cock continued to swell, pressing against the fabric and flesh. His movements restricted, Mark released his grip and quickly stripped out of the offending clothing before taking up where he'd left off, squeezing and caressing, restlessly urging on the gratifying sensations. A thick bead of pre-come oozed from the small slit at the tip of his cock and trickled down the heavy, reddened cap, anointing his rigid organ. With his thumb, he spread the slick fluid over the head of his cock and closed his eyes, constructing a fantasy in his mind.

Joe was on his knees between Mark's spread thighs. Blue eyes, dark and fathomless, held Mark's mesmerized gaze while Joe lowered his face, his tongue sliding over the swollen crown of Mark's shaft. Mark's belly tightened, his hips surging upward as a groan crawled from his throat.

Behind his eyelids, Mark could see Joe's mouth engulf his straining erection. He imagined how it would feel to experience the increasing pressure surrounding his cock when Joe tightened his lips. Wet heat would paint his skin slick with each sensual slide of Joe's mouth and tongue as he effortlessly brought Mark closer and closer to ecstasy.

Mark rode the wild wave of his fantasy, struggling to maintain control, to prolong the aching delight. He groaned again, his heart pounding, his breath rushing through his laboring lungs. The jacking strokes of his hand against and around his cock became almost frantic as he tipped over the edge into climax with an unrestrained wail. The sound ripped from his throat as the muscles in his buttocks strained, lifting with the upward thrust of his hips. Burst after burst of pearly cream spewed forth, the rushing seed accompanying each gut-wrenching surge of pleasure. The first warm, wet ribbon landed against the taut arch of his throat; the second hit his chest. Each subsequent and weaker eruption trailed lower and lower, until the final trickles slid softly over his fingers.

Relaxing into the sofa cushions, Mark lay quietly while his breath and heartbeat gradually reestablished themselves to normalcy. With a sigh, he released the grip on his flaccid cock and absently ran his hand over his belly, spreading the cooling semen over his heated skin. The gesture, slow and soothing, brought Mark to the brink of sleep.

Looking toward the fireplace, he saw Chip watching him curiously, the big dog's tail tentatively fanning the air. Mark chuckled weakly. "We're incomprehensible beings sometimes, aren't we, buddy?" Yawning, he forced himself up, gathered his clothes, and after giving Chip some pats of reassurance, headed upstairs for a quick cleanup. As usual, his pet faithfully followed him. Chip's thick, padded cushion, pulled from the closet where it was stored during the day so Mark wouldn't trip over it, was laid out at the foot of the bed. Mark left him circling and scratching at it to find just the right spot.

As he washed his hands and wet a cloth under the brisk flow of hot water, Mark glanced at himself in the full-length mirror that was attached to the bathroom door. His

body was tight and fit, the muscles in his shoulders, arms, and legs well defined, but not overly so. He ran a wet hand through his short, tousled, golden-brown hair as his hazel eyes followed a smooth trail from between firm pecs, then arched down to end at the lightly furred and neatly trimmed bush that topped his pubic area. Grimacing slightly, Mark scrubbed the washcloth over his chest and belly. He would never exude the rugged, alpha-male quality that Joe projected so effortlessly, knew, in fact, that some would categorize his looks as boyishly handsome.

Allowing his eyes to become unfocused and distant, he pictured Joe standing behind him, the carpenter's hands resting on his shoulders as he leaned forward to tongue Mark's neck and ears. What was it Joe had called him? Adorable? Huffing a snort of self-derision, Mark forced himself back to reality with a thump.

This obsessing over a man he'd briefly met had to stop. After all, it was unlikely he would ever see Joe again, much less enjoy any kind of relationship with him. *Why start now and break a phenomenal twenty-four-year streak of virginity?* Mark reminded himself. Scowling with disgust, he turned from the mirror that seemed to silently mock his loneliness.

Shutting off the lights, he crossed the room, noting that Chip had finally gotten comfortable. Mark turned down the covers on his bed and slid under them, settling down to sleep with a disgruntled sigh. His last thought involved a tall, golden, god-like figure -- a bold and sensual Apollo who seized him roughly and pulled him into his arms while stealing a passionate kiss. Mark's lips curved slightly as he drifted into his dreams.

He woke to a cold, wet nose insistently nudging the back of his hand. Mark groaned and rolled, coming face-to-face with Chip and his intent brown eyes. "Hey, buddy," he croaked. "Kinda early, isn't it? Guess I should be glad you didn't wake me with a kiss."

Chip promptly obliged, sliding his tongue over Mark's chin and cheek.

“Shit, bud! Okay, I’m up, I’m up!” Scrubbing a hand over his face, Mark released an ear-cracking yawn and stepped into the sweats he’d abandoned on a chair the previous night, before stumbling downstairs like a zombie, bare-chested and bleary-eyed.

When he flung open the door to let Chip out, however, his gaze widened in surprise. The woods had been transformed into a winter wonderland. From the look of things -- at least four or five inches of white stuff were on the ground -- it had snowed most of the night, and more was coming.

Chip raced around the yard, barking his excitement. Every once in a while, he’d stop to anoint a tree or bush or to rub his face in the fluffy snow.

Shivering with the cold, Mark crossed his arms over nipples that had pinched tight. In spite of the goose bumps marching up and down his uncovered flesh, he still managed to grin at the big dog’s antics, then sobered when he thought of Joe. The man had said he’d planned to hike back to the visitors center this morning. With this weather and accumulation, it was going to be a real bitch of trip.

Mark immediately began to formulate a plan as he called Chip in, then headed upstairs to brush his teeth and to dress. Joe might need some help and Mark intended to offer it. He grinned with nervous excitement at the thought of seeing the other man again.

After donning insulated underwear, Mark put Chip’s bed away in the closet, pulled his clothes out, and finished dressing. Returning downstairs to the kitchen, he fixed himself a quick breakfast of instant oatmeal. By the time he was done, it was close to 7:30. Admonishing Chip to stay and be good while he was gone, Mark bundled up in his coat, knit cap, gloves, and boots, then headed to the garage where he fired up his favorite winter toy. The snowmobile had been serviced a few weeks ago, so once it was gassed up, it was ready to go. Snowmobiling was a fun way to break up the monotony of long, snowy days, and he had been looking forward to his first ride of the season.

Despite the snow, Mark was able to follow the oft-traveled trail he and Chip had used the day before. He arrived at Joe's campsite in no time at all, intending to pick up the other man's path from there. It was therefore with no small amount of surprise that he discovered Joe's tent was still up; Mark had been sure Joe would've broken camp by now and been on his way. Throttling the snowmobile to a standstill, he shut it down.

The ensuing silence was eerie. "Joe?" There was no answer. Brows beetling in puzzlement, Mark called again. Nothing.

Concern began to churn in his gut. Mark strode to the tent to look inside. Except for a sleeping bag and few of Joe's possessions, it was empty. Backing out, he studied the ground, searching for tracks. Shallow depressions pointed the way into the woods, already nearly obscured by the silently falling snow.

Mark followed the faint trail, alert for any movement or sound, scanning the surrounding area as he walked. Thoughts of renegade bears nudged his consciousness as he peered warily between the trees. All remained quiet, his own footsteps muffled by the blanket of white covering the area.

The path took a sudden turn, and there, a few steps ahead, he spotted a large, dark lump on the ground, partially hidden by a thin layer of snow. "Joe!" he yelled, running to the fallen man, reassured when his yell garnered a response. Joe rolled to his back.

Mark knelt beside him, heart pounding with apprehension, and gently ran his fingers over Joe's face. The carpenter's skin was pale and cold, and his forehead sported a large, discolored contusion that was split and sluggishly oozing blood.

"Joe? Joe, can you hear me?" Relief sliced through him when Joe groaned and opened his eyes.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, it's me. Are you all right?"

Joe attempted a smile. "I guess. I tripped over a fucking root. Can't see what's under all this snow. Damn. Last thing I remember is something hit me like a sledgehammer." He grimaced, hand reaching up. "Fuck, my head hurts."

Mark intercepted Joe's hand before it touched the wound on his forehead. "You must've hit a tree on your way down or a rock once you got there. You have a cut that's bleeding and a sizable lump there. I don't think you want to mess with it. Let's see if we can get you on your feet."

Mark stood, and as gently as possible, helped the big man to rise. Joe swayed unsteadily, and Mark quickly moved to his side, wrapping an arm around Joe's waist.

"Shit. Dizzy."

"It's okay, I've got you. Just stand here a minute." Mark waited quietly until Joe's grip on his shoulder lessened. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Good. We're going to take this nice and easy. Let's get you out of here." The two men walked slowly back to Joe's campsite. Even through the layers of fabric that separated them, Mark could feel the trembling that began to run through the other man's body. "Talk to me, Joe. Are you all right?" Mark glanced at Joe's face. He'd grown paler still, his lips tinged with blue, his shivers increasing as they walked.

"C-c-cold," Joe managed to stutter.

"I know. I'm gonna get you warmed up." Mark took Joe straight to his snowmobile. "I'm not stopping to pack up your stuff unless there's something really important that you need. Did you bring a wallet or anything like that?"

"N-no."

Worried as hell, Mark maneuvered Joe into position on the snowmobile seat, then took his place in front of the injured man. Reaching back, he wrapped Joe's arms around himself, and then leaned forward until the other man's weight rested against his back.

“Hold on tight to me. Can you do that?” He felt Joe’s nod, the movement reassuring.

Mark started out slowly. When he felt Joe’s arms grip him, he opened wide the vehicle’s throttle and sped home as quickly as he could. He knew Joe was likely experiencing hypothermia, hopefully a mild case, or possibly shock from his injury. In either situation, Joe needed gradual warming to get his body temperature back to normal.

When they arrived at the cabin, Mark helped Joe inside, shushing Chip, who was barking and gamboling around excitedly. Considering that sharing their body heat was going to be a must, Mark opted for the bed instead of the couch. No way would both of them fit side-by-side on the sofa.

Partway into their climb upstairs, Joe sagged heavily against Mark as his strength flagged.

“Shit, don’t quit on me now, Joe.” Mark panted lightly and threw a panicked glance back at the steps they’d already managed to traverse. Running his tongue over his dry lips, he bit them, then shifted slightly, maneuvering for a more secure perch on the steps. Joe was no lightweight; Mark was certain he wouldn’t be able to take them both the rest of the way if Joe passed out.

“Come on, man. We don’t want to end up a broken heap at the bottom of the stairs.”

Joe seemed to marshal his reserves, and together they continued, finally reaching the landing, before they staggered down the hall and into Mark’s room. Mark lowered Joe to the bed and swiftly stripped his guest out of his coat, sweatshirt, flannel shirt, tee shirt, and hiking boots. Massaging the cool flesh gently as he went, he dropped everything into a pile on the floor.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Mark couldn’t help but admire the treasure that was revealed once he’d peeled the outer layers away. Joe’s body was beautiful. Skin that was once smooth and burnished was now pale and cool. It covered firm, rippling muscle. Hard, defined pecs sported quarter-sized, light tan areolas that were topped with tightly

pinched nipples. As his gaze meandered downward, Mark marveled at Joe's substantial six-pack, trim waist, and flat belly. The man's arms were solid with sinew and prominent veins that trailed down to his hands, which were large, the fingers long and broad, yet tapered and graceful. They were the competent hands of a man who was no stranger to physical labor.

Mark raised one of Joe's feet and removed his sock. Never having paid much attention to such things, he was struck now by the flowing symmetry of this part of Joe's anatomy, reminding Mark of a painting by Michelangelo. The extremity was long, broad at the ball, and tapered through a high arch before flaring out again at the heel.

The lack of warmth in the flesh he gently rubbed recalled Mark to Joe's need. Curtly admonishing himself to stay focused, Mark reached for the buckle of Joe's belt, opened it, then unfastened the top button of his jeans.

"Lie back, Joe," Mark ordered softly. Sliding the zipper down, he grasped both the waistband of the other man's jeans as well as his briefs. "Can you lift your hips for me?" Joe complied, and Mark divested him of the remainder of his clothes. What appeared was every bit as notable as the rest of him.

Mark let his gaze rest briefly on Joe's groin. Even drawn up with the cold, his cock, surrounded by a pale bush of gently curling and wiry hair, was impressive. Refusing to get side-tracked, Mark worked briskly. Noting the condition of Joe's hair, he fetched a couple of towels from the bathroom. It wouldn't help him to get warm, having that cold, wet mass pressed against the back of his neck.

He got Joe to sit up, and as carefully as possible, pulled the tie from his hair. Spreading the towel around Joe's shoulders, he pulled Joe's hair from beneath. While keeping the bulk of the towel between the carpenter's skin and his wet hair, Mark used the ends of the thick terrycloth to gently blot as much of the moisture as he could from the thick, bedraggled strands. Urging Joe to stand, he pulled the blankets back, draped the dry towel over the

pillow, then settled him in the bed. Joe's breathing was quick and shallow, his shivers hard and constant.

Needing some quick advice and concerned that searchers might be sent out when Joe didn't arrive as scheduled, Mark fumbled in the drawer of the bedside table for the phone book. He quickly found and dialed the number for the park's visitors center, explained the situation to the ranger on the other end of the line, and paid close attention to the instructions he was given.

"Yeah, I figured that. I've got him undressed and in bed." Mark listened intently for a moment. "I was planning to do that." He fidgeted while the ranger continued to talk. "Mild concussion probably. He's got a cut and a lump on his head. No, I don't think he was unconscious when I found him, but if he did get knocked out, it probably wasn't for long." Mark listened again. "Okay, yeah, I'll do that. Thanks, man, I appreciate it."

Ending the call, Mark stripped down to his briefs without hesitation and slid beneath the blankets. Moving close, he slipped an arm over Joe's waist and pressed the full length of his body against the other man. Joe's skin was still cool, and the contact sent a shiver down Mark's spine.

"I hope this is all right; it'll help get you warmed up quicker," Mark explained softly.

"S o-o-kay," Joe stuttered. "J-j-just wish...I c-could...enjoy it more."

"Hmm, well, try and relax instead," Mark admonished lightly, sparing a small smile for Joe's ability to flirt even under these circumstances. *When he gets an idea in his head, he's certainly tenacious.* "I wish I had an electric blanket, but my body heat will have to do. You're gonna be all right, Joe."

They lay quietly against each other. Mark listened carefully to the sound of Joe's breathing, noting with satisfaction that it was easing into a regular rate. As the minutes passed, he felt Joe's shivers lessen. The tension in his own body gradually dissipated. Eventually, the skin pressed against his own radiated a near normal heat and Joe's muscles

loosened as his temperature rose. Between his diminishing adrenaline rush and the building warmth under the covers, Mark fell asleep.

He woke sometime later, sunshine baking the blankets at his back where it streamed in through the window. Drowsy and relaxed, he noted the arm Joe had slid around him as they slept, as well as the fact that his head was pillowed on Joe's chest, while part of his body was now draped over Joe's. The heartbeat beneath his ear was strong and steady.

Carefully, Mark lifted his head and studied Joe's face. His color was good, and the blue tinge had disappeared from his lips. The lump on his forehead was still an angry reddish purple, but the cut had begun to scab over, and the man's beautiful hair appeared to be dry.

Mark glanced at the clock on the bedside stand. It was just after noon, some four and half hours since he'd gone out looking for Joe.

Mark shifted slightly, the move making him realize he was semi-erect. Positioned as he was against Joe's side, his cock was nestled by Joe's hip, with only a thin veil of fabric separating them. That knowledge was sufficient to set Mark's heart thumping harder. The urge to move, to grind his cock into the warmth of Joe's body, was so instinctive, so primitive, that it was almost more than he could resist. Mark had to steel himself; instead of giving in, he stifled a groan of frustration and forced himself to move away.

Gingerly, he disentangled himself from the sleeping man, trying not to wake him. Joe grunted and rolled to his side. Mark seized the opportunity to slide out of bed. Picking up his jeans and tee shirt, he gritted his teeth against his demanding erection, dressed, and headed downstairs. His first order of business was to let Chip out; that done, he brewed a pot of coffee, then, head down, he leaned against the counter. "This sucks," he murmured.

Meeting Joe was proving to be an exercise in torment and delight. Although the circumstances were hardly ideal, Mark was glad to have him here. Trouble was, Joe's presence was stirring so many conflicting reactions and emotions, Mark was finding it hard to deal with the unexpected mental and physical chaos.

Shaking his head, he pushed away from the counter to rummage in the cupboards for a tray his grandmother had used to bring meals to him when he was ill in bed. Sure enough, he emerged triumphant, finding it in the third cabinet he explored.

Mark poured a glass of orange juice, a glass of water, and two cups of coffee, setting everything on the tray. After adding a third cup with a splash of milk, the sugar bowl, and a spoon, he headed back upstairs, stopping on the way to let Chip in.

Joe was still sleeping when Mark entered the bedroom and placed the tray on the bedside table. It seemed a shame to wake him, but Mark was concerned. Even though Joe seemed recovered from the exposure, it was possible he had a concussion. Mark wasn't willing to take chances. The most prudent action would be to rouse him and check the man's condition, so he did.

Mark put a hand on Joe's shoulder and shook him slightly. "Joe, you need to wake up."

Joe's lids fluttered, and he mumbled, "Wha?"

"That's it, open those baby blues."

"Go 'way," Joe growled.

Mark snorted a laugh. "Not until you're awake."

Joe blinked his eyes open and managed a creditable glare. "I'm awake. Happy?"

"So-so," Mark replied. "How do you feel?"

"You woke me up to ask me how I *feel*?"

"Yeah."

"Tired. Can I go back to sleep now?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you got whacked in the head."

"So?"

“You could have a concussion, so it’s not a good idea for you to keep sleeping. Seriously, how do you feel?”

Joe heaved a sigh and struggled into a sitting position. The sheet dropped from his chest, but he grabbed it and settled the material over his lap before leaning back against the headboard. “I feel groggy because someone just roused me out of a sound sleep. My head is spinning slightly, and I have a headache... Is that coffee I smell?”

“Grouch. Yeah, it is. Coffee, orange juice, water. How’s your stomach? Any nausea?” Mark sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Not that I’m aware of, but I’ll let you know after I have a cup of your coffee,” Joe answered with a half grin.

“Very funny. I brought milk and sugar, too.”

“I take it black.”

“You should have some sugar in it. Warm, sweetened drinks are good for people who are suffering the effects of hypothermia. I read that somewhere.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m warm now.”

“It still wouldn’t hurt.”

“All right! One spoonful, but that’s all.”

Struggling to hide his smile, Mark stirred the sugar into a cup, then handed it to Joe. He watched as the man took a sip before he leaned in to get a closer look into Joe’s eyes.

“What are you doing?” Joe’s brows pulled together in a frown.

“I’m trying to see if your pupils are dilated.”

Joe held still while Mark stared. “Well?”

“They look normal.”

“That’s good. So do yours. Mind if I drink my coffee now?”

“Smartass. Be my guest.” Mark reached for his own cup and took a sip. The brew was rich and strong, just the way he liked it.

They sat silently for a moment, until Mark caught himself studying Joe over the top of his cup. That he did so was disturbing enough, but to find Joe gazing back was totally unnerving. He set his cup back on the tray and rose from the bed.

“Where are you going now?” Joe asked.

“To get a washcloth to clean the blood off your head.”

“Blood?”

“Yeah. It’s dried, but the cut still needs to be taken care of. I’ll put some antibacterial salve on it, too.”

Mark retreated to the bathroom. By the time he returned with a well-soaked washcloth, a towel, a bottle of ibuprofen, and several other first-aid items, Joe had finished his coffee and put aside the empty cup.

“Can you take these?” he asked, showing Joe the ibuprofen.

“Yeah.”

“Juice or water? I think you should have the juice.”

“Juice it is,” Joe conceded gracefully.

Mark opened the bottle and shook three tablets into Joe’s hand, watching with satisfaction as Joe downed the pills and all of the juice. Seating himself at Joe’s side, he removed the empty glass and reached across Joe’s body for some pillows, conscious all the while of their bodies’ close proximity. He pushed the pillows behind Joe.

“There. Lean back and tip your head up a bit. I’m going to lay this washcloth over the bump to soak the dried blood.” Joe did as Mark instructed and sat quietly. After giving the moisture time to work, Mark lifted the cloth and carefully wiped the blood away. With delicate precision, he lightly swabbed the wound until it looked clean. New blood rose to the

surface and Mark blotted it away. Using the towel, he dried the surrounding skin, carefully smeared the cut with antibacterial salve, and placed a large bandage over the wound.

Unfortunately, when Joe had fallen, he'd ended up on his side, with the flow of blood directed toward his temple. "*Man*, you've got blood in your hair."

Joe silently pulled his thick locks to one side. Mark swallowed hard and tried not to stare. With his hair loose and flowing over his shoulder and chest, even if it was somewhat bedraggled, Joe resembled an ancient warrior, a fierce and virile Viking ready to plunder and pillage, or a noble knight about to do battle with pagan Saracens.

Steeling himself against his overactive imagination and the visions that caused his blood to heat, Mark gently separated the crusted strands at Joe's temple, sandwiching them between two layers of damp washcloth. He rubbed until Joe's hair and scalp were free of as much blood as possible.

"Guess these things came in handy after all," he commented to further distract himself. He gently touched the extra-large bandage on Joe's forehead. "My grandmother insisted I needed to have more than just Band-Aids in my first-aid supplies. As usual, she was right. There," Mark used the towel to dry the hair at Joe's temple. "All done."

"Thanks. You have a very light touch. You're not a doctor, are you?"

"No, don't you remember? I told you I'm an architect."

"Did you? I don't recall..." Joe frowned slightly. "Anyway, I've remembered why I walked into the woods."

"Why's that?"

"I had to go; all this coffee and juice has forcibly reminded me of it."

"Sorry. Let's see how steady you are on your feet; then I'll leave you to it."

Joe scooted to the edge of the bed, threw the sheet aside, and rose gingerly to his feet. A slight sway brought Mark to his side. "Damn, I'm a little lightheaded. Just let me stand here a sec."

Mark steadied him. "Sure. Take it easy. Slow, deep breaths." He did his best to ignore the fact that not only was he holding the most gorgeous man he'd ever seen, but said man was also unashamedly naked -- something that was brought home to him by virtue of the arm he had wrapped around Joe's slim waist.

Mark kept his focus on Joe's face, actively fighting the urge to let his eyes shift downward and feast on the bounty below. It didn't help that Joe's skin was so soft and his muscles firm and warm under Mark's hands. His scent, a light, earthy, male musk tickled Mark's nose and sent pulses of sensation that threatened to awaken his as-yet quiescent cock.

"I think I'm all right now. Let me try walking."

With an equal mixture of regret and relief, Mark released his hold and moved. Joe took a few steps, then breathed an audible sigh. "I'm good, thanks."

"Great. I'm gonna take the tray downstairs and give you some privacy. Holler if you need anything."

"Will do. Oh, hey. Would you happen to have a brush or comb I can use?" Joe grimaced and held out a strand of his hair. "If it gets too much more tangled, I'll have to cut the clumps out."

"Sure." Mark went to his dresser and rummaged for his seldom-used brush. A comb usually sufficed for his own hair.

Joe accepted it with thanks, then continued to the bathroom and closed the door after him -- but not before Mark got an eyeful of a pair of taut, rounded ass cheeks, the likes of which made his knees weak.

"Son of a bitch."

"Did you say something?"

Mark swore vehemently under his breath. “No! Nothing. I’ll be downstairs.”

“Okay.”

Mark picked the tray up and fled.

Chapter Two

Mark unloaded the tray, set the dirty dishes on the counter, then put the tray away. Needing to give himself some time to calm down, he methodically washed up everything. Steam from the hot water rose in a fog, and Mark reached out to wipe the condensation from the window over the sink.

The sun, which had been out when he'd awakened, had disappeared, and the snowfall had resumed. There had to be a good nine or ten inches by now, and the wind had picked up. Clouds of small flakes swirled in the air and swept across the yard. These weren't the pretty, fluffy flakes that people tried to catch on their tongues. Rather, they were the insidious type that stung the skin and kept coming and coming until everything was buried under drifts of freezing white powder.

Previous experience led him to believe the roads would be all but impassable at this point. The snowplows wouldn't bother to clear this sparsely inhabited stretch of road until the snow slowed and the winds died down. Thankfully, there was no ice, which meant the power should stay on. Still, he was happy to know two kerosene heaters were out in the garage, along with several five-gallon cans of fuel. The stove was powered by natural gas, so

he'd be able to cook, and there was a ready supply of firewood stacked just outside the backdoor.

He also had oil and battery-powered lamps, as well as a large supply of candles laid in. In addition, he'd made sure there were plenty of canned goods in the pantry: soup, other nonperishable foodstuffs, and bottled water. Over the years, Mark's grandparents had drummed it into his head that the more isolated the region you lived in, the more self-reliant you needed to be. He'd never forgotten that lesson and always kept the cabin well-stocked and ready for whatever came his way. Short of the roof blowing off, he and Joe would be able to weather the blizzard without undue difficulty.

Thinking of Joe took Mark's mind off the storm. For someone who'd come into his life such a short time ago, the man had certainly grabbed the lion's share of Mark's attention. Heaving a sigh of resignation, Mark decided he'd better go check on his guest.

He quickly finished the cleanup and made his way upstairs, wondering absently where Chip had gone to. His question was answered when he got back to his bedroom. Joe was sitting on the edge of the bed, Chip at his feet, a look of doggy bliss on his face as Joe petted and scratched his head, neck, and chest.

Striving to shrug off the surge of arousal that appeared every time he saw Joe naked, Mark smiled and joked, "Are you trying to steal my dog's affections?" Chip's tail fanned the floor, and his mouth parted in a wide canine grin.

Joe turned his attention to Mark and gave him a weak smile in return. Mark felt an immediate frisson of unease, his stomach tightening in apprehension.

"What's wrong?"

Joe broke eye contact and looked down at Chip. "I can't remember."

"What do you mean? Can't remember what?"

"I was washing my hands. After I rinsed them off and took the towel to dry them, I noticed I pulled this ring forward so I could dry under it. It was such an automatic gesture,

like something I've done a million times, but it made me take a good look at the ring, and I realized..."

"Joe?"

"I don't remember being married. I don't know who put this ring on my finger."

Mark's eyes widened with dismay. "Now, wait a minute. You remembered me."

"Obviously, but unless you're my wife that doesn't help," Joe answered with some asperity, then shot Mark a grimace of remorse. "Sorry, I'm a little freaked. I keep telling myself not to panic, but it's not just the ring. I can tell you where I live and what kind of car I drive. It's a truck, by the way. I remember hiking in the park and setting up camp and meeting you. I get flashes of things that seem familiar -- no, they *are* familiar. I know these things, but there are holes. I work with wood. I'm a carpenter. I told you that, right?"

"Yeah, you're a professional carpenter, and you make furniture. You even do a weekly show on television."

"That explains some of what I remember, like television cameras and stuff, but what about the rest?" Joe abandoned petting Chip to run a slightly shaking hand over his own hair, pushing the long, glistening strands over his shoulder. He shivered. "What am I going to do?"

"The first order of business is to find you something to wear. Hold on a minute." Mark left the room and returned a few minutes later with some sweats and a flannel shirt. "Here, these should fit. My grandfather's a pretty big guy; he and my grandmother leave clothes in the guest room for their visits. I didn't bring underwear, though. I didn't think you'd want to wear Grandpa's briefs." Mark was relieved to see the smile that brightened Joe's eyes.

"No, that's okay. Thanks. At least you didn't choose a dress."

"You'd have a better chance of fitting in my clothes. Grandma's about five-two."

"Eyes of blue?"

Mark grinned. "Yeah, actually."

Joe stood. Mark started to glance away when he saw Joe tilt slightly. In two strides, he was at Joe's side. "Take it easy. Are you still dizzy?"

"Just when I first stand up." Joe took a deep breath. "I'm okay now."

Mark took the sweats from Joe and knelt down on one knee. "It probably won't do you any good to bend over to put these on. Lift your foot." Joe did, and Mark slipped his leg into the sweats. "Now the other." Mark worked the pants up, keeping his head turned to the side. The proximity of Joe's groin and the thick cock which nested there was just too close for comfort.

Finally, Joe took over and pulled up the material the rest of the way. Before Mark could rise, Joe's hand brushed lightly over his hair. Unable to stop himself, Mark looked up, his lips parted and his breath hitching.

Joe was gazing at him with a look that was at once sultry and tender. "Seems I'm destined to continue thanking you." Joe's voice had dropped an octave and was low and husky.

"You're welcome," Mark managed. He marveled at how natural it seemed to be on his knees before Joe. If only their relationship was such that Joe's pants were coming down instead of going up.

What would it be like to reach out and caress the warm skin of those muscular thighs? Would it be an amazing experience to lean forward and suckle the round orbs of Joe's balls or to run his tongue over Joe's cock before pulling it into his mouth? What would Joe taste like? Would that mesmerizing musk inundate Mark's nostrils until Joe's scent filled him each time he took a breath? Would Joe's fingers intertwine with his hair to hold him in place, the better to savor the pleasure of his mouth?

"Mark?"

Coming to with a startled jerk, Mark felt his face heat. He rose shakily to his feet, simultaneously aware of how labored his breathing had become. "Socks. You need socks."

Before he could move, Joe wrapped a firm, restraining hand around Mark's forearm. "I kissed you. Yesterday. I remember I kissed you."

"That was probably a mistake."

"It didn't feel like a mistake." Joe's other hand came up to cup Mark's cheek. "I remember this blush; it's what compelled me to do it. What are you thinking about that has you blushing?"

They stared at each other for a moment.

Biting his lip, Mark turned his gaze from Joe's, too inhibited to give him the truth. "It's nothing. Don't you think there are some bigger issues we need to deal with right now? I'm going to call a local physician, our family doctor when I was growing up. He's retired now, but he should be able to give us some clues as to what's going on with you."

To Mark's relief, Joe released his grip, albeit with seeming reluctance. Mark shifted, then turned away, chiding himself for his mixed emotions. While part of him had been grateful, another part was disappointed that Joe didn't force the issue. That he didn't take another kiss.

Mentally kicking himself, he strode to his dresser, then tossed Joe a pair of socks he thought would be big enough for him. Crossing the room to pick up the portable phone on the bedside table, Mark quickly rummaged in the drawer for a well-used address book and dialed the number for Dr. Williams.

Slumping down into the wing chair on the other side of the bedside table, Mark watched Joe lower himself to the bed to don the socks. A hello from the other end of the line made him sit up before he relaxed and exchanged a few pleasantries with Dr. Williams. Then he came to the reason for his call; he spoke at length about Joe's accident and the lump on his head, in addition to the slight dizzy spells and memory loss.

He then spent the next several minutes listening to the doctor, his head nodding as he uttered an occasional, “Uh huh” or “I see.” He turned his gaze to Joe. “Do you know if you were actually knocked out or were you just dazed?”

Joe shrugged and reached for the elastic band he used for his hair. “I’m not really sure. If I was out, it couldn’t have been for long.”

“I agree. Your tracks were starting to fill in but weren’t covered, and you had some snow on you, but not a lot. Did you hear that, Doc?”

From the corner of his eye, Mark saw Joe run his fingers through the long, sleek strands of his hair before gathering them at the back of his neck. Mark got a little short of breath at the sight and swiveled his head away to look out the window, but he could still see Joe’s movements. *The brush of his hair against naked skin must tickle. I wonder what it feels like.*

He was fascinated with Joe’s hair, even though he’d seen guys with long hair before and had never been fazed. Some men’s had looked okay, but most had appeared unkempt and scraggly; Joe’s locks simply added to his appeal. The strands were thick and smooth, shimmering with glinting highlights when the light hit them just right. His hair gave him an air of untamed sensuality and bad-boy mystique. Joe wasn’t at all the kind of man Mark had pictured himself wanting. Even stranger was that he had pictured someone more like Derek Swenson, a man who was clean cut and buttoned down. Comparing the two men made Mark realize there was more to attraction than appearance. In the end, it was what was inside the person that mattered most.

Putting aside those fleeting thoughts, he forced his attention back to his phone conversation. He noticed Joe watching him and sent a reassuring smile toward the other man. He’d meant to ease the frown over Joe’s brow. It didn’t work. He was finally able to end the call after promising to pass on the doctor’s greetings to his grandparents.

“Well?” Joe demanded when Mark replaced the phone on its base.

“Doc says you probably have a mild concussion. He said it can be brought on by a head injury, which would also explain the dizziness. As for your memory loss...well, he was throwing out terms like retrograde, traumatic, and dissociative amnesia. I didn’t understand it all, but basically amnesia’s a tricky thing, and it affects different people in different ways. Sometimes, the things that have happened most recently, like memories leading up to an accident, get blocked, or a traumatic memory is suppressed. In the majority of cases in which a head injury is involved, the patient’s memory usually returns within hours or over a period of days. Considering the fact that you’re already remembering some things, he believes you’ll have full recall eventually. What concerns him the most are the dizzy spells.”

“So what do we do now?”

“According to Doc, as long as your injuries aren’t life threatening, the best thing for us to do is to sit tight. There’s no sense in trying to get you to the hospital in this weather. You’re supposed to stay in bed and rest, but if your symptoms worsen, you’ll need professional care. My SUV has four-wheel drive, so we’d have a good chance of making it into town, but I’d rather not chance it unless we really need to. Seriously, what do you think? Are you feeling about the same, worse, or better?”

“Right now, I’m okay. I get a little lightheaded when I stand, but I don’t have the urge to vomit or anything. Isn’t puking a symptom of severe head trauma?”

“Yeah, that’s what Doc said.”

“What about the whole staying awake thing? Not that I’m sleepy anymore.”

“There’s no problem with you sleeping, but I’d feel better keeping an eye on you when you do go back to bed.”

Joe grinned. “You gonna sleep with me?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Yes, in a totally platonic manner.”

“You’re no fun.”

“So I’ve been told.” Mark looked at his watch. “How about lunch? You hungry? I’m starving.”

“I could definitely eat,” Joe admitted, clearly about to leave the bed.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Mark placed a hand on Joe’s shoulder. “Doc said bed rest. You’re officially an invalid for the rest of the day and night. You stay here, and I’ll bring it up.”

“Come on. That’s too much trouble. How about I go downstairs and rest on the sofa?”

Mark took in the melting appeal in Joe’s eyes and gave in against his better judgment. “All right. But you have to promise to stay put.”

Joe grinned. “You have my solemn vow.”

“Hmm, you don’t look too solemn to me,” Mark grouched. “Fine. If we’re going to do this, we’re doing it carefully. Stand up and take it slow.”

Still smiling, Joe did as Mark demanded. Mark slid an arm around Joe’s waist. “Dizzy?”

“Um, no, not really.”

Mark sent Joe a suspicious glare. “Is that the truth, or are you just trying to get me off your back?”

Joe laughed. “I swear it’s the truth. You’re a persistent little shit.”

“Hey! I’m not little.”

“All right. I take it back. But you are persistent.”

“Okay, I’ll admit to that part.” Mark fought the smile that tugged at his lips. “Now, we’re going to walk downstairs with my arm around you. Hold onto the handrail on your side, and I’ll do the same on my side. If you get dizzy, say so, and we’ll stop and rest.”

“All right, Granny,” Joe teased.

“Fuck you.”

“Actually, I prefer to top, so whenever you’re ready, it’ll be you that’s fucked.”

Mark froze, blinking at Joe in shocked surprise.

“Whoa. Sorry. Where did that come from?” Joe apologized, then eyed Mark speculatively. “I suppose I should be embarrassed, but somehow that sounds like something I do often enough to know whether I’m a top or bottom.” Joe frowned and then drawled, “But if I’m happily married and have a wife, that doesn’t make any sense at all. Hetero couples don’t label themselves tops or bottoms.”

Mark shrugged. “It’s not unheard of for a gay or bi man to be married and even have children. Maybe you had sex with guys before you got married. Some guys find it’s just easier to play it straight under certain circumstances.”

“But not you.”

Mark met Joe’s somber gaze. “Are you asking me if I’m gay?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not out but, yeah, I am. Does it make any difference?” Since Joe had already kissed him, it wasn’t too surprising he found it easy to make the admission.

“Not in the way you might think.”

“What do you mean?”

“You being gay doesn’t change who you are or make me think any less of you.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, gay or straight, you’re a nice guy. Actually, I’m glad you’re gay. This would be a lot more complicated if you were straight.”

“How?”

“You’d probably have tried to punch me out for kissing you. Given how much I enjoyed it, that would have been a damn shame.”

“Think so, huh?”

“Definitely. Plus, if I’d made you mad, I’d probably be an ice cube about now.”

“Don’t joke about that. And it’s not true. Even if you’d pissed me off, I would still have gone looking for you.”

“Sorry. I know you would have. Like I said, you’re a nice guy.”

Momentarily speechless, Mark opted for changing the subject. “You ready?”

Joe’s brow rose in question, a teasing smirk tilting his lips. “What did you have in mind?”

“Going downstairs!”

“Oh. Yeah, sure. If that’s all you’re offering.”

“Are you ever serious?” Mark growled as he aimed them toward the landing.

“Serious is overrated, but I really don’t know why I keep saying these things to you. Either you’re irresistible, or I’m a son of bitch who cheats on his spouse.” Joe waved the hand sporting his ring. “I wish I could remember. I mean there’s no questioning your appeal, but *damn*. I’d like to know if this is unusual for me, or if I’m normally one of those jerks who can’t keep his pecker in his pants, even though I’ve apparently made a commitment. This is frustrating.”

Mark didn’t answer in favor of steering them safely down the stairs. As they went, Joe was still conjecturing.

“Maybe I’m not married to a woman. It is possible, you know. That’s something I do remember; in some places, it’s legal for two guys to get married. It would certainly explain why I’m so willing to acknowledge my attraction to you. Surely I can’t have been straight up to now.”

Safely reaching the first level, Mark led Joe to the sofa, placed conveniently to face the television. He got Joe to put his feet up; then he unfolded the throw that was draped over the back of the couch, spreading it over Joe. Done, he looked the frowning man in the eye, responding in kind to Joe’s candor.

"I'll admit it's possible you're not married to a woman, but what difference does it make? You're obviously married to someone."

"I suppose," Joe said sullenly. "But I don't like the implications. If I'm committed to someone, then I shouldn't have kissed you. I shouldn't be thinking about you the way I've been. It means I'm a lousy bastard, and I don't like it. If I'm really that kind of man, shouldn't I feel guilty?"

"I don't know. I suppose some guys who cheat feel guilty. Then again, there are those who don't think twice about it." The expression on Joe's face made Mark's heart twist.

"Is that your opinion of me?"

"No! How could it be? I know next to nothing about you, but..."

"But?"

"I don't get that vibe from you. Generally, guys who cheat are pretty slick and cool about it. They don't question themselves the way you've been doing. Don't you see? All of this is making you uneasy because you care. If you were the type of guy who did this kind of thing all the time and you found yourself attracted to someone, you wouldn't hesitate, right? Doesn't that make sense?"

Joe slowly nodded. "I guess it does in a roundabout way."

"Sure it does. Now stop worrying about it." Mark handed Joe the television remote. "Here, entertain yourself. Tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwiches okay with you?"

Instead of taking the remote, Joe wrapped his hand around Mark's wrist and pulled. Caught off guard, Mark toppled forward and saved himself from landing on top of Joe by virtue of his other hand on the back of the sofa. Holding himself up on one stiffened arm mere inches away from Joe, he was left face-to-face with a very determined-looking man.

"So how *do* you feel about me?"

"Um..."

Joe's hand reached up to cradle Mark's cheek as he stared into his eyes. "You liked it when I kissed you. Just as much as I did, I think."

Mark's rate of breathing ratcheted several notches higher than normal, his heart thumping to keep pace, while his subconscious screamed out a warning. *This man is dangerous!* "Yes, I liked it," he admitted a bit breathlessly, "I'm attracted to you, but that doesn't mean we can..."

"Just this. For now," Joe warned, then curled his hand behind Mark's head. Sinuous fingers wound through his hair as Joe slanted his lips against Mark's. Held prisoner, Mark moaned. Heated shivers slid down his spine, even as he automatically struggled to break free.

Joe merely tightened his grip on Mark's hair, his other arm encircling Mark's waist to haul him down. Thrown off balance and weakened by Joe's kiss, Mark's knees gave out. Joe caught him easily and lowered him until their bodies were resting together. Mark squirmed against the other man, his thickening cock pressing against the hardness that had already filled Joe's sweatpants.

Gasping for air, Mark managed to free his mouth from Joe's. "Stop. You've got to stop."

"Why? Don't tell me you don't like this." Joe bucked, his hips driving his cock against Mark's. "Your body says differently." His mouth moved to Mark's throat, nuzzling the tender flesh there.

Mark grunted, sensation erupting in his groin. He moaned at the wet slide of Joe's tongue against his skin. "It's not right."

"It feels pretty damned right to me," Joe purred in Mark's ear before laving the hollow beneath it. His hand traveled down Mark's back and slid beneath the waistband of his jeans. Finding the firm swell of Mark's ass, he squeezed. "This feels even better. Sweet and plump."

Before Mark could move, Joe once again slid his other hand into Mark's hair with a firm, unrelenting hold. Controlled by the near painful grasp, Mark was forced to accept another kiss. Even as his mind protested, his body responded to the force of Joe's rough

seduction. Mark found himself not only accepting Joe's insistent tongue, but his own tongue was reacting by exploring the heated contours of Joe's mouth. Captured in a fog of sensation, Mark relaxed into Joe's embrace, his thoughts of escape suspended until the hand on his ass moved.

That large, warm, and slightly callused hand moved to span the crevice that bisected Mark's cheeks. A long, sinuous finger insinuated itself and came in contact with the virgin entrance to his body.

Quick as an oyster slamming its shell shut when disturbed, Mark's muscles contracted against that foreign touch. The growing urgency he'd felt and his body's clamoring need to give in disappeared in wash of pure panic. Mark thrashed against Joe's restraints, desperately casting about for something to free himself.

Without conscious thought, he found the words he sought. "You'll hate yourself for betraying your lover."

Joe stiffened beneath him and then withdrew his hand from Mark's jeans. Sighing in defeat, he sank back against the sofa cushions. "You're right. I would hate myself. But there's more to it than that." Joe brought both of his hands to Mark's face and gently held him in place. "I wouldn't want to see contempt for me in your eyes. I haven't known you for long, but I know that's how you'd feel if I did something so dishonorable. Lucky me, you're such a boy scout. It's a good thing you're not trying to seduce me because I probably wouldn't be able to resist." Joe gently swept his lips against Mark's, then released him. "Get up, angel, before I change my mind. I feel like I haven't come in a century, and you're just too damned tempting."

Mark rolled off him and scrambled to his feet, glaring at Joe. "*Boy scout? Angel?* And yesterday, I was *adorable*. You make me sound like some goody-two-shoes kewpie doll! I don't know why you're having such a hard time keeping your hands off me, but don't try to

blame me for any of this. It doesn't matter what I look like or what you feel when you see me. I'm not asking for 'it,' and next time you grab me, your fucking ass is out of here!"

"Mark..."

"Shut the fuck up, and watch television. I'm going to fix lunch." Without another word, he marched out of the living room and into the kitchen.

Shaking with fury and frustration, Mark rattled around in the cupboards, bringing out a frying pan and a pot for the soup. Stopping just short of slamming them on top of the stove, he went to the refrigerator for cheese, butter, and milk. Dropping the ingredients on the counter, he spread a paper towel next to them, grabbed some slices of bread from the nearby loaf, and deftly sliced cheese from the roll of longhorn Colby, his favorite kind. Heating the frying pan, he made the sandwiches and buttered one side of each before slapping them into the pan.

As he went to fetch soup from the pantry, Mark stopped for a moment to lean against the doorway and struggled to find an island of calm amidst the turmoil of his emotions. He felt infuriated, yet ineffably sad and just plain cheated. Why did the one man who'd ever stirred him so deeply have to be married? Mark's vision blurred; he angrily blinked back the welling tears.

I won't fucking cry over this. Determined not to let the situation get to him, he shoved the resentment and disappointment aside, plucked two cans of tomato soup from the shelf, and returned to the stove. He quickly made the soup, stirring it while it warmed, as well as flipping the sandwiches on the other sides to brown.

Once everything was done, he popped his head through the kitchen doorway. "Do you want anything on your sandwich? I'm putting mayo and tomato on mine."

Joe was watching the *Weather Channel*. "That sounds good." Joe's voice was carefully neutral.

"What do you want to drink? Milk, juice, water, coffee?"

“Milk. Would you mind putting some ice in it?”

Mark made an effort to lighten his tone. “Hey, that’s the way I like it, too.” Things were difficult enough; the last thing he wanted was for Joe and him to be unable to talk at all.

Joe gave Mark a tentative smile. Mark smiled back. “I’ll bring it out to you in a jiff.” Joe’s smile broadened, and he nodded without a word.

Feeling better, Mark got everything ready, then went through the living room and down the hall. He returned with two small, wooden folding tables. He set up one in front of Joe and then opened the other next to it for himself. Another trip to the kitchen, and he came back with everything balanced on the tray he’d used earlier. Setting it carefully down on his table, he passed over Joe’s dishes, then laid out his own before tossing the tray like a Frisbee onto the seat of a nearby recliner.

“Damn, you’re organized. This looks really good.”

“Dig in,” Mark ordered and lost no time settling down to his own meal.

The two of them ate in companionable silence, occasionally passing the plastic-wrapped saltines back and forth to crunch up in their soup. Chip took up a station between their tables and was rewarded by an occasional bite of toasted cheese from both men. Mark appropriated the remote and flipped channels until he found a movie he and Joe agreed on. It wasn’t long before they’d finished their meal.

“More soup or another sandwich?” Mark asked Joe.

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

“How about dessert? I’ve got chocolate-chip ice cream in the freezer.”

“I think I could handle that,” Joe replied with a grin.

Mark retrieved the tray and gathered the dishes. Dropping them off in the kitchen, he generously dished out two bowls of ice cream, grabbed a jar of peanuts, and then made his way back to Joe.

He indicated the jar as he handed over one of the bowls. "Want some? I like to put them on my ice cream." Joe let Mark shake a handful of the unsalted nuts on top of his dessert. Mark put away the tables before sitting down to enjoy his own. The rest of the day went by quickly as they let Chip out briefly, then watched movies from Mark's DVD collection.

When dinnertime rolled around, Mark made pork chops, instant garlic mashed potatoes, and corn, accompanied by homemade biscuits. Afterward, he cleaned up the kitchen while Joe watched the evening news. Outside, the storm still raged, its presence emphasizing the cozy warmth of the house. It wasn't long before he and Joe were yawning and ready for bed. Mark helped Joe up the stairs, despite Joe's insistence that he didn't need help.

"I haven't felt dizzy for the past few hours, and nausea's never been an issue."

"I know, but Doc said to keep watch for twenty-four hours, and that's what we're going to do."

"You're not planning to wake me up every hour, on the hour, are you?"

"No, Doc agreed that wasn't necessary; more like every three."

"That doesn't sound too bad. You shouldn't have to wake me more than twice. I don't usually sleep more than six or seven hours a night anyway."

"That's something you didn't forget," Mark commented with a smile.

"I guess not." Joe gave him a mischievous grin in return. "So, let's get naked."

Mark's raised brow joined the frown on his face. "Nobody's getting naked, but you can take your shirt off. The rest stays."

“Spoilsport.”

“My house, my rules.”

“Hmm, you’ll have to come stay at my house some time. I’ll bet I could come up with all kinds of interesting rules.”

“I’ll just bet you could.” Mark pointed to the right. “You take that side of the bed. It’s king-sized with lots of room. I don’t expect to wake up and find you on my side.”

“What if you end up on my side? Do I get to do whatever I want with you, then?”

“*No*. Would you just shut up and get ready for bed? I’d like to get some sleep. For some reason, rescuing idiots who fall on their heads wears me out.”

“All right, all right. No need to abuse the walking wounded. I’m just trying to inject a little levity,” Joe mumbled on his way to the bathroom.

While Joe was taking care of business, Mark quickly undressed and slid into a pair of lightweight sweats, then took his turn when Joe vacated the bathroom. His own preparations didn’t take long. As he opened the bathroom door, two things caught his notice. Joe was again in his bed and looking damned good. His hair was loose, the shining mass framing his shoulders like golden silk. The second thing he noticed was Chip, who sat waiting patiently. Glancing down, Mark reached out to pet him.

“I’m going to let Chip out one more time. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

Mark trotted downstairs with the big dog hot on his heels. Obviously knowing he was about to go outside, Chip swept ahead of Mark and beat him to the door.

“Eager, huh?” Mark questioned with an affectionate grin. Chip had been his constant companion for the past six years, and Mark was aware he was a typical doting dog owner.

Switching on the porch light, he opened the door and let Chip out. Although the snow still swirled around, Mark noted that the wind seemed to be dying down. It was still cold

enough to raise goose bumps on his skin, however. He closed the door and watched Chip through a nearby window. With weather like this, it wouldn't do to leave him outside any longer than necessary. Thankfully, instead of taking his time and nosing around, the big dog quickly finished his business.

Mark had the door open and was waiting for him when Chip hit the porch. Grabbing the old towel he kept on the hat tree near the door, Mark towed away the clinging snow from Chip's coat and examined his paws for ice crystals before setting him loose. Without wasting a second, Chip bounded upstairs. Grinning, Mark followed him.

All the lights in the bedroom were out except the lamp by the table on Mark's side, which was on its dimmest setting. Joe was already lying down, his eyes closed.

Moving quietly, Mark went to the closet and hauled out Chip's large, padded bed and placed it on the floor toward the foot of the bed. It was all the invitation Chip needed. He stepped onto the thick cushion, circled around several times, and with a satisfied doggy grunt, laid down and settled in for the night.

Yawning, Mark pushed aside the covers on his side of the bed, sat down, and set the alarm. He finally turned out the light and stretched out on the bed, pulling the blankets over himself. Rolling to his left side, he yawned again.

"Night," Joe mumbled.

"Night," Mark returned. In a few short minutes he was asleep.

It seemed only moments later when the alarm rang. Nerves jangling, Mark haphazardly slapped at it, cursing under his breath. He made sure Joe was all right -- receiving a gruff affirmative -- and reset the alarm. Joe made a trip to the bathroom. The last thing Mark remembered was the slight give of the bed when Joe rejoined him.

At the appointed time, the alarm rang again, and they were once more jerked from sleep.

“This is ridiculous. I’m fine,” Joe growled before Mark had even gotten the alarm shut off. “I wasn’t a bit dizzy when I went to the bathroom, and there’s nothing wrong with me that killing that fucking alarm clock won’t cure. I hate those sons o’ bitches.”

For some reason, Mark found Joe’s heated declaration funny. Feeling woozy and disoriented, he began to chuckle almost hysterically and collapsed back on the bed.

“What the fuck is so funny?” Joe asked plaintively.

Mark glanced over at Joe; the expression on his face and the tone of his voice made Mark laugh all the harder.

“You’re goddamn nuts,” Joe declared, starting to snicker himself. “And here I was beginning to wonder if you had a sense of humor.”

Joe’s words had Mark chortling so much that his stomach hurt and tears spilled from his eyes. Moments later they were both rolling on the bed, captured by the infectious hilarity. When sobriety finally caught up with them, they were lying face-to-face, their smiles slowly fading as they gazed into each other’s eyes.

Joe wiped an errant tear track from Mark’s cheek. “You look worn out, babe. Go to sleep. Everything’s fine.”

Mark stared sleepily at Joe, everything in him yearning to lean into Joe’s touch. There was nothing he wanted so much at that moment as to say the hell with everything.

He teetered on the edge of danger, wanting the pleasure, the pure animal gratification he knew awaited him in Joe’s arms. His body leaned infinitesimally closer to the other man, his resolve thawing, melting. Even the small twinge of unease he felt when Joe’s darkening eyes signaled his realization of Mark’s desire didn’t deter him. Mark’s lips parted; he moistened them with his tongue, knowing full well what signal he was sending. He no longer cared about all the reasons he’d held back before.

It was Joe who stopped him by tweaking his nose. “You’re exhausted, and your judgment’s impaired. You’ll be sorry after you’ve had some more rest.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Believe me, I know. And don’t ask me to explain it. I’m too damned tired. Go to sleep, Mark.” Joe decisively turned his back to Mark, tugging the blankets up to his shoulders. Mark heaved a frustrated sigh and rolled onto his side as well, away from Joe. “One more thing,” Joe said, his voice loud and precise in the early morning silence. “You ever look at me that way again, and you’re fucked. On your back with your legs wrapped around me, on your knees, or up against a wall. Doesn’t matter where -- you’ll be quite literally fucked.”

“Okay, okay, I get it! Shut up!”

Joe chuckled. “Just wanted to make it crystal clear. I thought you might need some visuals.”

“Yeah, yeah. The longer I know you, the more I think you were sent straight from hell just to torment me.”

“Well, it would make sense. Who better to torment an angel than a demon? Maybe we’re destined to play a game of temptation. I want you, you say no. You’re ready to give in, and I say no. Seems like the joke’s on both of us.”

“Some joke. And I’m not an angel.”

“Matter of opinion, babe.” Joe yawned. “Let’s debate it later.”

“Definitely later, I gotta let the dog out.”

Taking care of that chore as quickly as possible, Mark returned to bed. Without stopping to consider the fact that Joe no longer needed a watchdog, Mark climbed back into bed and in moments was fast asleep.

Lying quietly on his side of the bed, Joe heard the change in Mark’s breathing that indicated he’d dropped off. Cautiously, he turned until he faced Mark’s back. Even from behind, Joe found something about Mark appealing. It may have been the soft, vulnerable

nape of his neck that was exposed by the short style of Mark's hair, or perhaps the utter and complete trust he'd given. Not many people would allow a near-virtual stranger into their home, let alone into their bed. While it was true the circumstances were extraordinary, still, Mark's generous nature had shone through. Whatever it was about Mark that got to him, Joe knew he was nearly defenseless against it.

It had taken every ounce of self-control he possessed to refuse Mark's unspoken offer. Perhaps it was unfair, but up till then Joe had relied upon Mark's sense of propriety to keep things from going too far. This time, knowing that Mark wouldn't stop him, Joe had reluctantly held back. *I guess I'm not a total bastard.*

He had tried to concentrate on what he *did* remember, hoping those memories might inspire others. For the most part, it hadn't worked. It was only at odd moments, such as when he'd watched television, mindlessly giving the screen his full attention, that an elusive memory would slip in and take him by surprise. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, some bits found others to cling to, whereas others were isolated, seemingly waiting for the conjoining pieces to be found.

At the moment the answers to the questions he most wanted to know remained a mystery. Was he truly married? To whom? A man or woman? Joe puzzled over these again and again. His attraction to Mark would seem to indicate that he was gay or at the very least bisexual.

An idea came to mind, an experiment of sorts. Joe closed his eyes and pictured a woman, naked. She had full breasts, a small waist, curvy and rounded hips, and shapely thighs. He imagined her lying next to him, sweet lips parting for his kiss, her back arching, thighs spreading, her entire body calling for his touch.

Then, he went a step further. He touched her, caressed her soft skin, kissed her shoulder. Joe's inner vision dimmed. He sensed her moving, turning, rising to her knees. Blindly, instinctively, he moved into position, his cock hard and ready. Finding the tight

opening that awaited, he eased inside the hot tunnel. Nearly groaning at the sensation, he began his thrusts, a slow, easy rhythm which increased until it became wild, hard, pounding strokes that brought their bodies together with a resounding smack of flesh against flesh.

Another vision filled his fevered brain, merging seamlessly into the first. The hips he held were not soft and round, the waist above them not an inward curve. The back that filled his inner gaze was taut and firm, the arms strong, the straining muscles clearly delineated. A shock of tousled dark hair topped the head that pressed into the pillow, the grunts and groans of pleasure distinctly masculine.

Joe's eyes popped open with astonishment. This wasn't his imagination but a memory. He'd fucked a man -- but was fucked the right term? Clearly, they'd been having sex, but it had seemed to be more than that. Something about that scene caused Joe's breath to hitch and his heart to race. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he blinked furiously, racking his clouded mind for the truth of that vision. He knew it was important, incredibly important, but his brain refused to reveal anything more.

Frustrated beyond measure, he slipped out of bed and sequestered himself in the bathroom. Tension filled his body. He felt restless, ill at ease, and quite simply, lost. Casting about for something to soothe this confusion, his gaze landed on the tub. Stripping off his sweatpants, he stepped in and turned the water on, letting it heat before flipping the toggle for the shower.

A stream that was almost too hot cascaded over him. His growl was a mix of bliss and vexation. His wayward memory conjured up its newest offering and Joe concentrated on the image of dark wavy hair and a body that made his own rock hard with desire. The sounds of sweet, blissful moans rang out in his imagination. Taking his cock in hand, Joe stroked his demanding erection, letting the needs of body and mind collide. He groaned at the rapid buildup of sensation, his hand squeezing and sliding over and over the length of his aching shaft.

Every move reeked of desperation, not only physical, but emotional. The tears that had heretofore been held at bay slid free to mingle with the water that flowed over Joe's face. A jolt of pure carnal delight pierced Joe's gut, his climax exploding forth in a torrent of creamy seed. Knees going weak, he braced himself against the shower wall, eyes closed while relief and despair fought for dominance.

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck," he whispered. "Who are you? Why can't I remember? I need to remember you."

Fists clenched and panting hard, he waited until his emotions righted themselves and the frustration dimmed to a bearable level. Huffing out a deep breath, he straightened and pushed away from the wall. Knowing there was nothing he could do for now but wait for his scrambled memory to fix itself in its own time, he finished his shower. He let his thoughts drift as he dried himself and dressed, and consciously shied away from anything too serious or intense.

About to leave the bathroom, a movement caught his eye. Coming face-to-face with the mirror over the sink, he stared at himself. The face that looked back at him was tired, the eyes solemn and sad. In the back of his mind, he heard laughter. "We used to laugh," he complained softly to the ethereal presence that haunted him.

Gaze dropping from his reflection, he looked down, waiting with unseeing eyes, trying to focus on that elusive lover. When nothing else was forthcoming, he turned away and quietly rejoined Mark in bed, welcoming the troubled sleep that claimed him.

Chapter Three

Mark woke slowly, and with a few blinks of eyelids heavy with sleep, managed to focus on the bedside clock. It was a little after one. Yawning, he rolled to his back and stretched. Soft snores sounded from the other side of the bed; he glanced over to see Joe facing him, sound asleep, his lips parted.

A tiny smile curved Mark's lips, but disappeared when the thought crossed his mind of what it would be like to wake up every day to such a sight.

Pushing away the weight of sadness that formed in his chest, Mark eased out of bed. Chip deserted his cushion at the same time. Not wanting to disturb Joe, Mark wasted no time in herding his overly enthusiastic pet downstairs. Opening the front door, he laughed when the big dog threw himself off the porch and into a snowdrift. Never one to stand on his dignity, Chip shuffled out of the fluffy pile, shook himself, and made for the trees.

Knowing Chip would be a while, Mark retreated upstairs to take care of his own needs and to shower. After cleaning up, he came out of the bathroom to find the bed empty and Joe gone. However, the smell of coffee wafting up the stairs clearly broadcast the other man's whereabouts.

Mark crossed to the closet, grabbed a tee shirt to go with his jeans, donning it as he descended the stairs. He opened the front door, but there was no sign of Chip.

Just as he'd pursed his lips to whistle, Joe's voice sounded. "I let him in."

Pleased, Mark shut the door and sauntered into the kitchen. Joe was camped out at the table, thumbs resting against his temples and forehead cradled in his hands. The carpenter's face hovered over the cup of hot coffee before him.

Taken aback by Joe's posture, Mark poured himself a cup and settled in a chair at the table. Before he could say anything, Joe spoke up.

"If you ask me whether I'm all right, I'm going to deck you. I just like the feel of the steam on my face."

Stifling his smile, Mark sipped his beverage before setting it down. "You're one of those people who are grouchy in the morning, aren't you?"

Joe stayed as he was when he replied. "It's not morning, but, yeah, if the fact that I don't like to chitchat like some airhead as soon as I get out of bed makes me a grouch, so be it. Is it a crime that I don't want anyone talking to me for at least an hour after I get up?"

"Maybe a shower would help."

Joe glanced up. "It didn't."

Mark's eyebrow rose in question, but he said nothing.

"After you dropped off. I was tired, but I couldn't sleep, so I showered. I thought it might help me relax." Joe brought his hand down and drummed his fingers on the table. "I remembered something."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but that's not important right now. What is important is my stomach. Are we going to have breakfast or go straight on to lunch? I'm hoping for lunch. I could seriously use some red meat. Please tell me you're not a vegetarian."

"I'm an out and proud carnivore," Mark admitted with a grin. He went to the refrigerator and checked the freezer. "Let's see. I've got ground beef, so I could make one of those skillet box dinners or maybe spaghetti and meatballs. There's also a couple of roasts, some pork chops, or..." He turned to smile at Joe, flushing when he saw Joe's gaze fastened to his backside. "...Porterhouse steaks."

Mark swung back to the freezer, grateful for the cold air on his face. "What kind of vegetables do you like? There's frozen peas and broccoli in here. I've also got canned extra sweet corn or fresh potatoes and carrots. There's even some packaged salad mix in the crisper." Leaning back to hear Joe's reply, Mark was surprised when his back hit Joe's chest with a mild thump.

"Careful," Joe cautioned lightly, reaching out to steady him.

"Sorry. I didn't see you there."

Joe moved closer. One hand landed on Mark's shoulder, the other reached past him, the movement bringing his lips close. "Which of these are the steaks?" Joe asked, his fingers tapping the white, butcher paper-wrapped bundles.

The man's breath, warm and moist against the nape of his neck, made Mark shiver. Breathlessly, he directed Joe to the proper packages.

"Nice," Joe replied. Lifting his other hand from Mark's shoulder, he extended his other arm and gathered the packages.

"Yeah, they should be good." Mark murmured distractedly.

"I'm not talking about the steaks. I'm talking about you. You smell good. I like that shampoo you use."

"Oh, um, a friend of mine gave it to me. It's birch and mint."

"Smells good enough to eat." Joe nuzzled Mark's damp hair as well as the back of his neck.

Mark closed his eyes, loving the feel of Joe's lips against his skin as they placed several lingering kisses here and there, following some meandering path. Mark relaxed, accepting Joe's touch until a sharp nip just above the collar of his shirt made him gasp.

Before he could protest, Joe pivoted and sauntered over to the microwave. "We need to defrost these, right?"

Recovering his composure, Mark closed the freezer door. "Yeah." He cautiously approached the carpenter, but Joe seemed intent on the microwave and was placing the frozen steaks inside.

"What do I push?" Joe followed Mark's directions and got the microwave started. "About those vegetables. If you have the right seasonings and potatoes, I know how to make really good steak fries that you bake in the oven. The corn sounds good, too."

Mark agreed, and without further incident, the two of them prepared their meal. Soon, the steaks were in the broiler with salt, pepper, and garlic powder seasoning, while the potatoes baked and the corn heated on the stove. A timer ticked merrily in the background. Mark opened a package of brown and serve rolls, laid them out on a baking sheet, and popped them in the oven.

Everything came together nicely. Mark and Joe served themselves at the stove when the timer went off, settling at the kitchen table to eat.

"Mmm. Damn, this steak is fantastic," Joe praised after his first bite.

"They'd be even better on the grill."

"Oh, yeah; we'll have to try that when summer rolls around again."

"Will we?"

Joe met Mark's eyes. "If or until I find out there's some reason we shouldn't, then, yes, we will. Unless you don't want to."

"I have no objections," Mark answered. Joe's decisive answer, no matter how unrealistic, made him feel good. He attacked his food with a will, enjoying every delicious morsel.

After lunch, they ended up in Mark's office. Joe immediately went to the drafting table, examining the blueprints Mark had been working on for a house. The rough draft was accompanied by a list of notes detailing the rooms, their function, and their placement.

"Are you designing this for a client?" Joe asked, turning and catching Mark ogling him from the doorway.

Mark had been admiring the man's broad muscular shoulders, the long, lean line of his back, and the firm outline of his ass that was showcased by the light fabric of the sweats stretching across it when Joe bent over the table.

Determinedly ignoring his embarrassment, he joined Joe. "Actually, these are for me. I live in a condo that's close to work, but I miss having a big yard, especially for Chip, and some space to move around in. I was thinking of looking for a one- to three-acre plot to build on. Someplace that's not too far from the office, so I won't have a terribly long commute."

"You should move out to Dothan by me. There's plenty of undeveloped ground that's been zoned for residential occupation. It only takes me half an hour or so each way to get to the studio for my show."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "That's a possibility. I'll keep it in mind." He pointed to the plans. "So what do you think of this?"

They began to discuss various aspects of the blueprints, the design and structural details. Then they moved on to construction practices and the commonalities their jobs shared. Mark was impressed by Joe's knowledge and wondered if these were things not affected by his memory loss or topics that he remembered as they talked. Wanting to help, he encouraged and carefully guided the conversation to subjects that Joe, given his occupation, would be familiar with.

Their exchange turned to books when Joe noticed the volumes filling Mark's shelves. They discovered a mutual love of mysteries and military thrillers, as well as several authors whose work they particularly enjoyed, making a list of the other's recommendations. At one point, when Joe recalled a particularly elusive author's name, he paused.

"Don't you think it's weird I can remember something like this, but some of the really important things elude me?" He fidgeted for a moment before capturing Mark's gaze. "Do you suppose there's something I don't want to remember, that I'm deliberately repressing it?"

"I guess that's possible," Mark conceded, noting the sudden tension in Joe's demeanor. "You said earlier that you had another memory. Is that what makes you believe you might be trying to block out something?"

Joe remained silent for a moment, frowning. "Maybe," he replied curtly.

Mark's interest instantly sharpened, but Joe's response clearly indicated his reluctance to elaborate -- which made his next words all the more surprising.

"I remembered having sex with someone." He stopped, shook his head, then continued speaking. "No, no; that's wrong. I was making love with someone. I know that now. It was... I was making love with a man. He had dark hair, wavy. I could almost feel it against my fingers, though I wasn't touching it. His body was so...familiar. Like I'd touched him a thousand times. But I couldn't see his face. Jesus, why can't I remember?!"

Seeing the near anguish in Joe's expression caused Mark's heart to wrench. "Joe, that memory..."

Standing abruptly, Joe avoided Mark's gaze, "No. Don't. Look, I'm sorry. I can't talk about it anymore. I need to think." He left the room.

Mark was left with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. *He does have someone in his life. A man.* The thought was bittersweet. Had Joe not been attached, the attraction between them could have been allowed free rein. *How ironic.* Mark was sure Joe would

eventually remember everything and everyone in his life. It was just a matter of time, which was what he'd intended to say when Joe had interrupted him.

Knowing the best thing he could do at the moment was to leave the man alone, Mark decided to tackle the laundry. After starting a load that included the clothes he'd stripped from Joe when he'd first arrived, Mark returned to his office and picked a book from among his favorites. Then he retreated to the living room and settled in front of the fireplace.

Joe stayed holed up in Mark's bedroom for a couple of hours, then rejoined Mark downstairs. Nothing further was said about memories, and he seemed back to his usual gregarious self. Together they prepared a light dinner, and afterward, they spent the rest of the evening in front of the television.

Passing the hours with Joe's presence at his side had been pleasant. Mark liked the warm, companionable feelings he experienced, liked being able to spend quiet time with someone he cared for, but now, without warning, his libido began to rev up.

A fine tension tightened his muscles while a familiar ache started in his groin. Closing his eyes, he could almost feel the rising temperature of his blood as it rushed faster through his veins. As he inhaled deeply, Joe's subtle scent rushed in, a combination of woodsy musk and shampoo that tickled his palate and literally made his mouth water.

He abruptly realized that he'd been breathing in that same taunting, tempting aroma the entire evening, and that this seemingly sudden arousal had, in fact, been slowly building for the past few hours. It was only now when there was nothing to distract him that his body insisted he sit up and take notice.

"Hey, you awake?"

Mark opened his eyes. He saw Joe's eyes darken, his nostrils flare, and then a blurred bulk rushed toward him and squashed him flat to the sofa. The next thing Mark knew, Joe's weight had settled atop him. His mouth, opening on a grunt when the air was knocked out of

his lungs, was filled with a sinuous, exploring tongue. Stunned, Mark groaned, pulled air in through his nostrils, and accepted the scorching contact.

Joe's kiss made him dizzy. His thoughts, what thoughts he could muster, were a blur of contradictions. *Stop, don't stop, stop, never stop.* Desire climbed swift and sure as Joe rocked against him. Mark was distantly aware when Joe's hand slid between his body and the sofa to cup his ass, pulling them tighter together. Mark spread his thighs wider, one leg wrapping around Joe's. His hips began to move in concert with Joe's thrusts. The thick bulk of Joe's cock ground against his own; even separated by their clothes, Mark felt the obvious, hard bulge. He worked to find the friction he needed to come.

Joe released his mouth, laving and biting at Mark's throat. "That's it, baby," he murmured, his lips moving to hover over Mark's ear. "You are so fucking hot."

When Joe's tongue slipped into the shell, Mark bucked under him, a guttural groan torn from his throat. A fresh wave of vertigo hit, and he clung to Joe, straining for the orgasm that hovered just out of reach. Frustrated, he wailed, "I can't!"

Joe drew back. "Christ!" His eyes were filled with a determined fire. "Don't try to tell me you don't want this. I won't believe you." Joe's mouth descended once more, taking Mark's with bruising force.

The shock of Joe's declaration cooled Mark's ardor, giving him room to think clearly. Joe had completely misunderstood him, but now that his mind had leave to function, all the previous reasons for not being intimate with the other man rushed in with startling clarity.

Mark started to struggle, but it was too late. As quick as his thoughts had been, Joe's actions were quicker. The man had popped the button on Mark's jeans. In a flash, the zipper parted, and Joe's hand slipped inside, wrapping sure fingers around Mark's cock. A bolt of pure sensation bowed his spine. "Oh, fuck!"

"That's it, baby," Joe crooned. "See? So good. Don't fight it. You're so hard, so ready. Give it up, come for me." Joe's mouth was at Mark's ear again, his tongue licking and teasing, while he pumped Mark's cock with firm strokes.

Mark was undone. He'd already been so close to coming that there was no fighting Joe's bold caresses. The previously elusive orgasm struck with stunning effect. It twisted his insides with the most exquisite pleasure he'd ever felt. Eyes tightly shut, he cried out with the force of his climax, a wrenching pulse of bliss attending each spurt of semen that jetted free until his balls were emptied. Drained by his release, Mark sank into the sofa cushions. Muscles totally lax, his thoughts completely scrambled, he lay there, listening to the sound of his own harsh panting.

Several minutes passed before either of them moved. Joe withdrew his hand from Mark's pants, wiping it on his own shirt. "You soaked my hand." Joe commented. "And I can't believe I creamed my jeans. That hasn't happened in years."

Mark's eyes flashed open to find Joe gazing calmly at him, a teasing smile on his face. Without thinking he reached up and shoved. With a grunt, Joe rolled off him and landed on the floor. "You *bastard!* I don't fucking believe you! How could you do that? You've got someone waiting for you at home, you lousy, low-life, son of a bitch! You just do whatever the fuck you want, don't you?"

Joe rose to his feet and glowered at Mark. "Wait just one damn minute," he said, obviously trying to stem the raging flow of Mark's rant. Mark ignored him and continued to heap abuse on the man until Joe got right in his face and yelled. "Shut up!"

Mark stumbled in the middle his runaway tirade. Joe nodded with satisfaction. "Finally. Now, you're going to listen to me for a change. I'm tired of being made the bad guy here." Mark opened his mouth to protest, but Joe held up his hand, pinning Mark with a no-nonsense glare. "Ahttt! I don't want to hear it. You've had your say; it's my turn. Did it ever occur to you that I'm reacting just the way you want me to?"

“What?!” Mark scoffed.

“They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. What’s in your soul, Mark? Are you even aware of it? ’Cause what I’ve been seeing is an invitation. And, no, I’m not trying to justify anything by saying you’re asking for it. This is the complete and honest truth here. I’m telling you I want you, and I think you feel the same way. Everything I do is based on the vibes I get from you. Don’t you think it’s time you own up to your desires and stopped acting like an unassailable Victorian maiden? You want me. Admit it.”

Totally taken aback, Mark’s first reaction was to deny everything, but in the face of Joe’s all-too-accurate assessment, he found himself unable to. Grimacing, he exhaled sharply and confessed. “You’re right. I do want you. You’re...”

“Hot?”

Mark glared at Joe’s matter-of-fact grin. “I was going to say you’re one of the most attractive guys I’ve ever seen but, yeah, hot works. More importantly, I’ve never felt this way about anyone, but even though I’m admitting it, there’s still a wall between us. That’s why I get angry. That’s why I don’t want to give in. I want you so damn bad it hurts.”

“Then have me. Maybe this spouse or partner of mine and I have an open relationship. Maybe that’s why I can’t stay away from you.” Joe swept a hand over his hair in agitation. “This doesn’t feel wrong.”

This time, Mark made the initial move. He launched himself into Joe’s arms and kissed him as though the world was ending. Joe wholeheartedly returned the favor, reluctantly letting Mark go when he pulled away.

“Maybe there’s some truth to what you say,” Mark said softly. “Maybe it does feel right to you for the reasons you stated, but it doesn’t feel right to me. I don’t want to be a third wheel or a boy toy or a piece of ass on the side.” He backed out of reach of Joe’s extended hand, swallowing against the tightening of his throat. He continued with quiet dignity. “If

that makes me a Victorian maiden, then so be it. Good night.” Mark gave Joe a wide berth, then walked away.

“Mark, wait. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to belittle you or your importance to me. Believe me, that so was *not* my intent.”

Mark paused at the foot of the stairs. “I know.” He licked his dry lips. “Um, listen. You can sleep in the guest room. It’s the first door on the left.” He signaled Chip to follow and climbed the steps.

It was a couple of hours before Joe came up. Mark had been unable to sleep and heard the guest room door close; there was a finality to the sound that brought tears to his eyes. Wiping them away, Mark turned on his side, and loosing a shuddery sigh, stared into the darkness that filled his room.

The next day was torturous. He and Joe seemed determined to act as though nothing had happened. They were by turns overly gregarious and just as suddenly silent. Being trapped together in the cabin did nothing to help the situation, even though the weather had improved: it was no longer snowing, and the wind was dying down. Mark thought the snowplows would start running soon, if they hadn’t already, and shared this with Joe.

Mark retreated to his office for a time, adding to his blueprints with desultory strokes of his pencil; Joe stayed in the living room with his nose buried in a book. Late in the afternoon, desperate to escape outside, Mark donned his coat and boots, pulled on a knit cap, and grabbed his gloves. With the excuse that he was going to check on the generator and some other things in the garage, Mark wound up spending the better part of two hours killing time with unnecessary tinkering. He even swept the floor and denuded the ceiling of cobwebs with an old broom.

He finally returned to the cabin, dusty and dirty, but more at peace.

Joe had started dinner. He'd removed the ground beef from the freezer and was in the midst of preparing spaghetti and meatballs. At Mark's entrance he gave him the once-over and grinned. "Looks like you could use a shower." Joe seemed relaxed, and Mark was relieved at the decreased tension between them.

"Yeah, I can." Mark's hand went to his rumbling stomach. "*Man*, that smells good."

"Go get cleaned up. It'll be done by the time you get back. I just put the garlic bread in the oven."

Mark groaned. "Oh, yeah." The warm sound of Joe's chuckle trailed him as he left the kitchen.

With Mark out of the kitchen, Joe sobered and turned back to the stove. He wasn't nearly as at ease as he had pretended to be. He'd spent the entire day trying to ignore the sense of impending doom that hung over his head. His memories were returning; bits and pieces were coming together, more of the details that made up his life were joining to form a familiar picture. He knew with growing certainty that those last few pivotal details were hovering, waiting for a chance to slip in. Much as it pained him to admit it, he was scared.

Dread filled his heart while he struggled to maintain a calm façade. Thinking about Mark helped in a twisted sort of way. Even though the situation between them was strained, Mark's presence soothed him somehow.

Joe had made up his mind to leave Mark alone. No matter how hard it was, he was determined not to touch him again. Mark's words the night before had left him feeling shamed. No matter what Joe wanted, he had no right to ignore Mark's feelings or to take advantage of his vulnerability.

Those thoughts had made him realize what it was about Mark that attracted him so fiercely. It wasn't just the boyishly cute face and that tight little body; there was an elusive quality to Mark, something Joe had been hard-pressed to find a name for until now. Seeing

Mark red cheeked from the cold, his hair dusty and tousled, Joe had been reminded of an overgrown boy. And just like that, he knew. Innocence. For all that Mark was a man with a job, a home, and responsibilities, he still exuded a tender innocence that at once made Joe want to conquer and yet protect the other man.

It was the strangest sensation Joe thought he'd ever felt. It was like being pulled in two directions concurrently, both tempting, both with their own set of pros and cons, and both with possible rewards that stirred an ache in Joe's heart, not to mention his groin. He sighed. Much as he hated the idea, it didn't matter how he felt about Mark. This looming memory was going to change everything. He just knew it.

Pulling himself from gloomy reflections, he grabbed a couple of pot holders and pulled the foil-wrapped loaf of garlic bread out of the oven. Mark chose that moment to reappear.

Joe groaned inwardly when he smelled the young architect. Something about the birch-mint shampoo in combination with Mark's own natural scent wound Joe's spring. Glancing over, he noted the gleam of Mark's still-damp, golden brown hair. His hands twitched. At that moment, Joe wanted nothing more than to tangle his fingers in the thick mass of freshly washed hair and hold Mark still while he ravished his mouth.

He settled for plunking a slice of bread onto his plate. "I thought we could just fill up from the pans on the stove. Save on dishes."

"Suits me," Mark replied.

Struggling to keep his baser instincts in check, Joe seated himself opposite Mark and lifted his fork. Before taking that first mouthful, he ventured a tentative, "So..."

Mark looked up from his food. "What?"

"Tell me about your parents."

"My parents?"

"Sure. Unless you don't want to talk about them."

“Um, no, I don’t mind.”

Joe swallowed a bite of spaghetti and waited expectantly.

“Well, my father works for a banking consortium as a big-time wheeler and dealer. I don’t understand half of what he does, but I know some of it has to do with mergers and acquisitions. Whatever it involves, there’s a lot of overseas travel. He’s always provided for me, but he’s never been around much. My mother chairs the Helping Hands Coalition. Have you heard of it? It’s a huge charitable organization. They help provide daycare for working mothers and in-home medical assistance for the elderly, that kind of thing.”

Foregoing comment, Joe nodded around his mouthful of food.

“She got involved with them when I was about five. I think she missed my father and was looking for some kind of fulfillment; I don’t think motherhood did it for her. Not that she didn’t love me. I know she did, but she needed more.”

“Sounds like you’re making excuses for them.”

“Maybe. It’s just that I can’t fault them for not wanting to give up their lives for me, especially my dad.”

“Damn, Mark. That’s awfully generous of you, but I gotta tell you I think that’s bullshit. When people have children, they should be prepared to put the kids’ needs and welfare before everything else. Parenthood means making some sacrifices, not only the financial kind, but their time, too. I realize that parents need to work, but they should be there for their kids.”

“I suppose in an ideal world, that’s the way it should be, but you know as well as I do that in many cases that doesn’t happen. At least my parents were responsible enough to place me into my grandparents’ care. Maybe that’s why I don’t resent them. My grandparents raised me like I was their child.”

“Good people, your grandparents?”

“The best.”

"I'm glad they were there for you." He paused a beat. "So, when did you realize you were gay?"

Mark nearly choked on the bite of spaghetti he'd just swallowed. "Jeez, you're not shy about asking personal questions, are you?"

"Did I strike you as the shy type last night?"

A red flush spread over Mark's cheeks. "Uh, no, you didn't," he admitted a bit sarcastically. "To answer your *other* question, I was fourteen and got a hard-on watching Tommy Wheems play football."

"Tommy Wheems?" Joe asked with a delighted grin.

"Yeah. He was eighteen, a senior, and the star of the football team. Our school was hosting a game, playing one of our biggest rivals. Tommy was with the rest of the team around the players' bench. He got up to get a drink, and when he returned, he, uh, well...he, you know, adjusted the family jewels."

"That's all it took to get you wound?" Joe snorted and chuckled. "Lightweight."

"Yeah, go ahead and make fun, but, damn, I had to slink out of there with my hat over my crotch."

Joe threw his head back and laughed, Mark joining in. "What did you do?"

"They had the school open so the bathrooms were accessible. I went to the one least likely to be used by someone coming in from the bleachers and jacked off in one of the stalls."

"Bold move. I wouldn't have guessed you'd had it in you. I would've figured you'd wait until you got home."

"Are you kidding? I was fourteen. A stiff breeze would have made me shoot. Besides, I couldn't go home with a woody tenting my jeans." They shared another laugh but eventually sobered. Mark's expression turned contemplative. "It's funny now, but at the time it was

pretty devastating. I was scared to death. You know how teenage boys are. I'd heard the words 'fag' and 'queer' applied to some guys. Of course, when I first heard them, I didn't know what they meant, only that they sounded like a bad thing to be." Mark sighed and took a sip from his glass of water. He gave Joe a rueful smile. "Needless to say, I wasn't too happy when I looked up their definitions on the Internet and found out what they meant. Especially when I realized that while the other guys my age were perving over getting their hands on the girls' boobs, I was getting hard-ons wondering what it would feel like to have Tommy Wheems touch me."

"How did you deal with it?"

"I didn't. My grandfather did. He's not shy about confronting a problem. He found me crying about it one day and put two and two together. He'd apparently caught me glancing at the hunky electrician he'd hired to do some work here at the cabin. Grandpa told me how he'd found out his own brother was gay."

"Jeez, are you serious?"

Mark nodded and elaborated, telling the story of how his grandfather had helped him that day. Stopping to savor a meatball, he chewed and swallowed. "So, you see, I lucked out again. Not only was I fortunate enough to be raised by my grandparents, but they were sympathetic as well; they could just as easily have been small-minded bigots instead."

"That's true, but your grandfather let love point him in the right direction. He didn't want to hate his brother. I admire his courage. A lot of people find it simpler to give in to hate than to work toward understanding anything that's different from the way they lead their own lives. What about your parents? Do they know you're gay?"

"Honestly? I don't know. We never spend much time together. Usually holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and then we mostly talk about work. My mother occasionally asks if I've met any nice girls, but she's not too invasive with the questions. Frankly, they didn't really care that much about their own child, so I don't think me not producing

grandchildren is going to be much of an issue. That'd be the only reason I can see that would make them care if I was gay or straight."

Joe studied him closely. "It bothers you more than you admit."

"What?"

"The fact that your parents practically abandoned you."

"Well, yeah, but it's stupid. It's not like I didn't grow up loved or in a loving home."

"I know. But I can understand why it would bother you. We expect our parents to love us. I think it's a biological imperative." Wanting to wipe the melancholy from Mark's expression, Joe changed the subject. "Speaking of love, or rather sex, what else did you discover?"

Mark ducked his head. His sudden interest in his plate had Joe intrigued. "Let's just say I found some sites on the Internet that answered my questions about gay sex. Grandpa wasn't real happy when he found a subscription charge on his credit card for membership to a gay porn site."

Joe couldn't help the shout of laughter that burst forth. The thought of a shy, fourteen-year-old Mark doing something so naughty was nearly unbelievable and definitely amusing. Mark raised his head. His eyes were glowing with apparent pride. Joe could definitely relate. Sometimes, no matter who else might think it was wrong, certain juvenile, yet daring male exploits, were cause for celebration, not regret. Mark was definitely a typical guy in that respect.

Having gotten that surprising information out of Mark, Joe decided to push his luck and ask another question that had him curious as hell. "So, any serious relationships in your life aside from that crush on Tommy Wheems?"

Mark flushed and shook his head. He rose from the table to grab another slice of garlic bread, then sat and busied himself with his food. Joe restrained himself from probing any deeper. This was a topic Mark was obviously uncomfortable with.

Resigned to switching gears, Joe asked him about his work. It was the right call. Mark relaxed and they spent the rest of the meal talking about how he'd developed his interest in and became an architect.

"It's creative, like geometry on a grand scale," Mark enthused. "I loved math in school, especially that subject. Designing buildings is like taking a bunch of unrelated points, planes, angles, and curves and fitting them together into an aesthetically pleasing, harmonic whole. It's amazing, the things you can do."

"Our work, yours and mine, is very similar," Joe commented. "Although, as you said, yours is on a grander scale."

"Oh, yeah, but I can't do what you do. Actually building things, making furniture, all the precise cuts to the wood and the intricacies of fitting it all together. That takes a special talent. I put it all down on paper, but I don't create it with my own hands."

"Hey, don't belittle what you do. Without your plans, those that build would have a hell of a time keeping things straight. All our buildings and houses would be lopsided."

"I guess we'd make a good team, then," Mark ventured shyly.

Joe grinned at him, touched by Mark's comment. "I guess we would at that."

Their mutual tensions laid to rest, at least for the moment, he and Mark finished their meal and passed several hours in relative peace. When it was time for bed, they climbed the stairs together.

"During dinner, I asked all the questions," Joe said. "Was there anything you wanted to ask me?" They paused at the doorway of Mark's bedroom. Joe could see something was on Mark's mind, but he seemed to be having difficulty voicing it. "What?"

"Why do you wear your hair that way?"

Joe's eyes widened, and then he grinned. "What? You don't like it?"

"It's not that. I think it's...well...I just wondered, is all."

Loving the faint flush that spread over Mark's cheeks, Joe couldn't help but tease him.
"You think it's sexy, right?"

"Maybe. Is that why you wear it that way?"

"Nah. I look at it as a remnant of my rebellious youth. A leftover of the seventies' ambiance."

"Seventies?" Mark scoffed. "Yeah, right. You probably weren't even born yet."

"I was born in 1976. I'm thirty-one, kid."

"I'm hardly a kid. I'm twenty-four."

"Just as I thought, a mere stripling lad," Joe gently mocked.

"Fuck you."

"And a foul-mouthed one at that. I'll tell you what. Just to make it up to you, you can touch my hair if you like."

Mark glared.

Joe chuckled. "I'm sorry. I can't help teasing. You're just so..."

"If you say 'adorable,' I'm going to kick your ass."

"Actually, I was going to say cute. Will that get my ass kicked?"

"You're this close." Mark held his thumb and forefinger up, pad to pad, showing very little space between them.

"Then I'd better quit while I'm ahead." Joe leaned in and placed a chaste kiss on Mark's cheek.

Mark drew in a sharp breath. Joe saw wide-eyed uncertainty and conflicting emotions chase themselves across the younger man's face. Unable to resist, he softly brushed his mouth against Mark's slightly parted lips. An almost imperceptible whimper answered the pressure of his kiss. Shaken by that tiny sound, Joe withdrew.

Mark's eyes were closed, his expression a mix of pleasure, wonder, and concern. Joe knew he had to end this before things got out of hand. They'd just passed a pleasant evening; he didn't want Mark angry with him again.

He squeezed Mark's shoulder, causing him to open his eyes. "I didn't mean to do that, but I'm glad I did. Go to bed, kid."

"I'm not a kid," came Mark's automatic protest.

"Yeah, I know. I wouldn't be having a problem keeping my hands off you if you were. Goodnight, Mark."

Joe pivoted and walked down the hall to shut himself in the guest room. Leaning back against the door, he sighed with regret. The gloom that had haunted him earlier settled in again, resting like an unwelcome mantle on his shoulders. Nudged along by the force of habit, he went through the motions of getting ready for bed and was yawning by the time he pulled the covers over himself.

His thoughts turned to Mark. The feeling of imminent doom lessened. He smiled and allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

Waking at dawn, Joe's smile was long gone. His eyes snapped opened, the rush of his returning memories making him feel as though his heart was about to be crushed. He sat up in bed and struggled to breathe.

"God in heaven. *Drew*. How could I have forgotten?"

Chapter Four

Mark's eyelids twitched. A muffled *thunk* sounded from somewhere downstairs, then another. As consciousness returned, he slowly became aware of the fact that the noise was fairly regular. Puzzled, he sat up with a yawn. Chip's bed was empty, the big dog nowhere in sight. Yawning again, he blinked his eyes repeatedly, clearing his vision. Another *thunk* reached him as he left the bed and dressed.

Once out in the hall, he noted the door to the guest room was open. He went downstairs, where there was no sign of either Joe or Chip in the living room or kitchen. The sound of another *thunk* drew his attention to the mudroom and the back door, which he could see was unlocked. He opened it and looked outside in time to see Joe tossing a large piece of split log onto the stacked pile of firewood outside the back door. It hit with a solid *thunk*.

Joe had apparently found the clothes Mark had washed since he had donned his jeans and wore his own coat, in addition to his hat, gloves, and boots.

"What are you doing?" Mark asked, raising his voice to cover the distance between them.

Joe swung around, apparently having failed to notice his presence. “Oh. You’re up. Take Chip in, he’s been out at least a half hour.”

“All right, but what are you doing?”

“What the fuck does it look like I’m doing? I’m stacking firewood. You’ve got that pile over there. It looks like somebody just dumped it from the back of a truck, so I’m stacking it. Any objections?”

Taken aback by Joe’s almost vicious growl, Mark shook his head. “No, but you really don’t have to do that.”

“I want to do it. I *need* to do it. Go back inside, Mark.”

“What’s wrong?”

Joe let his head fall, his posture clearly announcing his displeasure. Straightening, he pinned Mark with gaze that held no warmth whatsoever. “I’ve remembered everything.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“But...”

“*Mark*. I need you to back off.” Joe’s hands were clearly clenched inside his gloves. “Just leave me alone for a while.”

“All right,” Mark answered softly. He called Chip, and once he and the dog were in, shut the door behind them. Realizing that standing around worrying wasn’t going to help anything, he took a quick shower, then brewed a fresh pot of coffee and fixed himself toast and eggs. For the next hour, he heard the steady *thunk, thunk, thunk* of the logs Joe threw on to the stacked pile of firewood. When it became quiet at last, he peered out the kitchen window and spotted Joe in the driveway.

The man had apparently found the snow shovel in the garage and was digging out Mark’s SUV. He’d also begun clearing a path from the house to the road. Noting the ferocity

with which Joe was attacking the snow, Mark mumbled, "I hope you don't have a fucking heart attack."

Chip nudged his hand, and he turned from the window to pet his dog, fingertips tracing the tan spots in Chip's coat. "It must be bad, his memories," Mark whispered. His own heart clenching in sympathy, Mark washed up the few dishes he'd used and withdrew to his office to wait.

The thudding reverberation of the back door being closed alerted him to Joe's return. Cautiously, he made his way to the kitchen. Joe was still in the mudroom, peeling off his outer layers. Waiting in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, Mark rocked on the balls of his feet, ready to retreat if necessary. When Joe made his entrance, Mark winced in sympathy. The man appeared to be exhausted.

Joe's gaze met Mark's; his eyes bore a look of haunting distress. With only a slight hesitation, he walked in, pulled out a kitchen chair, and sat with a groan. "I haven't shoveled that much snow in...well, I've never shoveled that much snow. Is that coffee fresh?"

"No, I'll make a new pot." Mark hurriedly got the coffee brewing, then served Joe, as well as pouring another for himself. Just about to seat himself opposite Joe, he paused.

Joe noticed. He wiggled his fingers. "Sit. I promise I won't bite your head off." As Mark lowered himself to the chair, Joe immediately began to apologize. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier."

"I take it you've had something of a shock."

Joe managed a mirthless laugh. "You could say that." He picked up his cup and sipped, then set it back on the table, toying with the handle and keeping his gaze fastened there. "My lover is...he's..."

Mark watched Joe struggle with the words; his throat closed in sympathy.

"Andrew Robert Dempsey. Drew. We were together nine years. We met in college, fell in love, graduated, and moved in together. He was a hemophiliac but stable. Drew became a

lawyer. Three years ago he, um, he was in a car accident. At first, he seemed okay, aside from a gash on the knee that needed stitches and a bump on the head. Later that night, his nose started bleeding. We tried to stop it, but there was so much blood, so fast.” Unconsciously, Joe started rocking in his chair. “I called 9-1-1. By the time they got there, he was unconscious. He never made it to the hospital.” Slow tears tracked themselves one after another down Joe’s cheeks. He rose from his chair and went to the sink, stopping to stare out the kitchen window.

“Jesus.” Mark moved behind Joe; he was finding it hard to repress his own tears. Tentatively, he reached out and squeezed Joe’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Joe nodded and turned on the tap. Splashing water on his face, he grabbed a couple of paper towels to dry off. He blew his nose and tossed the crumbled, soggy mess into the trash basket under the sink, he faced Mark with a wan smile. “Sorry. It was just such a shock, the memory of that day hitting me out of the blue. It was like reliving it all over again, even though it happened a few years ago.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine how you must have felt.”

“I hope you never find out,” Joe fervently replied. “Sad as they are, at least I have my memories back. I remembered why I came out here.”

“You know you don’t have to tell me. You don’t owe me any explanations.”

“I know. I’d just...I’d like to talk, if that’s okay with you.”

Mark smiled. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

“What’s that smile for?”

“You’re breaking the man rules.”

“Man rules?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe you forgot the cardinal rule. Men don’t talk about personal stuff. We’re supposed to hold it all inside and suffer in manly man silence.”

“Bullshit. Besides, I never was one for following those kinds of rules.”

“Suits me. Come on, take a seat. Drink your coffee.”

They settled at the table again. After gulping some more coffee, Joe released his cup in favor of twisting the ring on his finger. Slowly, he wiggled the band free and held it between his thumb and forefinger, staring at it. Then, he slid it up to the second joint on his right index finger, curling his fingers inward and using his thumb to rub over the gleaming gold with slow strokes.

“Drew and I used to camp at the spot where you found me. I asked him to marry me there.” Joe smiled faintly as he recalled the memory. “No matter how busy we were, once a year on that day, we’d be at that site again.”

“You’re a romantic. So was your lover.”

Joe shrugged. “I guess. When you have something special, you celebrate it, you know?” Fidgeting, Joe gently pounded his fist on the table, then brought it to his mouth, briefly touching the ring to his lips. Dropping his hand again, he sighed. “I came here to say good-bye. It probably sounds corny, but I was going to bury our rings together out there. I’d finally decided my family and friends were right, that it was time to stop mourning and get on with my life. Doing so was going to be the last thing I did before I left. Imagine my shock to wake up and find all that snow. I went out to relieve myself, fate intervened, and you know the rest. You came to my rescue.”

“It’s a good thing we crossed paths,” Mark mused.

“I believe you literally saved my life,” Joe told him earnestly. “And you know, now that I remember everything, I’m thinking my behavior’s been influenced by those hidden memories.”

“In what way?”

“In why I was so grabby with you. I’m not like that. I mean, I’m not shy by any means, but I don’t recall ever coming on to anybody that aggressively. Of course, for the past twelve

years, it's been a moot point. I was happy and more than satisfied with Drew for nine of those years, and then for the past three, there's been no love interest in my life. I was too tied to my grief to even consider getting involved with anyone. Until you found me."

Mark played with his cup, refusing to return Joe's gaze even though he felt it rest on him. The pull of it was almost irresistibly compelling. "Why me?"

"Now, how am I supposed to answer that? Attraction is one of those intangible, unexplainable things that people always try to analyze without success. It just happens. Two people meet and there's chemistry between them. Unless I'm grossly mistaken, I believe you feel the same way I do."

Mark raised his head and bravely looked into Joe's eyes. "You're right, but what you were saying before, about why you were so aggressive. I still don't get that."

"Because a part of me knew I'd lost Drew. When someone new came along who stirred feelings in me I thought I'd never experience again, I urgently wanted to hold on to him."

"Me?"

"You. Does that bother you?"

"No. I'm glad, because I really, really like you."

"Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"I really, *really* want you. Like right now, desperately. I haven't had sex except with my own hand in three years. Not that that's the only reason I want you, but right now all the blood's draining from my brain southward, and I can't think about anything but wanting to make love to you."

Marks's stomach clenched with nervousness and joy. Joe was at liberty to be with someone else and that someone else he wanted was Mark. He smiled anxiously, worried his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment, then released it. He'd never been with anyone

before, but he wanted this, wanted Joe. It was natural, a part of life. People did this every day. Right?

Assuring himself that there was nothing to be afraid of, Mark asked. "Do you have enough brain power left to walk upstairs with me?"

"I think I can manage," Joe replied with a silly grin.

Mark rose from the kitchen table and held out his hand. "Let's go."

Laughing, Joe took the hand Mark offered him and stood. Mark took a few steps toward the kitchen doorway but stopped when Joe tugged on his fingers.

"Wait a minute." Releasing Mark's clasp, Joe went out to the mudroom and returned with a small drawstring pouch. "I want to put this in here." He opened the pouch, solemnly pulled the gold ring from his finger, and with just the slightest hesitation, dropped it inside, where it landed with a tiny clink. Closing the bag, he left it on the kitchen table.

"Drew's ring is in there?" Mark asked softly.

"Yeah," Joe answered and then walked determinedly to stand in front of Mark. "Neither one of those rings has a role in what we're about to do. They signify the past, and I want to move forward...with you."

Touched by Joe's candor, Mark let all his restraints melt. He smiled and reached for Joe, his arms winding around his neck, his body melding to the other man's.

The kiss they exchanged was languorous and heated, filled with mutual give and take. Unfettered from the burden of guilt he'd felt at the possibility that Joe was married, Mark gave of himself freely, allowed himself to explore Joe's mouth with lips and tongue the way he'd longed to before. Heady and addictive, the taste and sensation of Joe's rising desire was everything he could have wanted.

When Mark pulled away, Joe blinked at him in dazed, heavy-lidded surprise. "That's the first time you've really come to me. The first time you've truly given yourself. Jesus. Did I really call you a Victorian maiden? Why do I have the feeling I'm going to be eating my

words? Among other things,” he added, with a lascivious grin and the rise of one suggestive eyebrow. “Come on.”

Joe grabbed Mark’s hand and pulled him out of the kitchen, through the living room, and hustled him up the stairs. Chip, who had been lying at their feet under the kitchen table, followed them up.

Joe stopped in the doorway of Mark’s bedroom, and for the first time, eyed Mark’s pet with disfavor. “What do we do about him? I’m not making love to you with an audience.”

Mark chuckled, heat rising to his cheeks. “I don’t want him to see whatever it is you’re going to do to me, either. He’s too young.”

“So...what do we do?”

Mark entered the bedroom and retrieved Chip’s bed from the closet. He laid the sherpa-covered cushion on the floor in the hallway next to his door. “Here, Chip. Lay down.”

Giving his master what seemed to be a reproachful look, Chip did as he was told.

“See, easy.” Mark indicated with a triumphant flourish of his hand.

Joe grabbed that convenient hand and in record time, they were in Mark’s bedroom with the door closed behind them. The next thing he knew, Mark found himself on his back with the mattress bouncing under him as Joe tackled him and took them both down to the bed. A bit wide-eyed at Joe’s vehement rush, Mark wasn’t given time to say anything.

Joe’s mouth crashed down on his own, and the kiss that ensued took Mark’s breath away. Joe’s tongue moved sinuously over his own, teasing and exploring while tempting Mark’s to reciprocate. Gathering his scattered senses, Mark managed to answer Joe’s invitation. He was already partially erect, and the rush of blood to his cock made him woozy. He moaned at the throbbing ache that pulsed deep in his gut. The pure sensual feel of it rushed through every muscle in his body, causing him to arch against Joe.

Joe answered Mark's movement by sliding a hand under his tee shirt and pushing it up to expose his abs. The fabric rose higher, as did Joe's hand, until his fingers found Mark's nipple.

Mark gasped when the tiny nub rose hard and tight at the teasing of Joe's fingertips. He tore his mouth from his partner's. "Joe, fuck!"

"What?" Joe growled, transferring his lips to Mark's exposed throat. "You don't like it?" Mark squirmed at the feel of Joe's tongue on his flesh, then shivered when moist heat ghosted over his damp skin as the other man spoke.

"I didn't say that," Mark panted. "It feels good. Everything you do feels good. *God*, makes me dizzy. I'm burning up."

Joe lifted himself and gave Mark a delighted smile. "This is going to be such a pleasure. You're so easy to please. Arms up," he ordered. "I want your shirt off. I want to feel skin, not fabric."

A small wrestling match ensued in which first Mark's, then Joe's, shirt was tugged off and discarded over the side of the bed. It was well worth the effort. Now that he was free to touch him, Mark's hands roved over the muscled planes of Joe's shoulders and chest. Wondering awe was chased by short-of-breath need as he took in the sheer, sleek symmetry of Joe's upper body. His fingertips drifted over Joe's nipples, drawing a rumbling growl from his lover.

Gaze flying up, Mark managed to ask between labored breaths. "You like that, too?"

"Of course. Nipples are sensitive. Here's something that feels even better."

Joe wrapped his hands around Mark's wrists pushing them up and back until they were over Mark's head. He lowered himself until they rested chest to chest, skin to skin. Mark registered the feel of two tiny nubs -- Joe's hardened nipples -- pressing into his flesh a moment before Joe started kissing him again. Moaning under the onslaught of sensations, he

accepted Joe's tongue and his own mounting passion. When Joe released Mark's mouth to go exploring, Mark was barely aware of it, until Joe started playing with his ear.

He craned his neck, attempting to put himself out of Joe's reach. "No, stop. I don't think that's a good idea. You did that before. I didn't like it," Mark insisted, albeit weakly.

"Are you sure? Or is it that you like it too much?" Joe teased, his hot breath fanning the inner tunnel of Mark's ear.

Mark shivered as he heard the smile in Joe's voice through his own rising panic. "It just...God, I don't know. Just don't."

"But I want to make you feel good, baby."

Joe's tongue did a wicked, swirling tango over the whorls of Mark's ear before he sucked the lobe in, placing tiny stinging bites over the plump, succulent edge. Mark shuddered and pulled at the arms Joe had trapped above his head. Moaning at the spike of arousal that jabbed him, he attempted to turn his head away. He only succeeded in exposing more of himself to Joe's tormenting mouth.

The dizziness he'd felt before was nothing compared to this. "*Oh, God.* If you don't stop, I'm gonna pass out." He breathed a short-lived sigh of relief when Joe ceased to nibble on his lobe -- only to gasp and freeze when his lover's tongue began to slowly lave the whorls that led to the hollow of his ear. Mark's body went rigid, his stomach clenching. "*No. Don't.*"

Frantic, he tried to struggle, but Joe was ready for him. Not only were his arms still pinned and held securely, Joe had thrown a leg over Mark's as well, and had Mark's upper body practically immobilized beneath his own. Mark was given a clear demonstration of just how strong Joe was. Except for some ineffectual thrashing, he was unable to break free.

"Hush, lover. Gonna make you fly," Joe promised and plunged his tongue into Mark's ear.

Mark cried out and bucked under the lash of pure sensation that swept over him. All he could do was pant and moan through the wave of dizzying vertigo caused when Joe's tongue moved in a softly rhythmic thrusting motion. Unable to concentrate on anything else, Mark almost missed the fact that Joe had released one of his own hands and was now holding both of Mark's wrists loosely trapped in the other. Joe's free hand trailed down Mark's body, pausing to lightly pinch one hard nipple before moving lower. The electric thrill from that teasing touch made Mark's ab muscles ripple. Arriving at the waistband of his jeans, Joe worked the button open and slid the zipper down.

It was only when warm, callused fingers closed around his cock that Mark became fully aware of the change in his circumstances. A few easy strokes over his rigid length had him groaning.

Joe eased his tongue from Mark's ear and softly drawled, "I want to suck you. Do I need to use a condom?"

"Condom?" Mark managed to reply with a labored rasp. "No. I don't...unh...oh, God..." Joe's exploring fingers were scattering Mark's thoughts like dandelion fluff on a turbulent wind. "I...I don't have anything."

"Don't have anything, as in condoms or diseases?"

"Both!"

Evidently satisfied, Joe licked and suckled his way down the length of Mark's neck to the curve of his throat and across his collarbone. From there, he made a provocative beeline for the flat, tan disk of one nipple, tracing teasing kisses along the way. Closing his teeth around the bud, he gently tugged while flaying the tiny nub with his tongue. Mark's indrawn breath accompanied the movement of his lover's hands as he broke free from Joe's slackened grip on his wrists. His fingers sought a hold in Joe's hair.

"Take the band out," Joe ordered against his skin and turned his head sideways to rest his cheek against Mark's ribs, giving him better access.

With trembling fingers, Mark pulled the band free and dropped it on top of the bedside stand before turning his full attention to Joe's hair. The thick, shiny mass spilled free, flowing over Mark's skin, making him shiver.

"I love this," Mark murmured, running his hand over the hair that lay warm against his flesh. "I never had a thing for long hair before, but yours is so beautiful, so sexy."

Joe lifted his head and smiled. "I'm glad you like it. I think I have something else you might like."

Joe continued his journey downward, and Mark released his grip on Joe's hair, feeling the soft tresses slide through his fingers like silken threads. Joe's hands and mouth on him had Mark closing his eyes to better appreciate the sensations, especially when Joe reached his ultimate goal. He heard Joe say, "You have no idea how much I've wanted this." Warm breath whispered over his skin a split second before Joe's mouth engulfed the swollen cap of his granite-hard erection.

"Son of bitch," Mark groaned, his hands dropping down to grip the bedspread.

Joe's tongue swirled and teased, seeming to savor the taste and texture of Mark's cock. Mark could smell the scent of his own arousal, aware of the damp heat that rose from his pores as he broke out in a light sweat. Instinctively he thrust, seeking a deeper place, a tighter grip, anything that would fulfill the sweet promise of ecstasy that Joe's actions invoked. When Joe's palm slid between his thighs to cup and lightly massage his ball sac, all conscious thought fled along with most of the oxygen in his body. Mark bucked, loosed an incoherent shout, and came.

Head slamming back into the pillow, his world grayed around the edges while his body gave a convulsive heave. Climax rushed in, bringing with it a flood of pleasure, replacing the spurts of semen that rushed out. Eyes closed, Mark flopped back against the mattress, boneless and replete, his heart pounding, his breathing rough and ragged. Next to him, he

felt Joe move and managed to crack one eyelid open in time to see Joe wipe a dribble of come from the corner of his mouth. Mark's eyelids popped open all the way.

"Mmm, you taste good. Here, lick," Joe insisted and smeared the dollop of pearly seed over Mark's lips.

"Hey," Mark protested before tentatively running his tongue over his mouth. The taste was mild, a bit salty with a hint of sweet. The scent held a faint, earthy tang.

"See. Tasty." Joe's hands went to the waistband of Mark's jeans. "Lift up."

Mark tightened his limp muscles and raised his hips. Joe pulled on his jeans and briefs, skinned them down Mark's legs, and threw them over the side of the bed to join their shirts.

Taking in the picture of Mark's total nudity, Joe grinned. "I knew it."

"What?" Mark asked, barely able to keep still. Under Joe's frank appraisal, the impulse to cover himself was strong.

"You have a beautiful body." Joe lay back on the bed and wrestled his own jeans and briefs off. They, too, went sailing. "I am going to fuck you so good. I swear it'll be the best you've ever had."

Wide-eyed, Mark stared at the full rampant glory of Joe's cock. Even though he'd seen it when he'd first brought Joe home and undressed him, what he'd noticed then didn't hold a candle to what he was viewing now. The thick, vein-wrapped, ivory column rose aggressively from the pale bush of curls that framed it. The plump cap, engorged and flushed with blood, leaked a few drops of clear fluid. Mark had to admit that it fit with Joe's other proportions, but why did it seem so *huge*?

He felt his sphincter tighten. "You really think that's a good idea? I could just, you know." Face flaming, he made a motion with his hand to signal jacking off.

"You're kidding, right? You're not changing your mind, are you?" Joe asked with a glower.

“No. It’s just that, well, you’re not exactly small.”

“Well, no, but I’m not exactly a Clydesdale, either. It’s not like I’m going to just jam it in.” At Mark’s wince, Joe paused, his brow creased in thought. Mark frowned at the look of amused comprehension that came over his lover’s face. “I knew there was a certain naiveté about you, but this certainly would explain why... You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

Mark scowled and rolled to his side, intent on leaving the bed rather than face the coming humiliation. “I knew this was a mistake.”

Muscular arms, warm and strong, wrapped around him, his progress abruptly halted by an unbreakable grip. “Oh, no, you don’t. Just because you’re embarrassed is no reason to stop.” Warm lips pressed against Mark’s nape while a hard body crowded close and spooned his from behind. Mark shuddered and tensed at the insistence of Joe’s hard cock pressed so boldly against the crevice of his ass.

“Everyone has a first time. Do you have any idea how it makes me feel to know I’ll be yours?” Mark shook his head, the sheer wonder in Joe’s voice made his chest tight. “I can’t even...” Joe paused, and Mark felt Joe’s forehead rest against the back of his head for a moment. “I won’t hurt you, I promise. All right?”

Silently, Mark nodded, willing the increased moisture behind his lids to stay put. The intensity of Joe’s words in conjunction with his own jumbled emotions had Mark on unsteady ground. He’d waited so long for a moment like this, hoping for more than just someone to share a physical release with. It shook him and stirred the hope that maybe Joe was finding more here than just a convenient bed partner.

He was distracted from his thought by Joe hugging him tightly. A shiver sailed down his spine when Joe returned to kissing and nibbling the back of his neck. “You wouldn’t happen to have some lube lying around, would you?”

“Top drawer,” Mark breathed, back to concentrating on the feel of Joe’s mouth and the heated skin and firm muscle that cradled him from behind. With a languid gesture, he vaguely indicated the bedside stand.

“Aha. Not so innocent after all,” Joe teased. “Hand it over.”

Joe released his grip on Mark enough that he was able to reach the drawer and fumble inside. He found the small bottle and, handing it over, settled back against Joe.

“Mmm, good stuff. Nice and slick.” Joe set the lube aside. “You use this to jack off with?”

“Jeez, do you have to know *everything*?” Mark demanded, his body going stiff with indignation.

“Well, no, but I’m curious. Relax, this is what’s known as pillow talk. For instance, would it interest you to know how I know about the quality of this lube?”

“I guess.”

“Because I have the same stuff in the drawer of my bedside table.”

“Really?”

“Really. Can you guess what I use it for?”

Mark found himself smiling, his body yielding. “Jacking off?”

“You guessed it. And by the way, I meant what I said about not having sex with anyone for the past few years. I’ve been tested and I’m healthy, though I never expected anything else. See. It doesn’t hurt to share a few intimate details.” Joe eased back a bit. “You can ask me anything you want, too. For as long as you remain coherent, that is. Roll over on your stomach.”

Mark complied and positioned himself comfortably. “Am I going to be incoherent?”

“Oh, yeah. Most definitely.” Joe explained matter-of-factly. “You see, I’m acting very cool and civilized when all I really want to do is pounce on you and fuck you into the

mattress. But being the considerate lover that I am -- especially given the fact that this is new to you -- I'm going to leash my inner beast and take my time." Joe threw one leg over Mark's waist. "But it would help if you ask questions to distract me." Straddling Mark, Joe carefully lowered himself to sit on his buttocks. "Is this okay? I'm not squashing or bending any of your important parts, am I?"

"No, it's fine."

"Good. I'll massage while you fire questions at me. Relax and breathe."

"Was that last bit aimed at me or you? You sound a little tense."

"Both. I'm horny as hell here, whelp. You're the only one who got off, you know." Joe shifted position and Mark jumped at the sharp smack that landed on one butt cheek.

"Ow!"

"That's not a question." Joe pointed out as he resealed himself.

"Okay, okay. Brothers and sisters. Do you have any?"

"Brothers and sisters. Yes. One of each." Joe began massaging Mark's shoulders. "My sister, Sandra, is two years older than me. She's a part-time librarian, married to a guy who does repair work on large appliances like washers and dryers for all the stores that sell those kinds of things in their area. They have three kids, two girls and a boy." Joe moved on to Mark's upper arms and then back to work the muscles at the base of his neck. "My niece Jessica swears she's gonna be an astronaut. My nephew Lance, ironic name, considering he's not the future astronaut..."

Mark snorted a soft laugh.

"Anyway, Lance says he wants to come and work with me. We built a very nice birdhouse together. The kid's got talent. And Lissa, the youngest, says she's 'going to work with Mommy at the liberry.' Yes, she pronounces it just like that."

"Mmm, that's nice. *Mmm*, so's that." Mark moaned when Joe's thumbs dug into the muscles of his shoulder blades.

Joe chuckled. "You're going to have to show me your technique. I haven't had a massage in ages."

"I don't have a technique."

"We'll teach you one. Now, back to your question." Joe leaned down, trailing kisses a short way down Mark's spine. Pre-come left a warm, moist trail against the Mark's skin where Joe's cock rested against it. "My brother Clay is two years younger than me. He's a chef at Bistro Mario. Ever hear of it?"

"Unh, yeah. I've eaten there. It's great." Mark grunted. "What about your parents?"

"Yeah, they've eaten there, too."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Joe laughed. "I know. Right at the moment my parents are on a cruise. Mom dragged Dad off to the Caribbean."

"Mmm. What are you doing?"

Joe was wiggling backward along Mark's body. "Giving myself room." His large hands slid over and cupped the plump cheeks of Mark's ass. Mark tensed, his muscles going taut beneath Joe's slightly callused fingertips.

"Relax," Joe lightly admonished.

Mark's buttocks were squeezed, kissed, and finally parted. With such a vulnerable part of himself exposed, he instinctively tightened against any intrusion.

"Do you know what rimming is?" Joe questioned softly.

"I've heard of it."

"Let's do it."

Mark groaned when Joe's tongue touched the sensitive flesh of his entrance. Hot and wet, it licked and laved, easing the tight ring while pushing against it as though demanding entrance. The contact brought such an intense sensation with it as to be almost painful. Mark pressed the side of his face against the pillow and breathed in the faint scent of fabric softener. It was familiar and anchored him to reality when he felt his world again tilting on its axis. He was beyond comprehending the conflicting emotions that swept over him. He wanted to crawl away almost more than he wanted the exquisite pleasure to continue. A war raged inside. Embarrassment fought against need, with indecision keeping him right where he was.

The snapping sound of the bottle of lube being closed almost escaped his notice, unlike the slick fingertip that replaced Joe's tongue, lightly rubbing his anus and the surrounding flesh before centering itself and sinking within. Tense muscle gave way to the insistent pressure and stretched to admit Joe's probing digit. For a moment, Mark felt as though his lungs would freeze, but he forced himself to relax and breathe, concentrating on this slight penetration.

"How does that feel?" Joe asked.

"Strange."

The finger slid deeper. "Strange good or strange bad?"

"Neither. Just strange."

"It's about to get good." Joe's careful exploration brought his finger against Mark's prostate. Mark's hips surged against the bed, a warbling cry wrung from his throat. "There it is. That's the sweet spot that's going to have you begging when I fuck you."

Unable to answer, Mark swallowed hard while Joe continued finger-fucking his hole. Strange was a thing of the past, urgent need had easily replaced it. Acceptance loosened his muscles, and he gave in to the sensations, embracing them and the bliss they brought. His hips rocked, dragging against the bed as he sought more friction for his aching cock.

“We’re going for two now,” Joe warned, before gently easing both digits inside. He slowly sawed them in and out, stretching Mark’s untried passage.

Mark was so lost in the fog of pleasure that engulfed him he didn’t have time to tense up. He groaned with every pass of Joe’s fingers over his gland and began seeking the contact. Pushing back into it, he forced Joe’s fingers deeper within him.

“I’ve forgotten how hot it is inside the human body. You feel amazing,” Joe trailed his free hand along Mark’s thigh. “Raise up on your knees, baby. You’re just about ready.”

Almost eagerly, Mark complied. The twinge of trepidation he felt was lost when the change in position sent Joe’s fingers surging further in. “*Fuck*. Joe, please. I need,” Mark begged, lamenting the loss of pressure that lifting away from bed took from his cock.

“I know, baby, I know,” Joe crooned. “One more finger.”

Mark cried out against the quick scorch of pain that accompanied the increased bulk filling him, but even that couldn’t take away the urgent desire. The burn quickly receded, and once more he began arching into Joe’s touch, welcoming the stretch, wanting more. He nearly shouted an inarticulate protest when Joe’s fingers pulled free, then groaned in relief when his anus was teased with something more.

Joe took up the bottle of lube and poured enough to slick over himself. Repositioning himself between Mark’s thighs, he guided his cock to press against the tender pink opening that beckoned him to enter. His gaze wandered the length of Mark’s spine, taking in the gorgeous expanse of male flesh spread before him. Mark’s body was truly inspiring, firm and sleek. His muscles worked with a smooth bunch and release that Joe found sexy as hell. It was all he could do to keep in mind Mark’s physical innocence and to go slow, rather than forge ahead without thought.

“Enough with the fingers. I hope this’ll do instead,” he growled, silently admonishing himself to stay in control. Grasping Mark’s hips to hold him steady, Joe pushed. The head of

his cock slid in past the tight ring, which clamped down convulsively. “Easy, babe, easy,” he soothed.

Releasing his grip on one hip, Joe let his hand glide in a calm, consoling manner over Mark’s buttock to the small of his back before letting it return. Mark uttered a few small whimpers of what sounded like blissful relief. The stranglehold on his cock eased, and Joe carefully propelled himself forward inch by inch until he was resting balls deep inside his lover. It was a feeling at once new, yet familiar, and achingly exquisite. Mark’s body surrounded him in moist, silken heat and was so snug that Joe knew he wouldn’t last long.

He draped himself over Mark, loving how this position allowed him to dominate, yet feel protective at the same time. Holding his lust in check, he nuzzled Mark’s neck. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Please. I can’t stand it.”

A frisson of pride swept over Joe, knowing that he was giving Mark such pleasure. “I wish I could see your face, but I thought it would be easier for you this way. Next time,” he promised both Mark and himself. Then, he began to move.

Drawing out slowly, Joe started the movements that would drive them both to the edge. Deep, unhurried strokes of his cock elicited moans of bliss from his lover each time the thick column passed over Mark’s prostate. Though Mark was inexperienced, Joe knew he instinctively reacted, driving himself back into Joe’s thrusts, wordlessly seeking more. Taking the hint, Joe shoved forward, setting a faster pace that had their bodies slapping together in a rhythmic symphony of flesh against flesh.

With his orgasm fast approaching, Joe curled his hand around Mark’s erection. It filled his hand like warm, living marble, the pulse of it pounding against Joe’s palm. Mark’s moans turned to urgent cries, fraying the edges of Joe’s control until he was pumping hard and deep, burying himself to the hilt in Mark’s body. With uncompromising precision, he jacked Mark’s cock and felt it swell and tremble in his hand.

Wet heat poured over Joe's fingers. Mark's body clenched tightly around him, and his wail of completion sent a shock wave coursing down Joe's spine. His own climax tore through him, and he felt the unleashed pulses of semen race the length of his cock to burst free, drenching the silken passage that clutched him. A guttural groan ripped from his lips as ecstasy stiffened his muscles and wrenched his hips forward to slam against Mark several times in quick succession. His body emptied itself, then slowly relinquished the tension that held him upright.

Joe withdrew and collapsed on the bed, pulling Mark with him to his side. With the smell of sex heavy in the air, the sound of their labored breaths and pounding hearts filling his ears, he savored the two of them lying so still, resting together. Joe yawned and heard Mark's weak chuckle a moment before he cursed.

Rising up on his elbow, he looked down at Mark, who turned his head to meet Joe's gaze. "What's wrong?"

"I should have pulled back the covers. The comforter's got come on it."

"So?"

"So I'll have to take it to the Laundromat to wash it. It's too big for my washing machine."

"And why's that a problem?"

"Have you ever been to a Laundromat?"

Joe smiled at the outrage on Mark's face. It was utterly adorable. "You've just had sex for the first time, and all you can think about is come on the comforter? You're harder to impress than I thought. I must not have done a very good job."

Mark rolled to his back and reached up, curling his arms around Joe's neck. Joe went willingly when Mark tugged him down. Mark's kiss was sweet, hot, sexy, and unmistakably enthusiastic. Joe had to admit his protégé was a natural when it came to kisses. Several thoroughly enjoyable moments passed before Mark freed him.

“I didn’t know it would feel so good. You were right. I was totally incoherent, and I loved every minute of it. When can we do it again?”

Joe laughed, totally entranced by Mark’s ingenuous zeal. “How about you let me have a short nap? Between the snow shoveling and the sex, I’m worn out.”

“Okay. I could nap and maybe grab a bite. Did you have anything to eat before you went outside?”

Joe lay back and encouraged Mark to cuddle close. “Now that you mention it, no. I wasn’t exactly hungry then.” As if on cue, Joe’s stomach growled. He felt Mark’s smirk against his skin and the warm press of his partner’s hand against his abdomen.

“We’d better feed you. Gotta keep you healthy and strong.”

“Then I can keep my cock up, which sounds like a damn good idea. I’d love to see you ride me.”

“Joe.”

Joe chuckled at the embarrassed lilt to Mark’s voice. “Go to sleep, lover. I’ll teach you all kinds of wicked things. But later. Much later.”

Joe heard Mark’s sleepy “Mmm” of agreement while letting a lazy smile play over his lips. The grin slowly dimmed when the day’s earlier events filtered into his thoughts.

Memories of Drew brought tears to Joe’s eyes. A succession of moving pictures like film clips played through his mind. There were so many familiar scenes. Drew behind the wheel of his car, dressed in a suit and tie for the office, humming along with the radio while his fingers beat out a rhythm on the steering wheel. His lover wearing cutoffs and in bare feet out in the yard, cursing the poppies that were taking over one of his flower beds. How many times had he seen the man sleepy and rumpled standing at the kitchen counter waiting for the coffee to finish brewing? Or held him in his arms as they lounged on the sofa watching television or wrestled on the bed while making love?

There was so much, so many memories. They all vied for recognition with such a sudden urgency that Joe felt himself drowning, floundering beneath the weight of them. Chest tight, he struggled to breathe, until a warm body snuggled itself closer. Yanked from his painful reverie, he glanced down. Mark was asleep, rubbing his cheek against Joe's chest.

Relief swept over him, and he took a deep, unrestricted breath. In the back of his mind, he heard a soft, familiar laugh and felt himself enveloped in warmth. This time when the memories came, Joe didn't fight them. Instead, he took all the comfort he could from them, reminding himself of the love he and Drew had shared.

He eventually came to the realization that there really was no such thing as an ending, that there was no need to separate one part of himself from another. Drew had moved on as required by some higher power, but he would never really be gone. Mark had entered his life, and so their time together would begin. What had come before and what was now would blend, becoming a part of his new life.

Hugging Mark tight, Joe angled his head and kissed Mark's hair. Breathing in the scent that was already deeply ingrained within his senses, he closed his eyes. The thought of Mark's embarrassment when Joe'd guessed his status as a virgin tickled his consciousness. The smile returned.

There were new memories to be made, and he would welcome each one with open arms.

Chapter Five

“It’s about time you got back.”

With a grin on his face, Mark took his gaze from the drafting table and settled it on the familiar figure standing in his office doorway. “Don’t be catty right off the bat, Char. It’s good to see you, too.”

His friend walked in, smiling widely. She went straight to Mark where he sat in front of the table and gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek. “Welcome back. What did you bring me?”

Returning the hug and kiss, Mark laughed. “I wasn’t exactly at the Mall of America, you know. Unless you wanted some pinecones or pebbles, there wasn’t much I *could* bring you.”

“Pass. I’ll let you treat me to lunch.”

“Hey, shouldn’t it be the person who’s been away that gets treated?”

“Not in my book. I’m the one who’s been stuck here working. You had your treat.”

Images of Joe flitted through Mark’s mind, and he silently agreed. He certainly had had his treat. More times than he could count. Joe’s treats were the reason he’d been shifting

with a little discomfort every time he sat down. He felt a flush rise to his cheeks, and heat gathered around his collar. He reached up to pull at his already loosened tie. As usual, the first thing he'd done when he got to his office was shed his suit coat, roll up his sleeves, and free his tie enough that he could unfasten the top button on his shirt.

Char looked him over with a critical eye. "What have you been up to, Mark Bartel? You're blushing like a schoolgirl who just got caught showing off her panties to a boy. Oh, my God." Char leaned closer, her incredulous gaze examining Mark's throat. Extending a hand, she pushed his collar aside. "Is that a hickey? My God, it is. What? Where? Who? Tell me everything!"

Mark sent a panicked glance toward the open doorway of his office. "Would you pipe down?" Rising hastily, he went to the door and hurriedly shut it. "Jeez, tell the entire staff, why don't you?"

"Sorry," Char apologized, then smirked. "But not really. Now spill it."

Mark couldn't help but beam. "I met someone."

"No kidding. He must be a real primitive type, if the size of that hickey is anything to go by."

"He's definitely not shy."

"Details. You'll get nothing else done today until you give me all the juicy details!"

"All right, all right. But I'm *not* telling you everything. There are some things I refuse to share." Mark held up his hand to forestall Char's protest. "First of all, his name is Joe Moning."

Mark spent the next half hour regaling Char with the tale of how he and Joe had met, including the accident and Joe's amnesia. He even revealed the frustration that had risen between them and how their problem had been solved by the return of Joe's memory. Char laughed and even cried when Mark told her about the death of Joe's lover.

“Oh, that’s so tragic. But it’s so romantic, too, the way you guys met. It’s like one of those amazing twist-of-fate things. So much better than eyeing each other’s cocks at a urinal in the bathroom of some sleazy pickup joint before having a quickie in the nearest alley.”

Mark laughed. “You’ve been watching *Queer as Folk* DVDs again, haven’t you?”

Char shrugged. “Maybe. So where is Joe now? When are you going to see him again? You *are* going to see him again, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. Tomorrow, in fact.”

“Why not tonight?”

“Because we both just got back from taking time off from work. You know how it is when you’ve been away. You need a day or two to get back into the routine and catch up on whatever you’ve gotten behind on.”

“True. So that means he lives close?”

“Yeah. He’s got a house in Dothan.”

“Wow, that’s great. Dothan’s such a quaint little town, very popular with antique hunters since they’ve got a fabulous antique mall there. That’s something we could do sometime. We could go browse the mall, drop in on Joe, do lunch, that sort of thing.”

“What was that second thing? Drop in on Joe? I don’t think so.”

“Spoilsport. You know you’re going to have to introduce me to him. I insist on meeting the man who’s stolen my best friend’s heart and left such interesting marks behind.” Char slipped a finger back in Mark’s collar, pulling it away from his skin while trying to peer down his shirt. “Any more of those in there?”

Chuckling, Mark ducked his head, attempting to pull away. “Cut it out; that tickles.”

“Aw, come on. Let me see.”

Caught up in their impromptu wrestling match, both of them were laughing and failed to notice the door to Mark’s office open until a disparaging voice spoke.

“How sweet. Children at play.”

Mark froze, while Charlotte coolly released him and turned around. “What’s the matter, Derek? Won’t anyone play with you?”

“I get my share, thank you. If you two wouldn’t mind focusing your heads on business, the morning meeting is about to begin.”

“Oh, take that stick out of your ass. No one says anything when you close your office door to peruse porn sites during business hours.”

“*Char,*” Mark breathed in warning. The last thing they needed was an interoffice war.

“What? Derek, despite his wishes otherwise, is not the boss. This is an architectural cooperative, and we are all equally responsible for bringing in clients and seeing that the work gets done. I’ve never had any complaints, and I know you haven’t, either. End of discussion.” Charlotte swept out of the room.

Mark rose from his chair, determined to follow her, but he was stopped when Derek blocked his exit. “She’s a fiery little bi...thing. I’ll give her that much.”

“Watch your mouth,” Mark growled.

“I’d rather watch yours. How about dinner tonight?”

“No.”

“That’s rather abrupt. You’ve got your own share of fire, haven’t you, Mark? I wonder who’s been stoking the flame,” Derek mused, his gaze dropping to Mark’s throat. “Not that it matters. No one could match what I can give you.” Derek eased closer. “I’ll bet you look lovely on your knees.”

Mark blanched. His anger over Derek’s near insult to Charlotte had temporarily made him forget how uncomfortable he normally felt around the man. There was something about Derek that gave Mark the creeps. Something cold and ruthless that resided deep in the man’s eyes and sent a skitter of unease down Mark’s spine.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mark denied evenly. "And as you so graciously pointed out, I believe we have a meeting to attend."

Amusement sparkled in Derek's eyes. "You're right, of course. Business before pleasure." Derek stepped aside. "After you."

Mark slipped by him, but not before Derek managed to cup one cheek of Mark's ass, giving it a quick squeeze. "Nice. It most certainly is going to be a pleasure when you finally give in."

Whipping around, Mark faced down the other man despite the fact that there was a lump in his belly the size of a boulder. "Stop touching me. I don't like it, I've never liked it, and I don't like you."

"What a shame." Derek shook his head mournfully in mock despair before fixing Mark with a cold and determined stare. "But liking me isn't a requirement. All I require is obedience. You'll give that to me when the time comes."

"You're nuts," Mark uttered in disbelief.

Derek smiled, but before either of them had time to say another word, Char came around the corner of the deserted hallway. "Mark! Get a move on. You, too, Derek."

Mark turned away and hurried to join Char, relieved. He'd been leery of Derek Swenson from the moment he'd set eyes on him, despite the fact that the man had been charming and well-spoken, with a proven track record as an architect. Still, he disturbed Mark on a visceral level, enough so that he had voted against allowing Derek's admission to their team. Char, too, had acquired an instant dislike for the man, but even with two votes against him, the majority had ruled and allowed him in.

The initial two months after Derek had joined the firm had passed without incident. Derek had seemed fine, friendly, yet professional...until the first "accidental" touch happened. Mark had been pouring himself some coffee in the community kitchen and thought nothing of it at the time. Then the incidents began occurring with increasing

regularity. It wasn't long after that the suggestive remarks began. Inexperienced as he was, he had been unsure how to handle Derek's advances. Ignoring them had seemed the best course of action; he'd hoped that Derek would get the hint that he wasn't interested. It was now more than apparent that the man didn't care how Mark felt. He was determined to insinuate himself into Mark's personal life in a far from impersonal manner.

Disturbed by the encounter and the growing belief that Derek Swenson could pose a serious problem, Mark followed Char into the conference room. He was well aware of the weight of Derek's stare as he went.

Joe checked over his tools and materials while the studio's filming crew arranged cameras and lighting around him. While he was definitely doing his best to keep his mind strictly on work, thoughts of Mark kept drifting in and bringing a smile to his lips. The past ten days had been utterly amazing. A trip that he'd been dreading had turned out to be the best thing that had happened to him since he'd lost Drew. Who would have guessed that the decision to formally put his mourning behind him would lead to the discovery of a new lover? He certainly hadn't.

"You've been positively cheery since you got back. It's good to see you smile for a change."

Joe looked up to find the production assistant, Mindy Montgomery, watching him. "What do you mean by that? I smile whenever the occasion calls for it."

"I know, but it's been a while since the smile actually reached your eyes."

"Yeah? Well, things change."

"You know what I think?"

"What's that?"

"I think you met someone while you were away."

Joe rolled his eyes, then winked. “You just may be right about that.”

Mindy chuckled. “Good for you. Is there anything you need? Anything I can get for you before shooting starts?”

“As long as there’s bottled water nearby, I’m good. It gets hot in here.”

“There’s plenty. Just yell when you’re ready for a bottle.”

“Thanks, Mindy.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” she replied and then rushed away to see to some other chores.

Joe was just about to return to his own preparations when his cell phone rang. Checking the caller ID, he was pleased to note who was on the line. “Hey, bro,” he answered cheerily.

“Joe! Did you finally make it back? How ya doin’?”

“Yeah, I’m back. Right at the moment I’m at the studio, and everything is just fine. It was a good trip. I really enjoyed myself.” *What an understatement*, Joe thought to himself, smiling broadly.

“Yeah? Even the snow part?”

“Definitely the snow part.”

Joe recalled the game of checkers he and Mark had played in which the loser had to go outside wearing only a pair of boots, run down the driveway, touch the mailbox, and return. He’d never laughed so hard in his life as he’d watched Mark hotfoot it down the shoveled-out path and back again in record time. It was even more fun having the pleasure of warming his lover after his ordeal. Mark had been certain his balls had disappeared for good, but Joe had easily demonstrated otherwise. His former virgin lover had proved very adept at showing his gratitude.

Joe felt the familiar ache start in his groin, and he forcibly drew a curtain over those pleasant reminiscences.

He started guiltily when his brother's voice demanded, "Hey, you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Sorry, I got distracted. What were you saying?"

"I was saying family dinner this weekend. You, me, Sandy, Phil, and the kids. I'm bringing Kathy."

"Kathy?"

"Come on. You remember. Medium height, brunette, glasses, beautiful green eyes. I introduced you to her at the restaurant about a month ago."

"Oh, yeah. Pretty girl. I was kinda surprised."

"Why?"

"Let's see, how can I put this diplomatically? She's not your usual type."

"What do you mean?"

"Clay, Kathy actually has a working brain. She was able to take part in an intelligent conversation, and she wasn't an emaciated waif. In fact, she's just shy of being plump."

"Watch it, bro," his sibling growled.

"Take it easy. I'm not insulting her. Didn't I say she's pretty?"

"I guess you did. And there's nothing wrong with her weight. She feels good, not all angles and bones."

Joe snickered. "I'm glad, but spare me the details, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah. So, what about you? Think you might bring someone?" Clay asked cautiously.

"As a matter of fact, yeah, if he's free."

"No kidding?! You met somebody? Jeez, Sandy's gonna shit a brick 'cause I found out before she did. So who is it? Anybody we know?"

“No, you don’t know him. I met him in the park when I went camping. His name’s Mark Bartel.”

“What’s he do? Gimme a few details, so I can tease Sand with ’em.”

“Dog.” Joe snorted. “He’s twenty-four, an architect, and works in a co-op office with six other architects. He’s got light brown hair, hazel eyes, is about five-ten or so, and he’s a really sweet guy. What else you want to know?”

“So, did you guys, like, do the deed?”

Joe cleared his throat. “Um, yeah.”

“Damn, Joe. You must really like this guy. Sandy and I were both wondering if you’d ever care about anybody again.”

“Mark is special. I want you guys to meet him. You’ll understand when you do,” Joe replied defensively. He didn’t like feeling as though he needed to apologize.

“Hey, I’m not criticizing, man. I’m happy for you. You know we all loved Drew, but there’s no reason you should spend the rest of your life alone now that he’s gone. At least that’s what Sandy says every time she tries talking me into finding guys to introduce you to. Like I have the whole gaydar thing down and can figure out who is and who isn’t straight.” He and Joe shared a laugh. “Well, I better let you get back to work. So, this weekend. Bring your honey. We’ll make him feel right at home.”

“Oh, Lord,” Joe groaned, hoping Mark wouldn’t put an end to their relationship after meeting his family. “Are you calling Sandy now?”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss this opportunity for the world.”

“I better turn my cell off, then. We’re about to start shooting. They don’t like it when a phone rings in the middle of things.”

“I’ll tell her, but you better call her yourself ASAP. She’s gonna be champing at the bit, and she’ll make your life a living hell if you keep her hanging too long.”

"Don't I know it. Later." Joe hung up and turned around to find the director, Ross O'Malley, and an expectant crew waiting for him.

"No need for a sound check. The microphones are picking up everything," Ross announced in a deadpan manner but with a twinkle in his eyes. "Now that we all know Joe's got a new boyfriend, let's get to work."

A cheer, good-natured laughter, and a round of applause went up from the crew. For the first time in years, Joe felt a flush of heat burn beneath the skin of his cheeks. Mindy stepped up and held out her hand. "I'll hold your phone, Joe." She winked.

Shaking his head, Joe grinned, handed it over, and prepared to go on air.

Mark had no sooner walked in the front door of his condo when he heard a ringing. Heading for the kitchen, he dropped the bag containing his supper from a local Chinese takeout place on the table, then picked up the portable phone from where it rested on the nearby counter. "Hello?"

"Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey, Joe," Mark breathed, a fine tension tightening the muscles of his body at the sound of his lover's voice.

"You sound a little out of breath. What are you up to?"

"I just got home."

"You worked late."

"Yeah, you know how it is when you take a vacation. You have to work twice as hard your first week back to catch up."

"I know. I just finished on the set myself about twenty minutes ago."

"Jeez. What have you been doing?"

“Wrapping up a couple of new episodes for the show. Things were going pretty smoothly, and we had all the materials standing by, so we decided to go ahead and film a second one. It was a damn long day, I can tell you.”

“I know what you mean. I felt like my eyes were starting to cross those last few hours at the office.”

“Make any headway?”

“Oh, yeah. There’s this special project in the offing. Our group did some preliminary designs and submitted them to the prospective client. There were some other firms in the running as well, but we were chosen. Today, we decided which of us would take on the lion’s share of responsibility for the project. Charlotte and I were selected.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thanks. I’m just relieved I didn’t have to work with...well, never mind. Anyway, Char and I do really well together. Our ideas just have a way of meshing and complementing each other’s.”

“That’s good. It’s always helpful to have a congenial partner. So...who was it you were glad you didn’t get as a partner?”

Mark grimaced and inwardly cursed his wayward tongue. “It’s no big deal. There’s a guy at the office I don’t like much.”

“Hard to imagine you not getting along with someone. You’re like the original Mr. Nice Guy. What is he, some kind of a troublemaker?”

“Truthfully? I think he’s got a screw loose.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. There’s just something about him that creeps me out.”

“Mark.” Joe’s voice was serious. “What is it you’re not telling me?”

“It’s nothing really, nothing I can’t handle.”

“Okay. But you can still tell me.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Why?”

“It’s...embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing? What the fuck, is the guy flashing you or something?”

“No.”

There was silence for a moment, and Mark squirmed but steadfastly kept his mouth shut, refusing to elaborate. Instead of pushing it, Joe surprised him by changing the subject.

“Are you free Saturday?”

“Um, yeah, sure. What’s up?”

“Family dinner. I’d like you to come with me.”

“You want me to meet your family?”

“Of course. I’ve already gotten the third degree from both my brother and my sister. They’re dying to meet you. If I don’t show up Saturday with you at my side, I’ll be in a load of trouble. So help me out here. Will you come? I promise to make it worth your while.”

Flattered and touched by the coaxing charm of Joe’s tone, Mark relaxed and smiled. “Yeah, of course I will. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for getting you in trouble. Besides, how could I possibly turn down an offer like that? Anyway, are we still on for tomorrow? Maybe you could give me an advance taste of what I’ll be getting for doing you the favor.”

A husky, sexy-as-hell chuckle ghosted over the line. Mark literally felt his toes curl while a resonating beat took up residence in his groin. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. I have a hypothetical question for you.”

Somehow Mark managed to simultaneously frown and smile. Joe was up to something; he could hear it in his voice. “Okay, hopefully I can come up with a hypothetical answer for you.”

“Suppose a guy who recently fell for somebody had spent the entire day thinking about him. He’s so anxious to see him again that out of the blue he decides to show up on his lover’s doorstep. Do you think the lover would be happy? Or would he be pissed that the guy just dropped in with no warning.”

A warm and eager smile curved Mark’s lips. Growing excitement made his breath rush through his lungs. Holding the phone tightly clenched in his fist, he left the kitchen, retracing his steps from his own recent arrival. “I would think he’d be pleased as hell. More than likely he’d spent his day pretty much the same way and would probably welcome the guy with open arms, not to mention a flagrant hard-on.”

“Oh, yeah. I was hoping you’d say that. Hurry up and open your door, babe.”

Mark arrived at the entrance to his home. Reaching out with his free hand, he turned the knob on the deadbolt, then the smaller one on the door handle. The panel swung open, and there was Joe, standing with his cell phone against his ear and a big grin on his face.

“Hi.”

Mark’s heart felt as though it was ready to expand right out of his chest. “Hi, yourself. Get in here.”

Joe stepped in -- Mark didn’t know who moved first or if they advanced at the same time -- but before the door was completely shut behind him, Mark was in his lover’s arms. Their bodies came together with a thump, their mouths fusing, and their respective phones hitting the floor, instantly forgotten.

Mark moaned and felt an answering echo of sound from Joe. Eyes closed, he held on tight as his mouth was ravished. He managed to do some ravishing of his own, his tongue tangling with Joe’s, then parting from it to explore the contours of Joe’s mouth. Mark sought out the new, yet fast becoming familiar, feel and flavor of his lover. A haze of longing clouded his thoughts until all that was left was pure need and an aching desire for more.

Sure hands traveled down his back, smoothing over his body. Even though the sensation was muffled by the layers of cloth between them, those fingers managed to stir goose bumps on Mark's flesh. He groaned again when the cheeks of his ass were firmly cupped. His body was pulled forward, his cock grinding against Joe, while an insistent thigh slid between his own. Given something to rub against, Mark took full advantage and rode that muscular thigh, moaning with delight at the pressure and friction that worked his cock and balls.

With a growl, Joe's hands clenched and Mark's feet left the ground. The world took a dizzying dip, and he landed with a controlled thud on the sturdy table that graced the small inside hall. Eyelids snapping wide in amazement, Mark could do nothing but hang on when Joe began to strip him in a frenzied rush. Mark's suit jacket was pushed down his shoulders and swept away.

"Fuck, I need you so bad. Hasn't even been forty-eight hours since I last saw you, but it feels like forever," Joe admitted, his voice a tight rasp.

"So hurry up and have me. Let me...argh, Joe!" Mark protested when Joe stopped him in mid-reach.

"Wait! Where's Chip?"

"What?"

"Chip. Don't want to be interrupted."

"Back porch, enclosed, heated, dog door, yard. Buttons," Mark blurted out, concluding his staccato speech as coherently as possible. Joe's hands were holding Mark back from getting to the fastenings on Joe's shirt. Frustration and need were robbing him of sensible speech.

No doubt understanding because of his own urgency, Joe released him, allowing Mark access while he himself attacked the buttons on Mark's shirt. In moments, Joe managed to

get rid of Mark's shirt; then he unfastened and unzipped Mark's pants. Parting the fabric, the warm, rich smell of male arousal wafted up and out.

Joe spit out a gravelly curse. Pushing Mark back, his hands went to the back of the waistband of Mark's dress pants, shoving the material down. Joe's actions, done with a rough, controlled frenzy, sent the blood surging through Mark's veins. The thick column of his rapidly filling erection jumped, the full tip of the crown growing even more red and hot as clear fluid leaked from the tiny slit. His shoes and socks hit the carpeted floor with a barely audible thud.

In seconds flat, Mark was bare-assed on the table, and Joe was giving him a look that was all feral lust and hunger. Before Mark could form a rational thought, Joe had sunk to his knees and Mark's cock was in his mouth.

Mark nearly howled at the sudden silky wet heat that engulfed his straining cock. He curled forward, hands gripping Joe's hair and shoulder as Joe's tongue did things that had him mindlessly squirming and moaning. The pleasure reached a plateau, holding at a near feverish level that was just short of throwing him over and into the blissful abyss of climax. Trying to rock his hips to get more, Mark whimpered in frustration when Joe firmly held him still and looked up with fire in his eyes.

"You're welcome to fight me, but I guarantee you'll take what I give you and love it."

"Bastard," Mark snarled.

Joe rose seamlessly to his feet and took Mark's mouth in a searing kiss clearly and specifically designed to subdue him. Any ideas Mark might have had to struggle disappeared. With a moan, he melted, going where Joe guided him until he was leaning back against the wall. His hips were pulled forward. Instinctively he started to wrap his legs around Joe, but one limb was caught and pushed upward against his chest, leaving him wide open and vulnerable to whatever Joe determined he'd do next.

His lover shot him a teasing grin; lightly callused fingertips swept gently up and down the crease of his ass. Gossamer touches had his hole practically fluttering as it tightened and relaxed.

“Need me?” Joe murmured. He’d crowded even closer, his jean-clad hips tight between Mark’s spread thighs.

The rough fabric lightly abraded Mark’s balls, and he grunted with every rhythmic sway of Joe’s body. “Fuck, yes. Come on. More.”

“Definitely more,” Joe promised while leaning in for another scorching kiss.

Breaking the seal of their lips, Joe reached into his back pocket and came back with a small disposable tube. Mark’s eyes lit up. Lube. With a raspy chuckle, Joe ripped the top off. “You look like a kid who just got what he wanted for Christmas.”

“Never wanted any present more than this. Hurry,” Mark pleaded shamelessly, then cried out and flopped back against the wall when slick fingers found the entrance to his body. One long finger breached the tight ring and slid deep, wringing a gasp from him.

“Easy, baby,” Joe soothed.

Joe searched for and easily found Mark’s prostate. One touch made Mark jump and moan again, another had him panting for air, and a third had him begging frantically. Before he knew it he was wantonly riding Joe’s fingers, while Joe’s mouth, teeth, and tongue wandered over his throat and shoulders.

“Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” Mark beseeched over and over. Lust had done away with any lingering anxiety or restraint he might once have labored under.

“I intend to. There’s just one problem,” Joe breathed in Mark’s ear.

“Nooo...what problem?” Mark wailed.

“My hands are full and my cock is still in my pants. How about you help me out, lover?”

Eagerly, Mark leaned forward and fumbled with Joe's jeans, unfastening the denim and pushing the fabric aside. Joe's cock sprang out. A flash of heat spread over Mark's skin. With reverent fingers, he traced the gnarled veins over the thick, rigid column, then stroked the solid length from base to tip. "Oh, fuck, so big. Want it, Joe. Come on. Now." Biting his lip against the zing of sensation that hit when Joe's fingers left the snug recesses of his body, Mark watched Joe take himself in hand to spread the remaining lube over his shaft.

"Right now," Joe agreed and pressed the head of his cock against Mark's anus.

Mark could swear he felt the throb of Joe's heart against his hole, a thought that was swept away when Joe pressed forward. His cock spread Mark's tender flesh, which eased open to accept the slow invasion. Mark cried out at the stretch and fleeting burn that accompanied the longed-for penetration.

"There now, baby. I'm in, I'm in," Joe crooned. Hips barely rocking, the tiny movement immediately soothed any distress, turning it into desire.

"More," Mark insisted.

Apparently at the end of his patience, Joe gave him just what he asked for. With one lengthy and smooth glide, he was buried to the hilt, balls resting against Mark's ass.

Mark threw his head back and was saved from a bump on the head by Joe's hand. "Yesss," he hissed. "Thank you, Joe. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"For saving your head or filling your ass?"

"Both, but mostly the last one. *Joe*." Mark panted. "Feels so good."

"Gonna feel even better," Joe promised and began to move once more.

Every thrust of his hips drew a moan, grunt, or whimper of pleasure from Mark. The heat built between them, the scent of laboring male strong and tart. The air surrounding them was redolent with the rousing aromas and sounds of their lovemaking.

Arms wrapped around Joe's neck, Mark fell into the rhythm of Joe's body grinding with his. Every advance of Joe's cock sent it sliding over the small gland deep inside Mark. It propelled waves of arousal inward that gathered in Mark's belly. Every withdrawal was just as devastating in its ability to daze him, but Mark's sheath drew tautly around his lover in an effort to hold Joe in. Both of them grunted at the constriction.

"Fuck, I love that, how you try to keep me inside," Joe gasped; Mark shook at the primitive rasp that vibrated his inner ear.

Joe redoubled his efforts and was soon slamming into Mark. The small table rocked and thumped against the wall. Viscerally aware of it, Mark closed his eyes and drank in sound of the repetitive beat. It was the music of sex, and it excited him almost as much as the thick cock that speared again and again into his body.

He buried his head in the crook of Joe's shoulder. Sweat trickled down his back and belly and formed under his knees where they lay braced over Joe's forearms. An indrawn breath brought Joe's scent sweeping in, tangled with their combined arousal. A deep ache stabbed through his abdomen, and he fastened his teeth in the skin of Joe's shoulder. Salty musk filled his mouth; he mindlessly sucked it in...

Then Joe's hand found Mark's rigid cock. One pull, and Mark screamed as the final stimulus he needed slid seamlessly into place.

Climax roared over him, his seed spraying between their torsos in stuttering spurts. Joe's guttural groan echoed dimly in Mark's ear, while a last surging swell and quiver of his cock announced his lover's own release. Creamy spurts of semen bathed his tender passage, the warmth of it blending with Mark's body heat while further melding the two of them together. Lungs heaving for air, Mark listened to the wild thump of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

Gradually, their bodies cooled and relaxed. Mark shivered when Joe nuzzled his shoulder and kissed his sensitized skin.

“Gotta move, babe,” Joe warned softly. Easing back, his softened cock slid free.

Mark uttered a half-hearted protest but let him go. His legs felt stiff as Joe released and lowered them; he gave them an experimental swing, working the knees to loosen them before scooting to the edge of the table. Mark was grateful Joe reached out to help him when his wayward knees wobbled.

Joe chuckled. “I seem to have driven all the starch out of you.”

“I am feeling a bit limp,” Mark admitted, then blushed at Joe’s evil chuckle. “Shut up. You know that’s not what I meant,” he grouched, looking ruefully down at his deflated member. “Besides, you’ve got nothing to brag about at the moment, either.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Joe agreed cheerfully. “Just let me rest for a bit, and I’ll be boasting again before you know it.”

Mark snorted. “How about some food and a shower first? I’m sticky and I’m starving. Not a good combination.”

“I could go for that. Lead the way.”

Mark bent to gather his discarded clothes.

“Now there’s a sight a man could get used to,” Joe growled, crowding close as Mark straightened.

“What?” he asked, surprised by the breathless quality of own voice. He was still getting used to how a certain tone in Joe’s voice could affect him so easily.

“My come, showing slick and wet around your tiny little hole.” Joe inclined his head to nuzzle the side of Mark’s throat, his strong arms encircling his lover’s body. One hand found an exposed nipple on his Mark’s chest, and Joe softly strummed it with his fingertips. “Your backdoor has that pouty-pink and just-fucked look. It amazes me how something so delicate looking can take my cock and give so much pleasure in return.”

“Oh, jeez.” Mark closed his eyes, swayed, and was tugged back against Joe’s hardening erection.

“Doesn’t look like I’m going to need much of a rest at all. Bathroom, babe. I’m going to show you how much fun a shower can be.”

Groaning with renewed arousal, Mark took a step forward, his own swelling cock rising to point the way.

Forty-five minutes later, he and Joe were clean, sated, and seated at his kitchen table. Eagerly, they scarfed down the Chinese food Mark had brought home. At first, Joe had been apologetic about literally stealing the food out of his mouth, but Mark had shrugged and assured him there was plenty. He always bought twice what he could eat so that he could enjoy the leftovers the next day.

“I’d rather enjoy you eating with me any day than have leftovers.”

Joe twined an arm around the back of Mark’s neck, holding him while he bestowed a tender kiss on Mark’s lips before offering up a shrimp egg roll. Licking his lips first to savor Joe’s flavor, Mark took a bite, then watched as the rest disappeared into Joe’s mouth. They locked gazes as each chewed. Mark felt a bubble of laughter stir inside himself and found an answering twinkle in Joe’s eyes.

He snickered. “This reminds me of a couple of movies I’ve seen where the lovers feed each other.”

“And end up devouring each other in bed,” Joe finished with a low chortle. “I’ve seen those, too, but I gotta tell you, babe, you’ve already been devoured twice in the last...” Joe checked his watch, “...well, less than two hours. I don’t think at this point I’ve got a third round in me.”

“That’s okay. I don’t think I could take a third round,” Mark confessed, shifting slightly in his chair.

Joe hissed softly. “Was I too rough?”

"No. I'm just not used to this yet."

"Then we'll just have to keep at it until you're good 'n' broke in."

Thinking he should be offended, Mark couldn't help but laugh. "You make my ass sound like a pair of new shoes."

"I would never compare such a fine item to a pair of shoes. Besides, we don't want to break it in too well. Unlike shoes, I don't think there are any repair shops around for that kind of thing." Mark gave him a gimlet-eyed stare before reaching for his glass and downing several swallows of water. "And to tell you the truth," Joe confided in a conspiratorial whisper. "I like the way it feels right now. Nice and tight."

Mark felt a blush rise to his cheeks. Taking a last gulp, he carefully set his glass down.

"That's a look I remember well," Joe said softly, his eyes suddenly serious.

"What?"

"Big, bashful eyes and flushed cheeks. I still can't believe you managed to hide all these years. You are so..."

"Adorable?" Mark supplied with a grimace.

Joe stretched out his arm again and pulled Mark close. "Beautiful, cute, lovely, sweet, angelic, charming." Each word was punctuated with a kiss. "Can we leave the dishes for the morning? I want to take you to bed."

"I thought you weren't up for a third time," Mark commented doubtfully. His hole gave a convulsive twitch, and he winced.

"I'm not. I just want to strip down, hold you next to me, and sleep for a while. Is that all right?"

Mark nodded. "That sounds perfect. But can we just rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher?"

Joe chuckled. "Whatever you want, babe."

Mark grinned, and together they cleared the table.

* * * * *

With Joe solid and warm at his back, Mark lay in bed, hovering on the threshold of sleep. Joe's voice, soft and deep, seemed to come from far, far away, barely causing a ripple in the dreamy state of his consciousness.

"Mark?"

"Mmm?"

"That man at work you don't like...what did you say his name was again?"

"Ummm, Derek Swenson," he muttered and stirred uneasily. Deep under the surface, a hint of alarm stirred and started to rise, forcing his quiescent mind from its drowsy state. He felt Joe's arms tightened around him.

"Shhh. Hush, baby, go to sleep."

Comforted by Joe's words and the security of his embrace, Mark's apprehension died without a whimper. He sank into blissful slumber.

Joe smiled and nuzzled his cheek against Mark's hair. That familiar aroma of birch and mint drifted to his nostrils. It was a scent he'd learned to cherish, as it would always remind him of those days at the cabin and how the man in his arms had come to be his.

He'd had a feeling that if he waited until Mark was on the edge of sleep, he could get his stubborn architect to spill the name of the man he'd mentioned earlier. This Swenson guy was apparently doing something to upset Mark. The fact that Mark, being the nice person he was, was disturbed by this individual was enough to put Joe on edge. More than likely Mark was putting up with things he shouldn't. That it was sexual in nature, Joe had little doubt. His young lover was quickly losing his shyness where Joe was concerned, but Joe was not

unmindful of the fact that until just recently, Mark had been a virgin. He also seemed, while not exactly firmly in the closet, reluctant to make it widely known that he was gay.

From Mark's description of his formative years, not to mention their own interactions, Joe could see that Mark was definitely not the outgoing type. He'd talked about his friendship with Charlotte Adams from his office, but aside from her and the grandparents who'd raised him, Mark didn't appear to have any other close ties. No doubt he'd made it a point to keep others at bay for fear of being hurt. Joe snuggled a bit tighter into his lover.

Human psychology was something that had always intrigued him. If his talents hadn't lain more strongly in other directions, Joe might have become a psychologist. He could easily see that Mark's personality had dictated how he'd handled his fear of being different. He'd hidden himself from prying eyes. Had Mark had a more aggressive personality, he might have openly flaunted his sexuality. In both cases, he would have been hurt.

Joe inhaled deeply and sighed. He'd always felt that being unable to accept the diversity of others was one of mankind's biggest faults. If more people would follow the golden rule and treat others as they wished to be treated, there'd be a hell of a lot fewer problems in the world.

Still, he was absolutely sure of one thing. This Derek Swenson wasn't treating Mark as he should, and that was something Joe was determined to put an end to. At this point, he wasn't exactly sure how that would be accomplished, but he was bound and determined to see it done. His lover wasn't going to spend part of his existence being uncomfortable in his workplace.

Placing a light kiss on the rounded cheek beneath his, Joe closed his eyes and relaxed. Tomorrow would bring answers. Tonight was for the simple joy of being with the man he loved.

Chapter Six

“Oh, shit,” Mark muttered under his breath. He could hear muffled voices on the other side of the closed door. The day of Joe’s family dinner had arrived, and Mark was doing his best not to dissolve into a shaking heap.

“What’s wrong?” Joe asked.

Mark glanced at the man standing so at ease by his side, all the while willing the tightness in his chest to go away. “Nothing.”

“You just said ‘Oh, shit.’ Something’s wrong.”

“I’m nervous, all right?”

Joe smiled and turned to face him. “I know you are. I know you don’t like meeting new people, and I appreciate what you’re going through to do this for me. But this is my family, Mark. I want them to get to know you, and I’m hoping, once you get used to them, you’ll be comfortable with and maybe even like them.”

“I know,” Mark confessed, feeling guilty and slightly miserable. “Sorry. I wish I was better at this kind of thing.”

“You don’t have to be better at anything. Just be yourself. They’ll take care of the rest. There’s pretty much no one in that bunch who has trouble keeping a conversation going. All you need to do is relax and let them wash over you. And, remember, I’m right here.”

Mark nodded and gratefully accepted the strong arms that pulled him in. He leaned against Joe for a moment, then tipped his head up invitingly. Joe accepted without hesitation. When their kiss ended, Mark smiled at him.

“That’s better,” Joe commented, his voice filled with approval.

“What?”

“You’re not frowning anymore.”

“Have I been frowning?”

“Mmm hmm. Let’s see if we can widen that smile.” Joe swooped in for a deeper kiss. They were so lost in their passion and the mesmerizing dance of their tongues that they failed to note when the front door opened.

“Mommy! Uncle Joe’s here. He’s kissing some man!”

Mark wrenched himself free of Joe’s arms, his face flaming in embarrassment. Joe merely laughed and made a grab for the boy who’d so baldly announced their arrival.

“Lance, you little brat, you’re not supposed to tell everybody.”

Lance giggled and threw himself into Joe’s arms. “Uncle Joe! We got a puppy!”

“A puppy! What kind of a puppy?”

“A gold ’trever. Come and see!”

Joe laughed, lifting the boy high. “A golden retriever, huh? Pretty nice, kiddo.” Swinging back to Mark, he motioned him inside and closed the door behind them. “Lance, say hello to Mark.”

“Hi.” Lance dutifully replied. “Are you Uncle Joe’s boyfriend?”

“Um, yes, I guess I am,” Mark replied. “Hi, Lance. It’s nice to meet you.”

“About time you got here.”

Mark took his shell-shocked gaze from Lance in time to see a dark-haired man in his mid-thirties approach.

“I see you’ve met the man of the house,” he said, indicating Lance. “I’m his dad, Phil Goddard; you must be Mark.” Phil held out his hand.

Mark mustered a smile and shook the proffered hand. “Mark Bartel. Nice to meet you, Phil.”

“Same here.”

Joe set Lance on his feet as Phil hustled them down a short hall that seemed to cut from the front of the house to the back. Ahead, against the left wall, was a staircase, but before they reached it, they made a left through an open doorway and entered a spacious living room.

In the ensuing confusion of introductions, Mark tried to keep his head from reeling while putting names to faces. Joe’s sister, Sandy, hugged him as though they were the closest of friends and had known each other forever. His brother Clay settled for a grin and a handshake. The family resemblance was unmistakable among the three siblings. All were tall and had hair in varying shades of blond. In addition, Sandy’s eyes were nearly as intense a blue as Joe’s, and Clay’s smile was the mirror image of Joe’s. It was at once disconcerting and comforting to see faces that reflected a familiarity with the man he now held so dear.

Mark exchanged quiet hellos with Clay’s girlfriend when they were introduced. Kathy, he noted, too, appeared to be a bit ill at ease.

“An ally,” she murmured conspiratorially when they greeted each other. “I can’t tell you how glad I am not to be the only practical stranger here.”

“I heard that,” Sandy remarked with a grin. “You’re not a stranger, Kathy. We’ve known you for what, four weeks? You’re practically family.” She gave Clay a significant look as though daring him to deny it. Clay wisely kept his mouth shut. “But don’t you two worry.

The Moning/Goddard clan are experts at sucking people in. We'll have you eating out of our hands in no time."

"I'd really prefer a plate, if you don't mind," Mark managed to reply, surprising even himself.

There was general laughter and Joe, obviously delighted by Mark's effort, gave him a quick one-armed hug and a peck on the temple. Mark stiffened, completely taken aback by Joe's open display of affection in front of his relatives.

"It's all right," Joe whispered, obviously perceiving his unease.

Mark struggled to relax, then noticed the young girl across the room. She was giving him a slightly hostile look. Stung by it, Mark subtly tried to separate himself from Joe.

His lover followed the line of Mark's gaze. He murmured a quizzical, "Hmm," and let Mark have his way.

The final introductions were made and Mark met Joe's two nieces, Lissa, the youngest, and Jessica, the eldest Goddard child. Lissa was a sweet, carefree child of six who enthusiastically gave Uncle Joe a sloppy kiss on the cheek and a happily bestowed "Hi" on Mark, before wiggling free to chase after her brother who'd gone to check on the treasured puppy.

Although her expression had slightly modified, Jessica gave Mark a very grudging hello. She was obviously better disposed toward her Uncle Joe, unbending enough to give him a hug, but was still more reserved than the other two children had been. Mark hoped it was just her natural manner and not because he was there. Jessica trailed out after her siblings, and Mark turned his attention back to Joe's sister.

Sandra was urging them to be seated. "Now that I have you where I want you, let's begin the interrogation."

"Oh, Lord, have mercy." Joe rolled his eyes.

Mark and Joe were treated to chuckles and myriad expressions of sympathy, but Sandy was focused. She launched her opening salvo. "So how did you two meet? I've gotten very little out of my brother, Mark. I expect you to be a little more forthcoming."

"Me?" Mark squeaked.

"Of course."

"Sandy, don't pick on Mark. I promised him I'd protect him from you," Joe teased.

"Well, somebody better start 'fessing up. I want details," Sandy insisted.

Joe gave an exaggerated sigh. He turned to Kathy. "Did you have to endure this?"

"Oh, yes. Sandy knows everything about me, including my shoe size and the name of my first-grade teacher."

"Stop stalling," Sandy demanded, giving her brother a proud and unrepentant smile.

Joe shrugged and gave in. "All right. Just don't get excited, okay?"

Sandy narrowed her eyes. "About what?"

"About the fact that Mark saved my life." Joe's words caused a general uproar. Finally managing to get everyone quiet, he explained.

Mark watched his lover with a kind of grateful awe. Leaving out key personal and private elements, Joe calmly mentioned how they'd met and discussed the accident. He described Mark's rescue and subsequent care of him, the temporary and targeted loss of memory, and how they'd finally discovered that it was all right to be attracted to each other. His lover managed to adeptly convey some of the poignant elements that had rocked both himself and Mark during those days they'd been trapped in the cabin together. Never once was Joe overly revealing about the passion and angst that had affected them. In fact, by the time Joe's story was finished, Mark found himself the target of various emotion-filled looks.

Shifting uncomfortably on the sofa, he edged closer to Joe. "What?" he uttered softly, finally unnerved enough to speak.

“He wasn’t exaggerating. You really saved Joe’s life,” Clay replied quietly. “Thank you, Mark, from the entire family.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and then Kathy spoke up. “God, it’s so romantic. Just like in a movie or a book.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Sandy agreed. Both women trained eyes softened by unshed tears on Mark.

“Women,” Phil remarked with a teasing roll of his eyes. “Mark just did what any decent person would do.”

“It’s not the rescue thing, Philip,” Sandy scolded, “although that’s part of it. It’s the whole thing and especially how they fell in love.”

“Oh, crap,” Clay groused. “Let’s not start talking about luvvvv.” He drawled that last with a smirk.

All the men laughed. Mark was relieved. Things had turned a little too serious for him, not to mention the fact that neither he nor Joe had ever mentioned love. It was a subject he wasn’t ready to broach, not even when he was alone with Joe, let alone in front of his lover’s entire family.

“I don’t care,” a small voice piped up from across the room. Jessica had returned and was standing in the doorway. “He can’t take Uncle Drew’s place,” she said, tears filling her eyes. Then, quietly addressing Mark, “I don’t want you here. I want Uncle Drew.”

“Jessica!” Phil and Sandy spoke simultaneously and started to rise from their seats. With a muffled sob, Jessica disappeared, her footfalls audible as she raced away up the stairs.

“No,” Joe insisted, waving them back to their places. “I’ll go. I think this is something I should handle. All right?” Both parents nodded. Joe gave Mark a concerned look, and then touching his cheek, he murmured, “It’ll be okay.” He left the room, following the path of the fleeing child.

Shocked and mortified, Mark was even more surprised to feel the sadness that took up residence in his heart. He stared down at his clasped hands, at a loss as for what to say or do. He glanced up when Sandy took Joe's place at his side.

"Mark, I'm so sorry," she said. "Jessica was devastated by Drew's death. She loved him so much."

"It's okay," he replied as he mustered a small smile and met Sandy's gaze. "I take it they were close?"

"Yes." She paused and caught her husband's eyes. "Honey, why don't you take Clay and Kathy to the kitchen? The pot roast should just about be done, and I think it's time we start organizing dinner." Phil nodded and led the other two away. Sandy turned back to Mark and continued from where they'd left off. "The two of them had things in common, like a love of gardening. I think Jess may even have had the beginnings of her first crush aimed at him. Drew accepted it so gracefully and tactfully; while he was affectionate with her, it was never more than what he gave the other children. And he and Joe never made a secret of their love for each other." Sandy reached for one of Mark's hands and took it between her own. "If you haven't already discovered it, you'll come to realize that Joe's not one for hiding his affection from or for the one he loves. No matter who might be around to see."

Mark's eyes widened as a kind of panic fluttered in his chest. Sandy laughed.

"It's not that bad, I promise. It was always just little things to show his love for Drew, even in front of the kids. A kiss on the cheek, holding Drew's hand, that sort of thing."

"You didn't object to two men doing that in front of your children?"

"Why would I? It's no more than what Phil and I do in front of them. I think it's good for children to see and feel a certain amount of affection among the adults in their lives." Sandy squeezed his hand. "Mark, I love my brother. His sexuality has never been an issue in this house. I want my children to grow up accepting of other people's differences. I want

them to know that short of bringing home a crazed wacko, we'll welcome whomever they choose to love."

Mark swallowed hard. "You have a more liberal mindset than a lot of people."

"I sometimes think so myself, but I've also learned that people will surprise you. There are a lot of people who don't broadcast their opinions, who are willing to live and let live."

"I suppose that's so. The silent majority?" Mark questioned with a half smile.

"That's right," Sandy agreed with a smile of her own. She leaned forward and kissed Mark's cheek.

"What's that for?" Mark asked, confused.

"For Joe. For what you've done for him."

"I didn't really do anything. I wish he'd stop saying I saved his life."

"Well, you did, and I thank you, but it's even more than that. You've put the sparkle back in my brother's eyes. After Drew died, it's like the light went out inside him. Joe was just going through the motions, living life day to day but not really finding any joy in it. Once in a while, I'd see a glimmer peak through, but..." Sandy stopped for a moment. Even though she turned her head, Mark could see her furiously blinking her eyes. She turned back with a wry smile. "Sorry about that. I've wanted to say this to you from the first day I spoke with Joe after he got back. I immediately noticed the change in him, and I knew it was because of you. I understand it wasn't anything you deliberately did and something you don't feel you deserve credit for, but I'm thanking you anyway. Joe's in love, and he's ready to face life again with joy. I was afraid I'd never see that again."

Before Mark could respond, Joe appeared. "Hey, you're not trying to seduce my man away, are you?"

Sandy sprang up from her seat and laughed. "As if I could. How'd it go upstairs?"

Mark, too, rose and gratefully extended his hand when his lover reached for it. Joe stood at Mark's side and faced his sister.

"Fine. We talked about Drew and how much we both loved him. I told her that it was right to never stop loving him, but that there was room in our hearts for many people. I told her how Mark was one of those people and how much I needed him in my life, how he made me feel happy again."

"Was she all right with that?" Sandy asked. The look she gave Mark held the distinct flavor of an "I told you so."

"Yeah. I think she understands. She's mostly embarrassed now about facing Mark. I told her it was all right not to come down for supper."

"Maybe we should go," Mark suggested. "This is her home, after all. I don't want my presence to make her feel she can't come out of her room."

"Nonsense," Sandy insisted. "A little time alone in her room is just what she needs. I think it will help her better appreciate the idea of thinking before speaking. It's all right, Mark. If I know my Jess, and I do, she'll want to brood for a bit."

"But won't she be hungry?"

"I'll see to it that she eats. Stop worrying. You two talk. I'm going to go see how much trouble everyone else has gotten into in my kitchen."

Before Sandy was fully out of the room, Mark found himself pulled into a vigorous bear hug.

"I'm sorry, babe. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Joe, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"My ribs feel like they're about to crack."

Joe lightened his grip but didn't let go. "Better?"

"Yeah."

They held each other while gently swaying to the cadence of their own music.

"I meant what I said," Joe murmured against Mark's temple. "You've made me happy again."

"You make me happy, too," Mark admitted softly. As he stood there, held securely in his lover's arms, Mark felt the utter truth of that statement seep into every atom of his being. This relationship was rapidly becoming the most important thing in his life. The thought thrilled and yet terrified him. Would he be able to live up to the specter of Joe's dead lover? Unable to answer the question for now, Mark merely sighed. He knew he was going to try. Joe was worth facing any number of obstacles and insecurities.

Mind made up, he gently disentangled himself from Joe's embrace. His lover looked at him with a questioning tilt of his head. "I like your family," Mark declared decisively.

Joe chuckled. "Even Jess?"

"Even Jess."

Joe gave him a mischievous smile. "Let's go eat. We'll hang out a little longer, and then I'm taking you home. I want to show you my complete and utter gratitude."

Mark boldly kissed him, then sauntered out of the room as he sent Joe an impudent wink over his shoulder. "I can live with that."

Turning away, he smiled at the sound of Joe's laughter. As expected, a strong arm draped itself over his shoulders. Together, the two of them headed for the kitchen. There were challenges ahead, Mark knew. He and Char had an important project to complete, and he had the feeling Derek would be standing by, not only to rock Mark's professional boat, but his personal one as well. And then there was Joe. They'd already encountered a few

pitfalls but managed to navigate around them. No doubt there were more ahead, but in an odd way, Mark was looking forward to them. His quiet life had been turned upside down. He was a little dizzy, but he was loving it.

 THE END 

Kate Steele

By day, mild-mannered Kate Steele lives the quiet life in rural Indiana with family in a century-old farm house. Ensconced in front of her trusty computer, she bravely fights off the attention of two annoying, yet sweet, lovebirds and two dogs who always seem to have to go outside. Transformed at night into a wild and fearless creature, Kate visits alien worlds, fights insatiable bloodlust, howls at the moon, and always brings home the most utterly gorgeous alpha male to indulge in wild sexual fantasies. Ah, the good life.

Visit Kate on the Web at www.katesteele.com.