

Loose Id

A sure-fire

Curve

KATE STEELE

A SURE-FIRE CURE

Kate Steele

LooseId®

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex).

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-358-2

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Olivia Wong
Cover Artist: Croco Designs

Dedication

To my friend and almost brother, Drew, whose suggestions and comments were invaluable. You're a peach. And, yes, as far as Americanisms go, this is a good thing. And to my dearest Bobby, for listening to me bitch and for not agreeing with my every complaint.

Chapter One

Dr. Conlon's assistant unlocked the front door and entered the dimly lit reception area. As always, she was greeted by the astringent smell of disinfectant mingled with the lemon scented cleaner the maintenance crew used. Underlying both was the warm, distinctive smell of the boarders.

At six a.m., the morning sunlight was just beginning to pour in through the large plate glass window at the front of the office. Stray dust motes sparkled and danced, stirred by the incoming air provided by the opening door. She flipped on the overhead light, stashed her purse behind the counter, turned on the computer, then opened the first of two doors that led to the back. Walking along the short corridor, she turned on the lights in each of three exam rooms along the way, leaving the bathroom lights off. Opening the door at the end of the hall, she stepped through and paused, a slight frown crossing her face.

It was quiet. Usually at this time everyone was up. The normal cacophony of barks, whimpers and howls was strangely absent. Had she not seen the nine residents with her own eyes the previous night, she would have sworn the kennels and cages were empty. An inkling of suspicion stirred in her mind.

She continued on through the large room with its supply cupboards, grooming tables, electronic weight scale and every other accouterment necessary to a working veterinarian. Passing the surgery room, she stepped into the kennel area. Sure enough, Dean Conlon, DVM, had stretched out his six-foot, two-inch frame on the floor. His bed was a long cushion he'd brought in from the lounge chair that sat on the small patio behind the surgery, and his blanket was one of his lab coats, with another wadded up under his head for a pillow.

Seven dogs of various sizes and shapes and two cats slept at the front of their kennels and cages, seemingly to be as close to Dean as possible. For his part, Dean had pushed the cushion close to and lay within inches of the kennel doors.

At first peaceful, Dean's eyes began to move under his closed lids.

He was swimming. The water was cool, refreshing, sluicing over his skin as he moved effortlessly through it. It felt as though hands were lightly, insistently caressing every inch of his body. Dean shivered at the thought. He continued to swim, so lost in the movement that he was unaware when the first touch began. A warm and strong hand glided over his back. He hesitated, slowing, his strokes becoming unsure and choppy as the hand was joined by another. Dean found himself treading water as those large, slightly rough palms moved over him.

It was dark, dark enough that he could see only a vague outline of who those hands belonged to -- a stranger, wide-shouldered and firmly muscled, his lower body lost from view under the water. Dean strained to see, then moaned as a hand slid around him and firmly cupped the smooth cheek of his ass, the other finding his cock. A few firm strokes brought him fully, painfully erect.

Determined lips, soft and insistent, fastened to his, a rough tongue demanding entry. Dean groaned under the sensual assault and opened, welcoming the sultry intruder that explored his mouth. The stranger's tongue stroked over his, just as his hand continued to stroke Dean's cock. Dean felt himself building rapidly, inevitably toward climax. There was an electric tingle in his balls as they drew tightly to his body, his throbbing cock swelling larger, harder. Dean felt the agonizing, pleasurable pressure increase ... he was going to shoot. It was coming, coming ...

"Dean? It's time to get up, Doc."

Dean's eyelids fluttered as the dream faded, receding into his subconscious, but his body was not as willing to relinquish it, clamoring for the release that had been so close. Dean groaned a protest against waking and his body's demand. He lay blinking, his vision finally focusing on his assistant, Cassie, as she loomed over him grinning.

"Morning," he grated out, his voice husky and groggy with sleep.

She clucked solicitously, shaking her head. "Morning, Doc. I see you decided to keep the patients company again. You're gonna ruin your back that way."

"Nah, the back's fine, but I sure could use a cup of coffee." Dean tried to put the plea into his eyes as well as his words.

Cassie grinned again. "Coming right up."

As she left on her mission of mercy, Dean breathed a sigh of relief. He'd discovered on waking that he had a rock-solid erection; whether it was the result of his dream or the fact that he had to take a major piss, he wasn't sure. He was just grateful that he'd been lying slightly on his side with his lab coat hiding the tell-tale bulge. He ran a hand through his hair

and snorted with amusement at what Cassie might have thought had she come in to find him under a tent; a tent that owed its support to his raging hard-on.

He smiled as he sat up and found he was the target for nine pairs of canine and feline eyes. "Morning, everyone, sleep well?" He received a mix of responses between slow waves from tails and blinks from eyes ranging from golden/green to black. "Don't everybody answer at once now," he admonished lightly.

Apparently taking this as permission to speak, a few barks, whimpers and one very loud meow ensued.

"Breakfast in a little while, guys." Dean rose to his feet with a groan. "Right now, though, I gotta go!" His long legs brought him quickly to the bathroom, where he flipped on the lights and closed and locked the door. Standing in front of the toilet, he unbuttoned his jeans, freeing his straining erection, and willed it to soften. A sigh that bordered on a groan of relief passed his lips as the flow of urine began, easing his over-burdened bladder.

After what he was sure was a record-breaking piss, Dean tucked himself in and moved to the sink, washing his hands while absentmindedly gazing at himself in the mirror. His dark-brown hair was tousled, the thick, short waves in disarray. When he'd dried his hands, he finger-brushed the strands haphazardly, then gave up. His brown eyes, with their dark amber flecks were clear, sleep now pushed away. He studied the rest of his features: straight nose, strong jaw and chin, nicely proportioned lips.

I look like my father, he thought with a grimace. For a moment his gaze became faraway and unfocused before it refocused with a snap. Inspecting his image again, he now saw pain and sadness in his eyes. "Damn," he whispered softly, still shaken by the powerful emotions that accompanied thoughts of his father and family. He pushed his melancholy away. "Enough," he mumbled.

Unlocking the bathroom door, he swung it open as he shut the lights off, then made his way to the reception area. The smell of freshly brewed coffee tickled his nostrils, urging him on. He found Cassie waiting for him, holding out his favorite mug, which was filled to the brim. Wordlessly, Dean accepted the mug and took that first ambrosial sip. He breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Cassie, if you could do nothing else, I'd still have hired you just so you'd make me coffee."

"If I'd known that, I wouldn't have done so much around here," she teased.

Dean returned her smile. "How are you and the new assistant doing? She seems competent -- at least when she's helping me."

"Doreen's a real asset, especially with the grooming side of the business."

"That's good. So, what's on the agenda for today?"

Cassie gave Dean a quick rundown of the appointments.

“First one’s not due in for, what, an hour?” At Cassie’s nod, he continued. “Great, I’m gonna slip next door for a quick shower.”

“Okay, Doc.” Cassie sniffed. “You do smell a bit like the guys in the back.”

“Hey, me and the guys, we’re tight. What’s a little smell among friends?”

“It’s okay by me, but Mrs. Perkins is your second appointment. You know how fastidious she is with the precious Muffin.”

He groaned. “Oh, Lord! Guess I’d better go get prettied up.”

Cassie laughed as Dean retreated.

He walked out through the kennel area, stopping briefly to pick up his make-shift bed from the concrete floor. Bestowing words of affection and encouragement to his erstwhile sleeping partners, he let himself out the rear door and dropped the long cushion, with its printed fabric covering of green vines, onto the lounge chair.

Following the well-worn path that angled away from the building that housed his practice, Dean stepped onto the gravel drive and headed for his home, which sat further off the road. The small structure was sheltered by several large maples and an ancient oak. The air was cool, a playful breeze ruffling his hair as he walked.

When he arrived at his front door, Dean was puzzled to see a single, long-stemmed, red rose lying in front of the doorway. Frowning, he picked it up before he let himself in and made a beeline for his bedroom. He dropped the rose on the bedside table, then gathered fresh jeans, a tee-shirt, socks and briefs, laying everything out on the bed. Giving the flower another scowling perusal, he shook his head and shrugged.

Crossing the hall, he entered the bathroom and began his morning routine. He stripped off the previous day’s rumpled clothing and dropped it in the hamper. After brushing and flossing, and a quick rinse with mouthwash, he shaved before stepping into the tub, letting the water run until it was the right temperature. He flipped the toggle for the shower.

“Oh yeeeah.” He groaned softly, standing with his back to the spray. His skin tingled as the heated water cascaded over his scalp and he bent his head to let the spray pound against his nape and shoulder blades. Remembering Cassie’s words, he discovered that while his spine might be fine, his neck was definitely stiff; he resolved to try and remember to bring a pillow to the office for his next night vigil.

Dean smiled, thinking of his patients and boarders. Talk about odd bedfellows. Still, it was better than spending another long night alone. Sometimes it got to be too much, no matter how he tried to distract himself.

He stood relaxed, and the warm water sliding over his body brought forth his early dream. “Mmmm,” he murmured. His cock responded, filling, rising ... insistent. Dean’s gaze traveled down the length of his lean, hard torso, closely examining the one-eyed glare of his demanding erection.

He gazed at it dispassionately, noting the full, ripe head, plump and flushed with blood. Under that smooth cap, a thick stalk of ivory rose with prominent bluish veins pulsing under the satiny-soft skin. The stalk was rooted in a dense patch of dark curls, now dampened by the water that flowed over his body.

His mind wandered back to the first time he'd felt the touch of another's hand. For just a moment, the memory was pleasant, but that part passed way too quickly. Dean swallowed the bile that rose in his throat, forcing the thoughts from his head. Instead he watched his own hand with distant interest as it wrapped around his swollen cock, and he turned fully under the spray. Rivulets of water coursed down his chest and brought his dream to a conscious level again. He reached for the bottle of liquid soap, squirted a dollop into his hand and stroked himself.

His eyes closed; he imagined the feel of those big, calloused hands again caressing his skin. His buttocks clenched. Just as in the dream, he imagined one large hand grasped a taut ass cheek, while the other hand stroked, squeezed and pulled his cock, urging on its need. His belly grew tight and his buttocks flexed as with a few, final, near-frantic strokes, his cock unloaded. Dean's eyelids lifted when rapid-fire pulses of thick, white come arced out and down to spatter on the tub floor. They momentarily painted the blue fish decals with white polka dots, then washed lazily down the drain.

Dean groaned with the release, his body registering the pleasure as it moved through him. Physically replete, he finished his shower, dried, dressed and returned to the office. Yes, he'd felt his climax, but emotionally there was nothing. Eight years after being ruthlessly betrayed by the one person he'd trusted most in the world, his heart was still encased in ice.

The red rose lay forgotten, wilting on the bedside table.

A gaze full of adoration had followed Dean as he walked to his home. Breathless anticipation had filled the watcher, then exultation and delight as Dean took the flower into the house, closing the door behind him.

He'd consented! Dean had accepted this first token, the declaration of love. A tender smile ghosted across the watcher's face. Visions of a future with Dean Conlon danced before eyes gone remote, lost in their own creation of heaven on earth.

* * * * *

Dean woke to a thumping reverberation in his head. Groggily he sat up. A split second of confusion gave way to understanding when he realized he was hearing pounding at the front door instead of suffering some strange, mutant headache. Grabbing his jeans from the chair near the bed where he'd dropped them earlier, he pulled them on, not bothering with briefs. He buttoned a few of the lower buttons while stumbling to the entrance in the dark.

Switching on the living room lights, he unlocked and opened the door to find a tall, broad-shouldered man waiting. Piercing blue eyes captured his from a ruggedly handsome and tanned face that was framed by thick, wavy and swept back sun-bleached hair.

“Doctor Conlon?” The stranger’s voice was firm, deep and demanding.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got a mare that needs attention. She’s about to drop her first foal, but she’s having trouble.”

“Why didn’t you just call?”

Dean was pinned by that brilliant blue-eyed gaze. “I wasn’t taking the chance that you might put me off. This mare’s valuable, Doc. I don’t want to lose her or the foal.”

“I never ignore calls for help,” Dean answered pointedly. “Let me get the rest of my clothes.” He strode back to the bedroom, quickly finished dressing, then returned to the living room to snatch his car keys out of the ashtray resting on a small side table.

“You won’t need those, I’ll drive.”

Dean glared at the man. “You’ll have to bring me home.”

“Not a problem.”

He saw the determination that sparkled in the man’s eyes and nodded. Wordlessly, he grabbed his medical bag and the pair of boots waiting near it. “Let’s go.”

Following the man out, he secured his door and pocketed his keys. In front of the house stood a fairly new truck, dark and shiny in the glare of the outside light. Dean walked around to the passenger side, climbed in and buckled his seat belt after settling his boots and bag on the floor. He leaned back, closing his eyes. His driver, already in place, started the truck and took off.

Dean took a deep breath, willing his nerves and stomach to calm down. It was disconcerting even under the best of circumstances to be pulled unceremoniously from a sound sleep; his head spun with the tiniest bit of disorientation that always seemed to cling for a few minutes whenever he was abruptly awakened. His body needed time to adjust.

Opening his eyes, his gaze was pulled to the motion of the driver’s hands on the steering wheel. In the glow of the dash lights, Dean watched every move. The hands were large and sinewy, the fingers long, broad and tapered; they looked strong and capable. Dean had a fleeting flash of his dream and felt his belly tighten while a tingle threaded its way down the length of his cock. For one unguarded, sleep-befuddled moment he wondered what it would be like to have those hands gliding over his skin.

He came to with a snap and took himself firmly to task. Dean suddenly realized that he had no idea in whose company he was, or where they were going. Clearing his throat, he managed to rasp out his question. “By the way, who are you?”

“Scott Whittaker. I live about five miles from here, on Westover Road. Don’t know if you’ve been by the place, but I’ve got a few acres and some horses.”

Dean stared. A few acres and some horses? The Whittaker place was large, to say the least. He had no idea exactly how big the spread was, but it was more than just a few acres. The property had rolling hills and flat pasture, all neatly fenced and well groomed. The Whittaker appaloosas were some of the most well known and sought after of the breed, both in the U. S. and abroad. When Dean had bought his veterinary practice from old Dr. Dennison a few months ago, he had read the files left behind, including the Whittaker's. He had wondered if he'd hear from them, or if they'd take their business elsewhere.

"I've been by your place, Mr. Whittaker. You've got some beautiful acreage, and from what I've seen, some fine-looking horses."

"Call me Scott."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Scott. You can call me Dean or Doc, I'll answer to either one."

"Glad to meet you, too, Dean. Sorry I had to drag you out of bed."

The rich, low rumble of Scott's voice traveled over Dean's nerve endings and made his stomach do another twist. He took a deep, calming breath, only to find it flavored by a subtle scent that intrigued and tickled his nostrils. It was a full-bodied aroma that wove its way into Dean's nostrils, wafting in to tickle his palate. It smelled faintly of horse, but mostly of man. There was warmth to it and a teasing, almost spicy musk that caused his groin to tighten yet again.

"Not a problem."

A car, another late night traveler, approached them going the opposite way. Dean glanced over at Scott and found the fine planes of his face briefly highlighted by the passing vehicle. His profile was strong -- high cheekbones were overshadowed by his brow and long eyelashes -- and his nose was straight above firm lips and a hard jaw.

Focusing his gaze forward again, Dean unhurriedly examined the kernel of attraction that had germinated the moment he'd opened his door to find Scott standing there. The seed had sent a seeking tendril up and out of the fallow field of Dean's libido, but he knew nothing would come of it. He relaxed back against the seat and again shut his eyes.

He'd felt attraction before; after graduating from vet school, he'd even dared to act on his feelings. He'd find a bar or club and exchange a few words with a likely partner. After that, there was usually some impersonal groping in an out-of-the-way place, topped by a quick fuck and a quicker good-bye. No deeper involvement had been wanted, making the anonymous encounters meaningless and unsatisfactory. It had taken only a few such experiences for him to realize how hollow they left him feeling, and so he settled for being alone and celibate.

Drawn from his somber thoughts when Scott turned onto the Whittaker driveway, Dean opened his eyes and replaced his shoes with his work boots. The drive was long, smooth and paved, unlike Dean's own bumpy gravel road. He straightened and mentally prepared himself to get down to the business at hand.

The path they followed was circular with a big central round patch of grass and a small flower garden. Scott drove past a large, two-story house with a wraparound porch and continued on back to the barnyard. He parked the truck and Dean followed him to the nearby stable. Inside were rows of box stalls, some occupied, others not. Those that were held prime examples of the renowned Whittaker appaloosas.

Pricked ears, soft blowing breaths and wickers greeted Scott's arrival, but he moved quickly down the rows, stopping at the large box stall at the end. Dean was on his heels, his gaze moving from the horses to Scott's muscular ass and the way it flexed so hypnotically under the fabric of the faded denim that encased it. A wave of heat swept over Dean and that fragile tendril of attraction surged upward and sprouted leaves.

A tiny frisson of alarm sent a shiver down his spine. He'd felt desire many times, but for some reason, this was different. His normal, automatic defenses felt noticeably weak against Scott's allure, and the growing temptation was distinctly intense, almost primal. He frowned, wondering what it was about this man that he found so fascinating. Certainly he'd seen men just as good looking and, yeah, Scott's body was amazing -- sleek and tight with a fine delineation of muscle that was more than evident when he moved.

Dean's eyes narrowed. *When did I notice all that?* he asked himself silently, then stiffened his spine. Maybe it was the time of night or the way he'd been dragged out of bed. Whatever the reason, he was determined to break the spell that Scott seemed unaware of weaving.

Arriving at the stall that held his patient, he was reminded of his purpose in coming here and ruthlessly squashed all other thoughts. The mare was down, and soft groans issued from her while shudders racked her belly with each contraction.

Scott cursed softly. "Shit." He turned to Dean. "What do you need, Doc?"

"A clean bucket filled with hot water. Some soap and towels, I too."

Scott instructed his stableman to bring the supplies, then entered the stall, walking quietly to the mare. He settled in the straw by her head. Before he himself approached the mare, Dean set what he needed from his bag aside and used the soap and bucket of hot water he was given. He quickly washed his hands and arms, dried off, then donned sterile gloves and a long sleeve that ended well up the length of his arm. Finally, he used disinfectant solution around the mare's vulva, as well as on his hand and arm.

"Hold her," Dean quietly instructed. Keeping his sterile arm high off the floor, he got into position behind the mare and lay down on his side. The straw-covered concrete was hard and Dean grimaced. The mare's entrance was still well lubricated from the rupture of her water, so he carefully worked his hand inside, gritting his teeth as another contraction caused her to bear down on his wrist. Taking deep, even breaths, Dean waited for the muscles to relax, then moved his arm deeper until he located the problem. One of the foal's legs was bent back and its head was turned to the side.

Working against the mare's spasms, Dean labored to move the foal back enough to straighten the angled leg. It was a long, arduous process. Each constriction fought to eat away his progress, insistently pushing the foal forward. Applying steady pressure, he was finally able to rearrange the foal's leg. That done, he found its nostrils, gripped as gently as possible, and with a few more endless seconds of agonizing exertion, was able to wiggle the head into position.

While he toiled, Dean heard a calming stream of soft encouragement flowing from Scott. Those soothing words were directed at the mare, but Dean found himself taking comfort from that deep, steady voice as well.

By the time he got the foal repositioned, Dean's shoulders and back were on fire from the strain. His awkward posture and the mare's birthing compressions had all but cut the circulation in his arm. It was with great relief that he slowly drew his arm and hand out. Shifting back as quickly and quietly as possible, he released a sigh when the foal's front legs and nose presented with the next contraction. He could see the twitch of the foal's nostrils; a tired smile curved his lips. With each squeeze, more of the foal appeared until a final rush saw it fully delivered. The umbilical cord snapped as it exited the mare's body.

Using the clean towels supplied, Dean dried the newborn colt and treated the end of the umbilical cord. He looked up to find Scott was grinning widely; when their eyes met, Dean nearly gasped at the sharp zing that shot through him -- a near electrical zap, it twanged every nerve ending in his body. Raw need, swift and hot, shook him. Dean saw the slight widening of Scott's eyes, and the blue that darkened to deep and mysterious azure pools.

A silent recognition seemed to pass between them, an acknowledgement of mutual desire that sent a surge of adrenaline pumping through Dean's veins even as alarm caused his heart to constrict. Such knowledge and need had never been revealed so effortlessly and intensely. Dean felt stripped of his defenses and dropped his gaze, painfully aware of Scott and the aching desire that was impossible to ignore.

Steeling himself, he rose and, arms trembling, picked up the foal and carried it around to the mare's head. Scott moved, and the two of them watched as she rose slightly to sniff and nuzzle her young one. Both men backed away and leaned against the wall -- Dean carefully keeping a discreet distance between them -- waiting to make sure all remained as it should be. The mare lay for a while, resting from her ordeal, joined by her foal. When her afterbirth passed, she struggled to her feet and stood protectively over her colt, paying the men little attention.

Scott asked the stable hand standing outside the stall to bring fresh straw and a pitchfork. On the man's return, he politely turned down the offer of help, removed the soiled straw and replaced it with fresh. The mare stood quietly, apparently well familiar with this routine and the man who performed it. At this point, the foal decided it was time to get

up as well. After several unsuccessful attempts, he clumsily braced on uncertain legs and feet. A few wobbly steps took him to his mother's teat, where he began to nurse.

Both men sighed with relief and left the stall to mother and son. The stable hand went to take care of his other chores and Scott continued to watch them over the stall door while Dean retreated to a nearby straw bale. Sitting down, he toed off his boots. When he began to put on his shoes, his vision was suddenly obstructed by the unexpected appearance of a well-pronounced bulge behind the zipper of a pair of worn jeans.

He looked up. Scott towered over him.

"Hell of a job, Dean. Thanks." Scott held out his hand.

Dean automatically reached out, took it and winced, his arm hurting from his efforts with the mare. Scott's hand was warm and slightly rough with calluses. Dean held in a gasp as another unexpected jolt shot straight down his spine, tightening his belly and sending unwanted signals to his cock. The dream he'd had before surfaced, and he was struck by the similarity of this touch to the one that had brought him so close to climax in his sleep. Maintaining a carefully neutral expression, he disengaged.

"You're welcome."

"Arm sore?"

"Yeah, shoulders and back, too. Comes with the job," he acknowledged.

To his surprise and consternation, Scott stepped behind him and, placing hands on Dean's shoulders, began a firm massage. Dean tensed; he wasn't used to being handled. The unexpected contact felt good and brought home to him just how much he'd missed the touch of another human being. It also sent another wave of panic through him. He didn't want these reminders and feelings.

Scott expertly worked the muscles of his shoulders, but Dean couldn't relax. He pulled away and stood. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get home. I've got to open the office in a few hours and I could use a bit more sleep or I'll be walking around like a zombie all day." He avoided the other man's eyes and busied himself by gathering his things and removing his soiled lab coat, bundling it with the dirty side in into his bag.

"Sure, Doc, I understand." Scott's tone was quiet.

As Scott led the way back down the corridor and out into the fresh, cool, early-morning air, Dean knew there was no way the other man could possibly understand what he was really feeling. He certainly wasn't about to enlighten him. Dean's own private hell was just that -- private.

Without a word, they got back into the truck, and the return trip was made in silence. Dean could feel the tension between them and he was sorry for it, but he felt helpless to set it right. Scott's gesture, though friendly, had carried possibilities that were tempting, but Dean's resolve was deeply ingrained. He wouldn't risk everything he had, his career and his practice, on a quick fuck, some easily won gratification and nothing more.

Eventually, Scott steered the truck onto Dean's driveway and stopped in front of his house. "Send me your bill, Doc, and thanks. I appreciate what you did." He spoke with solemn and easy sincerity.

Dean exited the truck and picked up his bag and boots, then hesitated. "Scott, I ..." He stopped, unable to form the words.

"Yeah?"

Dean met Scott's gaze, but the other man's thoughts were unreadable. "I wish ... what I mean is ... oh, hell, nothing. I'll send the bill." Dean shut the passenger-side door and rounded the front of the vehicle, disgusted by his inability to explain. He silently berated himself for his stupidity.

Scott's window came down. "Dean?"

He stood in front of his door, halting just as he fitted his key into the lock. He swung around. "Yeah?"

Scott grinned. "You gotta learn to relax, man."

Dean snorted softly. "Easier said than done. Goodnight."

Scott replied with a soft goodnight and took off. Dean let himself in and locked the door behind him. He leaned against the door for a moment, shaking his head. Lost in thought, he wandered through the kitchen into the small laundry room, where he soaked his soiled lab coat in soapy water and bleach.

Fatigue pulled at him, his mind strangely blank as he undressed and showered. He dried himself before settling into bed, noting that he still had three hours until he had to get up again. Dean turned on his side, an image of Scott forming behind his closed lids. Struggling to keep his thoughts grounded, he pulled the other pillow to him, wound his arms around it and drifted off. This time when he dreamed of hands caressing him, Scott's face replaced that of the unknown stranger. Dean stirred restlessly, struggling, fighting against the anxiety he'd lived with for years until finally he gave in, groaning as Scott made love to him.

Chapter Two

The next couple of days passed with blessed normalcy. Cassie and Doreen performed with their usual efficiency, keeping his appointments straight, while running the grooming side of the business. Most of Dean's days were taken up with routine exams and inoculations, and he saw his patients, including Doreen's boyfriend's pet, a boa constrictor the man had named Squeeze. The snake had escaped confinement at the boyfriend's home, knocked a glass from the counter it had been investigating and promptly fell on top of it, emerging with a piece of glass imbedded in its skin. Dean had been hard-pressed to keep a straight face as he'd treated the quiescent reptile, but he'd welcomed the novelty Squeeze had represented. After the glass extraction and a few required small stitches, Squeeze was as good as new.

Dean stayed busy and did his best not to dwell on thoughts of a tall, blond horse breeder. His conscious mind did well, but his dreams proved beyond his control. Each night he succumbed to the sultry passions Scott awoke in him and would rouse from sleep, his cock hard and aching for relief. Like any red-blooded male, Dean masturbated, but since meeting the other man, his needs had taken on epic proportions. He felt as if he were a teen again, filled with raging testosterone that needed constant release. It was disconcerting for a man of twenty-seven to once more feel as though a gentle breeze across his groin would be enough to give him a hard-on.

Several days later, the object of his unwilling desires stopped in at the office. Dean was with Cassie, discussing his notes concerning the last patient, when Scott walked in. Dean's stomach dropped, tension filled his body and an involuntary flush warmed his cheeks as vivid images of his fantasies marched in boldly triumphant circles in his head.

A slow smile spread across Scott's face as though he knew exactly what Dean had been dreaming. "Morning, Cassie, morning, Dean, I've come to settle up my bill." His gaze lingered on Dean.

Cassie looked from one man to the other and back again. Dean saw speculation dawn in her eyes, and a smile tugged at her lips. Mortified, he gave her a challenging glare, which Cassie answered with what appeared to be her most innocent expression.

“Let me check that for you, Scott.” She gave him a wink.

“You two know each other?” Dean struggled to keep his tone pleasant, refusing to give into the need to growl.

Scott nodded. “Her dad and mine were the best of friends. Cassie and I grew up together. We went to the same schools so we’ve spent considerable time in each other’s company. You’ll find a lot of that around here. It’s a close-knit community.”

Dean scowled. One moment of letting down his guard, one split-second lapse had led to this. He was almost surely out to Cassie and the reason for it was standing right in front of him. He couldn’t believe how quickly things were spiraling out of his control. Anger and resentment began to build. “That’s great. How’s the colt?”

“Feisty as hell, but his momma’s keeping him in line. He’s sweet, a real spitfire.” Scott’s reply was blithe, as if he were unaware of Dean’s struggle for calm.

On the face of it, Scott’s comments were about the colt, but the last one was directed at Dean in such a way and with such a look in Scott’s eyes, that Dean clearly understood the double entendre. His fury grew.

Just who the fuck did this man think he was to walk into Dean’s place of business and treat it and him like some cheap pick-up in a singles bar? He could feel the heat surging through his veins with the force of his wrath. Dean caught himself before he exploded and retreated into the ever-present ice within him that had become a long-familiar presence.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some work to do. Cassie will take care of you,” Dean replied coldly, meaningfully. He wanted Scott to understand that he’d not find what he was looking for with him. Ignoring Cassie and Scott’s stares, he quickly withdrew, strode down the hall and firmly shut the door behind him.

* * * * *

On the drive home, Scott’s thoughts were filled with Dean; they had been ever since the moment he’d first laid eyes on the contrary man. He frowned as he contemplated Dean’s behavior; Scott was sure Dean felt the same intense interest that he did. There was something about the man, a vulnerability he strove to hide under a frozen, prickly exterior. Not that Dean was always so cold; it only seemed that way whenever Scott made any kind of move. It was then that the glacial barriers would come up.

Scott had had more than his share of casual, sexual encounters. Mutual attraction among men was nothing new to him, and there’d been no mistaking the look in Dean’s eyes that night in the stall. For a moment the vet’s guard had been down. Scott had melted right into those warm brown eyes and sensed the dawning passion, the undisguised fascination

and allure. But as suddenly as they were there, the emotions had been withdrawn, overshadowed by a split-second flash of panic before that blank, icy wall had crashed down between them.

Scott wasn't buying it, not the cold act or the disinterest. He'd seen the anger building in Dean's eyes a few moments ago. Only a man of fire could express such heat and only the object of Dean's desire could stir it to such heights. Scott was determined to find his way inside the man, to learn why Dean was afraid to acknowledge his feelings, and to still those fears. In short, he wanted to stir the hunger until it exploded between them.

But he ached for more than just a casual encounter; he was tired of being alone. He knew that by now most people must have figured out he was gay. After all, there were a lot of pretty, eligible women in the area, and for an unmarried man his age not to take advantage of it -- well, he thought folks would probably believe there could only be one reason. Surprisingly, the population of the small town of Middleton by and large accepted the gays who lived within its sphere. Scott had seldom encountered prejudice for his sexual preferences. Perhaps it was because he was discreet, or maybe that at six-feet, four-inches and two hundred and seventeen pounds, no one dared to ridicule or question him.

Whatever the reason, he wasn't hiding who he was, especially not now, when he was almost certain he'd found someone with whom he might be able to build a life. *Yeah, yeah, I don't really know him yet*, he thought, trying to silence his niggling doubts. But it didn't take a rocket scientist to know, *to feel* that there was something special between them.

He remembered his first sight of Dean. When the other man had answered the door, his brown eyes had been slumberous and heavy his gleaming hair in tangled disarray. Dean had been barefoot, shirtless ... and the top two buttons of his jeans had been unfastened.

Scott had held his breath for a moment as he'd struggled to maintain eye contact with Dean, to carry on a conversation instead of allowing his admiring gaze to wander over Dean's firm chest and abs. Scott's fingers had twitched at the sight of the soft, springy patch of hair in the center of Dean's bulging pectorals. His imagination had taken him on a journey that began with his hands tangling in that silky thatch and following the trail down with lips and tongue over Dean's ridged abs, flat stomach ... and below, where it disappeared into the opening of his jeans.

"Damn," Scott murmured softly, shifting to accommodate a cock that had suddenly begun to pulse and thicken without adequate room for expansion. Retreating to less-enticing thoughts, he wondered how he might get to know Dean better without sending the man running. It had to be something and somewhere casual so Dean wouldn't be so wary of him; perhaps he could get Cassie to tell him what restaurants Dean frequented. Surely Dean must eat out occasionally?

Scott stepped on the gas, eager to get home and enlist Cassie's aid.

* * * * *

Sunday morning, while waiting for his breakfast, Dean sat perusing his paper in a booth at Martha's Diner. He relished these peaceful Sabbath days when the office was closed and he would be disturbed only in case of an emergency. Cassie had recommended Martha's a few weeks ago and Dean was becoming a regular customer because the food, though simple, was delicious.

Family owned, the original Martha's recipes were passed down from generation to generation and treated as the family fortune they were. It was a well-known fact that a certain group of people from a gourmet magazine, while preparing an article on little-known and out-of-the-way restaurants that served extra-special fare, had tried to convince the current Martha to part with a recipe for peanut-butter pie that was to-die-for. Needless to say, the writers had walked away empty-handed.

Martha and the rest of the family knew very well which side their bread was buttered on, or perhaps peanut-buttered on. Once revealed, a secret lost its mystique and a bad precedent would be set, a temptation to further generations to reveal another and yet another secret recipe, until the "Martha Empire" toppled, a thing that was simply too awful to contemplate.

The restaurant's décor was country casual: the tables were covered with blue and white gingham cloths and the booths were unpadded hardwood that were surprisingly comfortable. Shelves at varying levels on the walls displayed antique kitchen gadgets in addition to tins, bottles and even empty cardboard containers that had once carried an array of products such as coffee and sugar.

The atmosphere was relaxed; there was no fast-food rush here, thank goodness. The diners were allowed to kick back, mellow out and eat and gossip to their hearts' content. Martha's was understandably very popular with the locals as a meeting place.

And so Dean sat reading amidst the rattle of plates and cutlery and the buzz of conversation, his patronage and monetary contribution helping to fund a continuing dynasty. Engrossed in yet another newspaper article about the sanctimonious doings of his father, he absently reached for his coffee cup. A deep voice startled him.

"Mind if I join you? It's kind of crowded this morning."

Dean instantly stiffened. His body and mind went on full alert as he looked up into the intent, blue-eyed gaze of Scott Whittaker. Before he had a chance to refuse, Sarah, his waitress, rushed up.

"Hey, Scott, are you joining Dean? Good thing. There's not another empty seat to be had. You want coffee? Dean, let me top yours off. The usual this morning, Scott, or are you feeling adventurous?"

Scott smiled at Sarah's mile-a-minute chatter and sent her off with a request for blueberry pancakes, bacon and scrambled eggs. He turned to Dean. "I guess you've been railroaded. You never got a chance to say yea or nay."

“Sit, for God’s sake. I’m certainly not going to make you eat standing up.” Dean laid aside his newspaper with a sigh and strove to soften the tone of an invitation that was not exactly gracious.

Scott grinned and slid into the seat opposite him. “Thanks, I appreciate it. Office closed today?”

“Yes, every Sunday.”

“That’s good; everyone should have at least one day off a week. So, what do you usually do on your days off?”

“Eat breakfast here, maybe read or veg on the couch in front of the television. I go to the movies once in a while, if there’s anything interesting. Or sometimes I rent a movie and watch it at home. You know -- nothing special.

“Sounds like me, although I have to admit that an afternoon nap is usually part of my Sunday routine. Guess I’m getting old.”

Dean snorted. “Old? Yeah, right. You’re what? Thirty?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Ah, you’re right, after all. You *are* ancient.”

“Asshole.”

“No cursing on the Sabbath.” Dean tsked at Scott with a smile and wondered where his resolve had gone to keep Scott at arm’s length. He shrugged mentally. What could happen here, in public? Scott’s demeanor and body language were relaxed and non-threatening, so why worry? Dean followed the other man’s lead and relaxed, the initial tension draining from him.

“So, how goes the practice?” Scott asked with what appeared to be sincere interest in his eyes.

Instead of a general “Fine,” Dean ended up relating certain incidents and cases that he found interesting, including his session with Squeeze the snake. Scott chuckled appreciatively and some moments later their breakfasts arrived.

They ate in a mostly companionable silence, a few remarks made here and there between mouthfuls. After the meals were demolished and both men were lingering over a last cup of coffee, Dean began to ask a few questions of his own. Soon the two of them were engrossed in a discussion about Scott’s horses, of which there was an average of thirty on his ranch at any given time. Scott had four studs and a dozen mares, all pedigreed prize winners, and the rest were their offspring, ranging from newborns to two-year-olds being groomed for sale. Between selling his horses and the stud fees, Scott made a tidy living.

“I rent some of my land to a local farmer and take my fee in hay and oats for the animals. It saves having to buy feed, and I don’t have to worry about planting and harvesting.”

Dean nodded with approval. “That sounds like a good deal for both of you.”

Eventually, the conversation lagged, and Scott glanced at the paper Dean had set to one side. He seemed to take note of the story Dean had been reading. "Senator Conlon, same last name as yours. Any relation?"

Dean hesitated a moment, was tempted to lie, but in the end he admitted quietly, "He's my father."

Scott softly whistled. "Jeez, you have my sympathy. It can't be easy for a gay man to have a father whose views are as well known as Conlon's."

Dean froze. "Why did you say that?"

"What?"

"Why did you say 'a gay man'?"

Scott gazed steadily into Dean's eyes. "I guess because it takes one to know one."

For one frozen moment in time they stared at each other until Dean scooted from the booth. Fishing his wallet from his back pocket, he left money for his check and a tip and walked away without a word.

Cursing under his breath, Scott, too, paid his bill and hurried out after Dean. Looking left and right, he caught a glimpse of the other man as Dean turned down the alley between the diner and the hardware store next door. With purposeful strides, Scott followed, catching up with Dean before he exited the alley that led to a small parking lot in the back of the diner.

"Damn it, will you stop running away?" He cursed at the figure ahead of him and almost ran into Dean as the man abruptly halted in his tracks and turned to face him.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to talk to me," Scott insisted. "What are you afraid of?"

Fire kindled in Dean's eyes, and he took a step forward. "Certainly not you, Mr. Whittaker. I'll admit you're right, I *am* gay and, yes, my father has gone out of his way to make my life hell on earth, something that's none of your fucking business. But listen up, my real point is this: I'm. Not. Interested. I don't care *what* you want; I don't go in for casual fucks and most especially not with you!"

Dean pivoted to leave, and Scott, his own temper heating, grabbed his arm and swung him back around. "Not interested? Bullshit!"

Clearly shocked, Dean started to struggle when Scott pushed him back against the alley wall, grunting at the impact. Scott used the hard length of his own body to trap him there, then lowered his lips, ruthlessly taking Dean's. He was satisfied to hear a sharp gasp burst from the other man. Dean stilled and Scott pressed his advantage by sliding his tongue into Dean's open mouth.

Instant pleasure and arousal burst through Scott's body even as it must have done for his partner. Dean groaned, his body suddenly acquiescent, his eyes closing. Scott followed his example to better appreciate the feel, taste and scent of Dean. Their bodies were pressed intimately against each other, their similar height bringing two bulging crotches together at just the right angle. He ground his hips against Dean, and both of them moaned at the bolts of pleasure his action brought.

Dean answered the strokes of Scott's tongue with his own until a sensual dance ensued within Dean's mouth. Scott devoured his partner's unique flavor, accented by the taste of the coffee they'd consumed. It inundated his senses until his mind spun. The delicious taste was further enhanced by the heated, musky aroma of testosterone, reminiscent of two bulls in rut. He was pleased when Dean pushed his hips forward, emulating the hard, rhythmic motion of Scott's hips, and he triumphantly swallowed Dean's passionate grunts.

Sanity, which had fled the moment they touched, slowly began to return. Scott broke the kiss and stood breathing hard, his forehead resting against Dean's. With an effort, he stepped back, separating their bodies, and stared at Dean, whose eyes were dark with arousal and need.

All too rapidly, Scott could see Dean's apprehension and anger flood back. An instant later, he threw a punch that landed square on Scott's jaw and sent him sprawling on his ass. Scott was shocked, and Dean looked shaken by his own actions, staring down at him in wide-eyed dismay.

"I ... I'm sorry. I've never hit anyone in my life!"

Scott rubbed the injured area. "Well, you did a good job of it. Feel better now?" He grinned, then winced.

Dean frowned and shook his head. "Not really." He spun on his heel and walked away, leaving Scott in the alley.

Chapter Three

Cassie hung up the phone just as Dean came in with some updated notes for his files.

“Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“I need a favor.”

“Umm?” Dean looked up, waiting for her to continue.

“You know this is Joshua Finch Days’ weekend, right?”

“Yeah.” Dean knew that Joshua Finch was credited as the founder of Middleton and that the town celebrated the man by holding an annual craft fair, flea market and picnic. Several blocks of streets were closed off in the center of town so that vendors could set up booths, and a chicken roast took place in the empty lot next to the fire station.

Cassie smiled her best ingratiating smile. “Well, some members of the Chamber of Commerce are volunteering to man the barbeques for the chicken roast, and we were wondering if you’d volunteer for an hour or two.”

Dean gave her a doubtful grimace. “Cassie, I don’t know the first thing about barbequing anything.”

She quickly reassured him. “Oh, that’s okay. There’ll be plenty of others there who can show you what to do. It’s real easy, and it would make a wonderful impression on the townsfolk to see the new vet taking part in community events.”

“I suppose I could,” Dean answered hesitantly.

“Great! I’ll put you down for the one p.m. shift. Things will be calmer by then as they start serving at eleven.”

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope.” Cassie gave him a brilliant smile. “They’ll supply you with a chef’s apron to keep you clean. All you have to do is man one of the grills and cook the chicken.”

Dean’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, boy. I can’t wait.”

Cassie laughed and called after him as he retreated to his office in the back. “You’ll do great, Doc.”

Picking up the phone, Cassie punched out the numbers for the Whittaker place. When she heard Scott’s voice, she said, “It’s all set. You owe me big time, buddy.”

“Thanks, Cassie, I knew I could count on you.”

Suddenly serious, she went on. “Listen, Scott, I have a suspicion that Dean’s been hurt in the past. I’m only doing this because I know you, and I trust you to be careful with him.”

“And I appreciate your trust. Dean’s lucky to have you looking out for him.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a sweet guy, and he deserves to be treated well. From the way he takes care of the animals you can tell he’s got a big heart, so don’t break it, Scott, or I’ll have to hurt you.”

“Believe me, that’s the last thing I have in mind. I’ve got a feeling about Dean. He’s ... well, I -- Damn. I can’t explain it.”

Cassie was touched that a man with as much confidence as Scott had, was having trouble expressing his feelings. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

They ended their conversation soon after, and Cassie sat back in her chair with a smile on her face, her eyes going sentimentally misty. She thought about the possibilities of a relationship between Dean and Scott and wished them the very best.

* * * * *

The Saturday that heralded the Joshua Finch Days’ weekend rolled around and Dean duly presented himself for cook duty. He was greeted cordially by his fellow volunteers and handed a large white chef’s apron. Placing the bib strap over his head, he was reaching for the ties when a familiar voice sounded from behind him.

“Let me get that for you, partner.”

Dean stilled, an involuntary thrill shooting down his spine at the touch of sure fingers gathering the strings and tying a bow at his back. A large hand squeezed his shoulder.

“There you go. Ready to get cooking?”

Dean turned, coming face to face with a grinning Scott. “What are you doing here?” he asked, although it was fairly obvious as Scott, too, was decked out in an apron. He’d not seen or heard from the horse breeder since the Sunday two weeks ago when he’d decked the man. Dean felt his face redden at the remembered passion of the kiss that had led up to the

violence and his reaction to it. He'd had plenty of time to run the incident through his head and had alternately congratulated and cursed himself for his actions.

Still, he *had* managed to come to one conclusion. Despite everything -- his fear, his uncertainty, his anger -- he wanted Scott. The ice within him was melting, his defenses were crumbling and no matter how hard he tried to deny it, the strength of his need for Scott wasn't going away.

"I volunteer for this shindig every year." Scott shrugged. "As an expert chicken cooker, I've been asked to take the novice under my wing, no pun intended. Follow me."

Scott made his way down the row of hot, smoking grills where the mouth-watering smells of chicken and other food emanated. Dazed, doubtful and somewhat disgruntled, Dean watched him go, then shook himself and followed. They went all the way to the last grill in the row.

"Jim, Delbert, the relief shift is here," Scott announced to the two men tending some pieces of poultry.

"Scott! Hallelujah! My stomach's hittin' my backbone." One of the men, who was somewhat stocky, handed Scott the long-handled turning fork he'd been using, "I'm gonna go enjoy some of the fruits of my labors."

"You do look a might peaked, Delbert," Scott teased.

"Yeah, it's been all of --" The second man checked his watch. "-- four hours since he last ate."

Scott chuckled. "You best get him fed then; he could collapse any minute now."

There was general laughter before Scott introduced Dean to the two men they were replacing.

"Jim Hudson, Delbert Sands, this is Dr. Dean Conlon. Dean took over old Doc Dennison's practice." The men shook hands all around, Jim passing his turning fork to Dean. "Jim and Delbert own the local hardware store."

"Yeah, Dean. Nuts, bolts, nails, power tools ... You name it, we've got it," Delbert said proudly. "Next project you get going, you come and see us."

"Del," Jim admonished lightly. "Somehow I don't see Dean here as the do-it-yourself type. He's got more important things to take care of."

Dean smiled. "I do keep pretty busy with the practice. I don't think I'd be very handy as a carpenter or plumber."

"Well, Doc, you never know. You drop by the store and we'll give you a tour. There's something about power tools that gets under a man's skin. You may find your life takin' on a whole new turn."

Jim examined Dean thoughtfully, then looked at Scott and back. "I get the feeling Dean's life may be taking a turn that doesn't have anything to do with tools ... at least not power tools. What do you think, Scott?"

Scott gave the man a squinty-eyed scowl. "I think you're a little too observant for your own good." He threw a mock punch at Jim's middle.

Jim danced back. "Come on, Del. I don't think I can take Scott anymore. Not like I did when we were kids."

Scott jeered. "Jim, you liar, you never could take me unless your big sister helped you."

With a hearty laugh, Del slapped Jim on the back. "He's got you there, babe."

"Yeah, well, if you see me headed back this way with Sally, you better run, big guy," Jim threatened cheerfully.

Amidst more laughter, Jim and Del joined the lines of people waiting to be served.

Scott turned and Dean studied him with displeasure.

"Just what the hell did he mean about my life taking a new turn, and did I hear Del call Jim, 'babe'?"

Scott smiled. "Come on, and help me turn the chicken. Then I'll answer your questions."

The two of them made short work of the chore, Scott declaring that the pieces would be done in another five minutes or so. Moving out of the path of the smoke and heat rising from the grill, and far enough from the others to afford them some privacy, Scott proceeded to keep his promise.

"Delbert and Jim aren't just partners in the hardware store, they're life partners as well. They've officially been together for twelve years now, and that's not counting the years before when they kept their relationship secret."

Dean was shocked. "But what about the townspeople? Don't they give Jim and Delbert a hard time?"

"For the most part, no. This is a small town, and a lot of the people who live here have known their neighbors for generations. I'd like to believe that the majority of us have come to realize we all have our differences and eccentricities. Besides, Delbert and Jim have lived here their whole lives. Everyone's pretty much known them since they were born, and their friendship started when they were kids. Everyone got used to seeing them always together, so their being a pair now is as natural as viewing a striped pole in front of a barber shop. I doubt that people dwell on the fact that they're lovers; they're just Jim and Del, good men. They run a good business, they help their neighbors and they're active in the community. Those are all the things that matter."

"It's hard to believe that people could be so accepting."

"I'm not saying there aren't those who take exception to their relationship. This is the Midwest after all. We've got more than our share of bible thumpers and plain ol' bigots, but it's a minority and not a very vocal one at that. You don't have to worry, Dean."

Dean was startled by Scott's words and stared at him. "What do you mean by that?" His chest tightened as he struggled to keep his breathing slow and even.

“I think you know.” Scott’s tone was as challenging as his words.

Dean’s eyes narrowed, a storm beginning to brew inside him. “Why don’t you explain it to me?” he asked belligerently.

Scott shook his head, his expression clearly revealing his opinion of Dean’s reaction. His own eyes began to light up with ire. “*If*, for some *reason*, you decided you wanted to become involved with someone, you could do it and expect little or no trouble.” He enunciated each word clearly and forcefully, as though explaining the situation to a moron.

“You’re about as subtle as a sledge hammer and the most persistent, stubborn man I’ve ever met. You’re not gonna give up, are you?”

“Some things have too much potential to give up on,” Scott ground out.

Feeling as though he was about to step off a cliff, Dean asked, “Just what is it you want? I told you I don’t do casual sex.”

“If all I wanted was casual sex, I’ve got a dozen numbers I could call.” Scott abruptly smiled when Dean raised an eyebrow. “I’ve had enough of fooling around. I want more -- I want what Jim and Del have.”

“What makes you think you’re going to find it with me?”

“I don’t know, Dean. All I can be certain of is that, unless you’ve got a twin somewhere, it was you that night in the stable when that jolt shot between us. And it was you in the alley; you’d have to be a hell of an actor if you were faking your response to that kiss. And I don’t think you were.”

Heat climbed Dean’s cheeks.

“Give it a chance, that’s all I’m asking. Whatever your father did to you, he can’t touch you now. Don’t you think it’s time to grow up and declare your independence?”

Dean’s flush deepened. “There are things you don’t know ...”

“So talk to me -- let me in. Maybe you’ll find that discussing it will help. Don’t let an unhappy past ruin what could be a promising future.”

Dean was silent, weighing Scott’s words and his own feelings and desires. There *was* something special between them that was not just physical attraction. Dean could feel the pull, a magnetism and reaching of one soul to another, even when Scott was nowhere near him. It was as though that first late-night encounter had formed a link that was steadily drawing them closer while increasing their need for the other.

Sick to death of living in fear and tired of being lonely *and* alone, Dean made his decision. But before he could reveal it, Scott interrupted.

“What do you think?”

“I think I know two boys who are going to buy a whole grill full of burnt chicken if they don’t get their minds off each other and on to the job at hand,” came a strident reply.

Both men jumped guiltily and spun to face the speaker. Dean blushed furiously at the sight of the short, grandmotherly woman who stood hands on hips, foot tapping impatiently. She gave them both an expectant stare.

With a huge unrepentant grin on his face, Scott stepped forward and took the small woman in his arms, swinging her around. "Ms. Elma! Where you been, honey?"

"Scott Whittaker, you put me down!" she demanded imperiously, "I was taking a break, and it looks as though I got back here just in time. You there, young man, go and get that platter off the table."

Dean hastened to comply and returned with the tray, holding it as Ms. Elma and Scott filled it with the cooked chicken. Ms. Elma motioned to one of her helpers, who arrived with another round of raw poultry.

Once it was on the grill, she gave Scott an insistent look, though a twinkle lurked behind her eyes. "Now introduce me to your friend."

"Yes, ma'am. Ms. Elma Patterson, this is Dr. Dean Conlon, the new veterinarian. Dean, this is Ms. Elma, a retired teacher. She now runs this town."

Ms. Elma shook her head. "I had some moderate success teaching this one manners," she told Dean with mock severity, giving him a wink. "But he's still full of shit."

Scott roared with laughter, and Dean chuckled at the look of satisfaction on Ms. Elma's face.

"You still love me, though," Scott declared.

Ms. Elma snorted. "Hmph! You think what you like, young Whittaker." She turned to Dean. "You watch yourself. Scott thinks he's Mr. Charming." She patted Scott's face. "And sometimes he's right. You boys finish with this batch, then go enjoy yourselves."

Scott gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek; with a smile Ms. Elma sailed away to check the other grills, her sheer personality and determination obviously keeping everything running smoothly.

"She's quite a character," Dean commented.

"That she is, but I'm still waiting for an answer."

Dean gave him a wry smile. "What was the question again?"

"Dean." Scott's growl was a warning.

Despite the man's tone, when Dean looked into Scott's eyes, he thought he could see a hint of vulnerability and loneliness. They called out to him, familiar emotions finding a reflection within him.

"I think we'd better turn that chicken before Ms. Elma comes back. And I don't know about you, but I'm starving. I definitely want to eat before we go walk the booths."

A slow smile lit Scott's face. "I may be persistent, but you're evasive. I take it that that's a yes? We're going to talk?"

Dean's smile answered Scott's, and he turned away without a word to wield his long-handled fork on the meat. From beside him came a low-voiced comment.

"What have I gotten myself into?"

"I guess both of us are about to find out the answer to that question."

Scott gave him a nudge but remained silent.

Attending to duty, they put in their appointed time, finished their cooking chores and turned in their aprons. The serving lines were experiencing the afternoon lull, so they were able to get their plates filled quickly, then found places at an empty picnic table under a nearby tree. Both of them tucked into their food with good appetite.

As they ate, they chatted sporadically about nothing in particular between mouthfuls. Dean's gaze was drawn to the crowd on the street where he spotted Cassie walking with a good-looking young man. He turned back to Scott, intending to ask if he knew Cassie's friend but was arrested by the sight of the other man's eyes fixed steadily on Dean's mouth. Scott took a deliberately sensual bite of chicken, licked his fingers, and then he slowly chewed, his gaze finding Dean's. Dean's own eyes widened, and he felt a surge of pure lust flood his gut.

A spark lit Scott's eyes. "You keep looking at me like that, and I won't be able to get up from this table without embarrassing myself."

An involuntary smile ghosted across Dean's lips. "You started it."

"I look forward to the day I can finish it."

Dean snorted. "Slow down, horndog."

"You'll find I have a tendency to be impatient. At least about some things."

"I can understand that. It's just that I've spent a lot of time trying to avoid any kind of entanglement. It's hard to simply let go, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do. I'll try to be more patient."

Dean studied Scott thoughtfully, furrowing his brow as he considered how this newly hatched relationship was forming. So far, it was Scott who was taking all the chances, risking rejection and everything else that came with the age-old mating ritual. Dean decided it would only be fair to make this his turn. He dropped his gaze to the table and intently watched his own fingers trace the various hearts and initials that had been carved into the battered and weathered wood before speaking.

"When I was a sophomore in college, my father arranged for me to have a gay student as my roommate. He hired the guy to make a pass at me, to find out if I'd accept his attentions. I didn't know it then, but my father suspected I was gay and wanted to find out for sure." He looked up, troubled, his eyes meeting the interest in Scott's. "I fell for Jay, but it went way beyond fucking -- at least for me."

Dean stopped as a memory of the stunning anguish and bitter gall of betrayal flooded in. "About a month after we became lovers, my father called and ordered me to go home the

next weekend. I went, thinking the old man just wanted to lay down some more pronouncements about how the son of the exalted senator of Indiana should behave. We'd been through plenty of those talks before, but he never seemed to tire of telling me how important he was." He paused, his fingers drumming nervously on the table. "When I got there and walked into his office, Jay was there."

"Son of a bitch!" Scott swore softly, vehemently.

Dean smiled humorlessly. "Yeah. My father took great pleasure in telling me how he'd hired Jay to find out if I was a 'fag.' Then he told me I was changing universities, that my housing and education would be paid for as long as I kept my 'degenerate ways' to myself. He made it clear it was only for the sake of appearances that I was still part of the family. In reality, I was no longer considered his son and was no longer welcome in his home." Dean's voice turned frigidly cold. "He handed Jay a check ... and Jay took it. He never even looked at me. He just sat there, staring at that fucking check.

"When I left the house for the last time, the only person to see me off was my father's aide, Richard Rand. He handed me an envelope with information about the arrangements my father had made for me, where I was transferring and where I'd be living. I'll never forget the sanctimonious sneer on that man's face or the fact that nobody -- not my mother, my sister or either of my brothers -- stood up for me."

"What about the guy who betrayed you? Did you ever see him again?"

Dean nodded. "Right after I left the house. I was sitting in my car, trying to work through the shock. Everything was so messed up; I couldn't think straight. Didn't even know what to do next. Jay came up and knocked on my car window. I remember feeling this wild surge of hope, like maybe it was all just a big mistake, maybe he really did love me." Dean caught Scott's gaze. "I was nineteen and supremely naïve. I lowered my window. The first thing he said was that my father had already had someone pack my stuff so I wouldn't have to go back to our dorm room. Then he said he was sorry, that I was a nice guy and a really good fuck, but the money was too good to turn down."

Dean looked away, momentarily biting his lip. When he spoke, he was proud of the fact that his voice was calm, but even he could hear it was tinged with bitter sarcasm. "I didn't say anything, just rolled up the window and drove off. All of a sudden, everything became perfectly clear. I was a discarded son and brother who had the stellar endorsement from my ex-lover of being a really good fuck. So I took that knowledge and started my new life."

His gaze returned to the table, and there was silence for a few moments. Dean wondered if Scott would say anything. Maybe he'd said too much, and Scott was thinking what a loser Dean was and how he could graciously back away. He looked up, intending to give the other man an easy out but was stopped by the look in Scott's eyes: sympathy and understanding tempered with determination.

"You been carryin' this around a long time, haven't you?"

Dean nodded.

“About time to let it go, don’t you think? Thumb your nose at the old man and the bastard he paid to betray you.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“I know it’s not, but you’ve already done the hard part. You lived past it.”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, I lived, not very happily, but I lived.”

“So maybe it’s time you got some happy.”

“Any suggestions?”

Scott gave him a slow, lascivious grin. “Oh, I got plenty of suggestions, but for now, how ‘bout we walk the booths?”

Dean surprised himself by laughing. “I can deal with that.”

When he got up from the picnic table, his spirits rose with him. For the first time in a very long time, he felt the stirrings of hope. Scott’s acceptance and his no-nonsense, get-over-it attitude was just what Dean needed. Talking about his past had been cathartic, but not being allowed to wallow in it was even better. Scott was right. That time of pain was over and done with. It was time to move on.

A couple of hours later, tired and content, Dean continued to stroll with Scott by his side. They’d ambled up and down both sides of every street that held vendors who hoped to make a sale. Dean had consumed the better part of a good-sized square of pumpkin fudge, despite Scott’s teasing that his ass was ballooning out with every bite. The horse breeder was carrying an old pair of spurs. He told Dean about his collection of cowboy memorabilia, his interest in tales from the Old West and his admiration for those who had lived it rough in those days.

“I can easily picture you as an outlaw. You’d have a matched set of pearl-handled six shooters and be on the run from the sheriff and his posse.”

Scott’s eyebrow rose. “Now what makes you think I wouldn’t be the sheriff going after the bad guys?”

Dean looked him over appraisingly. “You’ve got a wild streak in you; I can see it plain as day. I think you’d rather rob banks than protect them.” He saw the speculative look that came into Scott’s eyes and steeled himself for the risqué comment he knew was about to be delivered. Just as Scott opened his mouth, another voice interrupted.

“Hi, Doc! You havin’ a nice day?”

Dean turned to find one of his staff behind him. “Doreen, hi! Yeah, I’m having a great day. This has turned out to be a lot more fun than I thought it would be,” Dean told her sincerely, knowing the main reason for this was standing beside him, “Do you know Scott Whittaker? Scott, this is Doreen Hodges, the second of my able-bodied assistants.”

“Nice to meet you, Doreen,” Scott said politely. “Are you enjoying the festivities?”

“Oh, yes, it’s been wonderful!” Doreen exclaimed, her dark curls bouncing with her enthusiastic nodding. She indicated several sacks that she carried. “I bought some great stuff at the flea market.”

“Looks like you could use a hand with all that. Are you here with anyone?”

Doreen smiled brightly. “Yeah, but I lost my boyfriend and my brother, Sean, a couple of booths back,” She looked around, studying the crowd, “In fact, there they are now. I better catch up to them before I lose them again.” With a “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Whittaker,” and a “Bye, Dean,” Doreen rushed off and soon disappeared into the crowd.

“She seems to have a lot of energy,” Scott commented.

Dean chuckled. “Yeah, I think she’s a little high-strung, but she does a great job with the dog grooming. Speaking of dogs,” Dean looked at his watch, “I gotta get back to the office. I gave Cassie and Doreen the entire weekend off, and I’ve got patients and boarders who need to be fed and settled for the night.”

“Yeah, I better get going, too. There are horses at home that need looking after. Not that Steve and Tim couldn’t handle what needs to be done, but I like to stay on top of things.”

Dean lifted an eyebrow meaningfully. “Oh, yeah? I’ll keep that in mind.”

Scott grinned broadly. “See that you do. How about you call me later? Around ten.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “What for?”

“One of those suggestions we discussed earlier.” Scott wiggled his eyebrows.

Dean frowned but soon spoiled the effect by laughing. “All right. Ten.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“I’ll see you, Scott.”

They split up and went their separate ways.

Suspicion and displeased speculation filled the eyes that followed Scott for a time before turning to find Dean’s retreating back. The expression in those too-observant eyes softened. Dean liked pumpkin fudge. That had been more than obvious by the delight on his face when he’d taken that first bite.

Arousal swift and sure flooded the watcher’s veins at the thought of those beautiful lips parting, pearly white teeth sinking delicately into the fudge. A hand muffled the moan of desire that made it past the watcher’s lips. Spinning away, the observer’s quick footsteps brought the fudge sellers’ booths in sight. Another present for Dean was in order.

Chapter Four

Dean sat in his favorite easy chair and took a deep breath. He'd finished feeding and cleaning up after the various animals that were recuperating or being boarded while their owners were away. After a long, leisurely shower, he'd fixed himself a light supper and relaxed in front of the television, watching a show on the History Channel.

As the hands on the clock drew closer to ten, he started to fidget, his nerves winding tighter with the anticipation of calling Scott. Looking back on their afternoon together, Dean found himself amazed that so much had changed in so short a time. Considering how quickly his resolve had given way in the face of the attraction he felt for Scott, there was an air of unreality about the situation. When he was with Scott, dropping his defenses became more and more easy; it was when he was alone that the doubts resurfaced.

Dean silently admonished himself and tried to calm down. He shifted sideways in the chair, his head supported by the winged back, long legs draped over the arm; this position always relaxed him. The chair seemed to wrap him up, cradling him, bringing back memories of his childhood when his grandmother would hold him, making him feel safe and secure. He sighed contentedly, feeling a certain regret for the passing of those days.

Determined to keep his word, he reached out to pick up the phone. It rang before he touched it. Dean jumped and swore, then checked the caller ID. Something about the number seemed vaguely familiar, and he frowned, letting the phone continue to ring. His stomach clenched when he finally recognized it.

His father's home office number. It seemed the senator was about to break the long silence between them. He swiveled in his chair, planting both feet on the floor. He had the distinct feeling he'd better brace himself. Pushing aside the feeling of dread that had washed over him, Dean cautiously lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Dean, is that you?"

“Yes.”

“This is Senator Conlon.”

At that self important declaration, Dean felt his worry replaced by wary disdain. “I know who you are, *Senator*.”

“Don’t use that tone with me, boy. Even you homos should know enough to respect your betters.”

Dean’s brow rose in disbelief. His father’s blatant disregard for even a semblance of civility dissolved the last shreds of his trepidation. “I do *not* believe you just said that. What’s even worse is that you believe it’s true. I’ll tell you what, *Senator*, the day you show me some respect is the day I’ll return the favor. Now, what the *hell* do you want?”

“What I want is to give you a warning,” his father’s voice growled. “I’m going to make this perfectly clear. I’m up for reelection and if you cause so much as one breath of scandal due to your degenerate behavior, I’ll make you sorry you were ever born.”

Dean’s chest constricted with shock. “Do you really hate me so much that you’d call to threaten me? What are going to do, Dad, have me eliminated?”

“*Don’t* call me that, and don’t be ridiculous. I won’t need to resort to murder -- that’s far too precarious a solution -- tempting though it may be. I’ll simply ruin you and anyone you’re involved with. Heed my warning, Dean. Stay in line or you’ll suffer the consequences.”

The connection was severed. Dean pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it for a moment before replacing it on its base. He rested his elbows on his knees and looked down at the floor. Studying the subtle patterns in the carpet, he pondered the timing of his father’s call. The reason was patently obvious, but why now, after all this time? Surely his father couldn’t have heard about his tentative involvement with Scott? And, if so, how? Did the man have spies watching Dean? The idea seemed ludicrous, yet knowing his father’s rabid prejudice against gays, it almost seemed plausible.

Lost in thought, Dean nearly leaped out of his skin when the phone rang again. He was instantly suffused with anger. “Fuck!” he shouted. Not bothering to check the number this time, he snatched the portable and snarled. “What’s the matter? Was there some other important point you forgot to impress upon me?”

There was a brief silence before Scott’s voice came on. “Um, nooo. It’s ten thirty. I figured you were procrastinating, so I thought I’d call you instead of waiting. What’s going on, Dean?”

“Oh, shit, Scott. Damn, I’m sorry. I, uh ...”

“Hey, take it easy. Just spit it out, all right?”

“My father called me.”

“I take it the object wasn’t to reconcile.”

“No. As a matter of fact, he threatened me.”

“The first question that comes to mind is why and, second, threatened you with what?”

Dean grimaced and rubbed his forehead. “Do you really want to hear this? Maybe you ought to just cut your losses and head for the hills.”

A husky chuckle sounded in his ear. “Well, now, that could be a problem. You see, I’ve got this stubborn streak a mile wide. When I make up my mind about something, it’s pretty damn hard to shake me. I’ve decided to get to know you, Dean, and it’s gonna take more than your bastard of a father to scare me away. So, let’s hear the rest, unless this is something you really don’t want to talk about. “

“Hell, you’ve already heard the rest of my fucked-up history; you might as well hear this, too. He called to say he’s up for reelection, and if I cause any scandal with my deviant behavior, he’s going to ruin me and anyone associated with me. What I can’t figure out is why call me now? He hasn’t bothered to speak to me since that incident with ...”

“Go ahead and say it, Dean.”

“That shithead who betrayed me.”

“There you go. Feels good to let it out, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does. Anyway, there it is. What do you think? Are you ready to risk being ruined?” Dean held his breath and waited.

“I’m not worried. As for why he called you now, it seems fairly simple. He told you himself. He’s up for reelection.”

“So?”

“The way I figure it is this. He’s hyperaware of anything he thinks might hurt his chances to keep his seat, so he’s gathering all the things he considers loose ends and bringing them under his control. Now that you’re out of school and running your own practice, you’re no longer financially dependent on him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You see? He’s lost his leverage with you because you’re no longer under his thumb. Now he’s trying to reestablish his dominance over you by attempting to intimidate you. From what I can see, the senator’s a man who likes to rule everything and everyone around him. You’re out from under his influence, and he clearly doesn’t like it.”

Dean thought for a moment, nodding. “That does sound exactly like him. He’s been that way for as long as I can remember. So,” Dean began hesitantly, “you don’t think he’s had someone spying on me? Someone who maybe saw us together and reported back to him?”

“*Hell, no.* Take my word for it, Dean. Your father’s a politician. Bluffing is a way of life for those fuckers.”

Dean laughed, a feeling of relief sweeping through him. “You know, if he wasn’t such a scumbag I could almost feel sorry for him.”

“Why’s that?”

"I know the reason he hates gays."

"Yeah?"

"My grandmother told me. When my dad was nine, his dad left my grandmother for another man."

A shrill whistle came over the line. "Whoa."

"Yeah. My dad never forgave him or my grandmother. She told me that when he got older, Dad told her it was her fault his father had left, that she hadn't been a good wife to my grandfather and wasn't woman enough."

"Jeez! Your dad is a piece of work. Did you ever tell him you know all this?"

"Oh, hell no! That'd be like confronting a psychotic personality with his own psychoses. If my father knew that I knew, he probably *would* stoop to murder, just to get rid of me."

There was a long pause before Scott's voice reappeared, hard as steel. "Did he threaten to kill you?"

Dean hastened to reassure him. "No, Scott, he didn't. It was me that came right out and asked him. He told me not to be ridiculous, that he'd never stoop so low."

"You're leaving something out. I can hear it in your voice. Tell me the rest, Dean."

For the first time since ending the conversation with his father, Dean felt the emotions he'd suppressed struggling to the surface. One hand fisted into a ball while the other clenched the phone. His throat grew tight, his breathing was fast and uneven and he fought the sting of tears that burned his eyes.

Swallowing heavily, he forced out the words. "He said murder was too precarious a solution, tempting though it might be."

"Fuck. Dean. Baby." Dean thought he could hear the strain in Scott's voice. "*Don't listen to him.* You hear me? You're a good man, and you haven't done anything wrong. You don't deserve to be treated this way."

Dean shut his eyes tightly. "I hear you." His voice was husky with tightly held-back emotion.

"You'd better," Scott admonished, then sighed dramatically. "Damn. This is not how I pictured our conversation tonight."

Taking a deep breath, Dean reined in his runaway emotions. "I imagine not. Just how did you picture it?"

"I was going to suggest phone sex. You know," Scott lowered his voice to a sexy drawl, "Hey, baby, what are you wearing?" before retuning to his normal tone. "That kind of thing." His self-mocking, plaintive confession surprised another laugh out of Dean. "Now that's a good sound. You've got a nice laugh, sweetheart."

Dean felt his tension drain away with Scott's good humor. "Sweetheart, huh?"

“Mmm, I think so.”

A smile tugged at Dean’s lips. “Thanks. I mean, not for that. Well, that, too, but for everything else. You know what I mean?”

“I do, and you’re welcome.” Scott barely stifled a yawn. “Man, I hate to say this, but it’s gettin’ late. Past my bedtime. You gonna be all right?”

“Yeah. I am.” Dean was more than pleased not only at the conviction in his voice but at the feeling of peace he felt inside.

“Good. So ... phone sex tomorrow?” Scott teased, although the question was clearly laced with hope.

Dean chuckled. “I’ll, uh, think about it.”

“You do that. Goodnight, Dean.”

“Goodnight.”

Dean hung up in a much better frame of mind. As he was getting ready for bed, thoughts of his father intruded, but he shook them off. Instead, he went to sleep with a Scott-induced smile on his face.

* * * * *

Waking up well rested and refreshed, Dean breezed through his morning routine as he prepared for work. Walking out the front door, however, he stumbled over a small package on the doorstep. Frowning, he bent to pick it up. It was a box covered in silver paper and tied with a red ribbon. He stepped back inside, curiosity running rampant as he untied it and tore off the paper, cautiously raising the lid on the box. Inside was a wrapped hunk of pumpkin fudge.

He grinned and murmured, “Scott,” touched by the other man’s thoughtfulness and the early morning trip to leave the present for him. Whistling, he tucked the package under his arm and headed back out, locking the door behind him.

Dean spent the morning seeing patients and sneaking small bites of fudge while taking care of paperwork at his desk. Stray thoughts of his father’s call brought an occasional frown to his face, but for the most part he managed to dismiss them. His mind wandered more often to Scott, which actually had him smiling. The man was so open and down to earth. He let Dean know what he wanted, and he wasn’t coy or underhanded about anything. His honesty was refreshing.

Dean felt a certain tension in knowing what might be happening between them, but at the same time, there was anticipation. Scott was bringing fun back into Dean’s world; he hadn’t realized how much he missed the lighter side of life.

Half an hour before noon, Cassie peeked around his office door, “Dean, you’ve got a call on line two. It’s Scott,” she singsonged with a grin.

“Get out of here,” Dean ordered, unable to resist the urge to smile back.

Cassie giggled and shut the door.

Dean eagerly picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, there. What are you wearing?”

Dean laughed. “I’m fully dressed and everything’s staying right where it’s at.”

“Damn.” The reply was full of mock disappointment. “Well, if I can’t get you naked, how about having lunch with me?”

“That sounds good, although I’m not really hungry. I’ve been eating the fudge; thanks for leaving it. I’ll admit to being surprised though, considering what you said about my ass getting fat.”

“Fudge? What are you talking about?”

Dean frowned, perplexed. “This morning. There was a wrapped package of pumpkin fudge on my doorstep. I thought you’d left it since you were teasing me about it yesterday.”

“Much as I’d like to take credit for leaving you a present, it wasn’t me.” Scott’s voice grew urgent. “How much have you had? Are you feeling all right?”

“I’ve eaten about a third of it since this morning. I feel fine ... You’re not implying that someone would try to poison me, are you?”

“There’s a lot of weird shit that happens in the world today, Dean. I’m not saying that anyone has a reason to try to hurt you, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t for the simple reason they could. As you don’t know where it came from, I’d feel a hell of a lot better if you’d throw the rest of it away.”

“It seems a shame to waste it, but you’re right. I’ll pitch the rest.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to have to be feeding you ipecac for lunch.”

“Gah, I think I’ll pass on that, but I could go for a BLT and some fries.”

“Now you’re talking. How about I meet you at Martha’s in an hour?”

Before Dean could reply, he heard the sound of a door in the background and someone talking to Scott before the other man came back on the line.

“I gotta go, Dean. There’s a guy here to drop off a mare to be serviced.”

“I didn’t know you went in for that sort of thing,” Dean stated seriously as a smile hovered over his lips. “Kinky.”

“Jealous?”

“Mmm, maybe.”

“Well, that sounds hopeful.”

“I’ll see you in an hour.” Dean laughed and ended the call.

He left his office and passed the front desk just in time to see a stranger enter through the front entrance. The young man was slim with dark, wavy hair. Dean frowned slightly; for some reason, his face seemed familiar.

“Can I help you?” Dean asked, his professional smile in place.

“Um, yeah, I’m here to ...” He paused for a moment as though struggling for words.

“To pick me up.” Doreen popped through the open doorway behind Dean. “Hi, Sean. Dean, this is my little brother. He came to take me to lunch. Sean, this is Dr. Conlon.”

Like his sister, he had light-blue eyes and dark hair, although Sean had managed to tame the curls whereas Doreen let them run wild. Dean reached out and shook the other man’s hand. “Pleased to meet you, Sean.”

“Same here, Dr. Conlon.” Sean retained his grip on Dean’s hand a little longer than necessary, his fingers trembling slightly. Doreen looped her arm through her brother’s and pulled him away.

“I’ll be back in an hour, Dean.”

“We’ll be here,” Dean replied with a puzzled smile as Doreen hustled her sibling out.

Sean followed Doreen but glanced back before leaving. The look he gave Dean was intense, enigmatic and suddenly cut off when the door closed between them. Baffled, Dean watched them through the window as they walked out to the parking lot and left in a red Chevelle. He stared after it for a moment longer, then shrugged. *Probably just my imagination.* But it almost seemed as though Sean had been trying to convey some silent message.

* * * * *

Seated across the table from Dean at Martha’s Diner, Scott finished his last fry as Dean watched, wiped his hands and mouth on a napkin and looked up.

“What’s the strangest thing that’s ever happened since you’ve been a vet? Besides dealing with Squeeze, the snake. Something else connected with the practice.”

“What do you want to know that for?” Dean asked with a smile.

“I want to get to know you,” Scott answered simply. “All the bits and pieces of Dean Conlon.”

Dean snorted. “All right, let me think. Oh, yeah ... After I graduated, I went to work at a practice with several other vets. We were located in a suburb with a residential area all around us. Not too far down the street was a guy who brought his dog to us. He really loved that dog.”

Scott studied Dean’s face as he talked, noting the sparkle shining in the depths of those soulful brown eyes. His lips were curved softly.

“One day,” Dean continued, “the guy came running into the office wearing nothing but a towel and carrying his dog, yelling that Tuttle was choking. I rushed both of them into an exam room and, sure enough, the dog had gotten a piece of stick wedged in his throat. There was no time for anesthesia or anything, but luckily the stick wasn’t very thick. I got two clamps on it, cut it in the middle and pulled the pieces out. Aside from some abrasions in the dog’s throat, he was fine. Once Tuttle was ready to go home, his owner lifted him off the exam table ... and his towel fell off. So there he was, naked, a dog in his arms, with me staring at him.”

Scott snickered. “So, tell me, did he have a big one?” He wagged his brows, hoping to see a blush wash over Dean’s cheeks.

Dean pondered a moment. “Nah, it was a chihuahua,” he deadpanned.

Scott hooted. “You got me. So was that story for real or were you just puttin’ me on?”

“No, I swear it’s true. Except for the chihuahua part. The dog was a basset hound. As for the guy?” Dean held up his hand, finger and thumb a few inches apart. “Not so big.” He smirked.

“So if you’d been fishin’ you’d have to throw it back?”

Dean stood, chuckling as he reached for his wallet and took care of his bill with a generous tip. “Yeah, I guess you could say that. I gotta get back.”

“Me, too. Steve and Tim will be expecting help with the evening chores.”

“Just the three of you take care of all those horses?”

“I’ve also got two part-time guys. They work from six till noon. That’s when the biggest part of the job gets done. Stalls mucked out and that sort of thing. Evenings are pretty light, mostly just getting everyone fed.” Scott also left money on the table. “What do you think, lunch tomorrow, about twelve thirty? Leo’s Bar and Grill does a mean Philly cheese steak sub.”

“Sounds good.”

* * * * *

A couple of days passed, and Dean spent the time working at the practice as well as sharing lunches with Scott. At the end of each day, he found himself at home, contemplating the idea of picking up the phone. Scott was being patience personified by not pushing for more than whatever Dean freely offered. Up to this point, it had all been teasing and innuendo between them, which was rapidly becoming not enough for Dean. Unfortunately, his brain kept reminding him of the past, cautioning him, but at the same time, his body and emotions were demanding more.

Tonight, he decided to squelch that inner voice and picked up the phone, punching in Scott’s number. The call was answered on the second ring.

“Dean! Hey, I was just thinking about you.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Oh, definitely good. What can I do for you?”

With anticipation accompanied by trepidation tightening his gut, Dean waded in. “Well, I was sitting here wondering, um, what are you wearing?”

A pregnant silence filled the line before Scott answered. “Dean. You’re not yanking my chain, are you?” His husky-voiced inquiry sent a shiver down Dean’s spine.

“No. Any objections?”

“Fuck, no. I’ve been dying for this. This is what I think it is, right? We’re going to play with each other?”

The last small sentence was spoken so softly and so seductively, Dean’s cock jerked painfully, rapidly filling, elongating and pulsing expectantly. “Damn,” he whispered.

“What’s the matter, baby? You gettin’ hard?”

Dean shivered, his breathing speeding up. “How do you do that?”

“It’s easy. You take everything too seriously. I understand why, but remember what we talked about before. It’s time for you to have some fun. Making love doesn’t always have to be conventional or solemn. It can be a source of joy and laughter, a true playtime for adults.”

“So this is only a game.”

Scott was quick to disabuse him of that notion, “Here and now, yes. But don’t make the mistake of thinking everything between us is going to fall into that category. Look, Dean, I’m not one for making speeches, but this is like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“I feel the same way.”

A long sigh wafted over the line. “Thank God,” Scott murmured. “Now, how about you get naked for me?”

Dean laughed, as happiness flowed through him. He stood and went into his bedroom, resolved to give as good as he got. “I’m unbuttoning my shirt.” His voice was low, enticing.

“Oh, yeah,” Scott rumbled, “That first night I saw you, when I came about my mare? You answered the door half-dressed -- it was all I could do not to reach out and grab you. Is your skin as soft as it looks? Touch yourself. Tell me what you feel.”

Dean freed the last button on his shirt and spread the sides before he shrugged it off his shoulders. He let first one sleeve slide down and away, then switched the phone to his other hand, the material dropping onto the floor. The slow drift of the fabric sent a chill over his skin. He closed his eyes and placed his hand on his midriff.

“Heat,” he murmured, “I feel heat from my skin.” His hand glided over his torso. “It’s smooth and warm, but underneath I can feel the muscles move. They’re firm and fluid.” Dean continued his self-exploration, “The hair on my chest is a different texture, rough yet silky, and ... ummm.” He moaned.

“What is it, baby?” Scott whispered.

“My nipples,” Dean breathed, “I touched one and they both tightened up, *hard*. It feels goood”

For a moment, nothing crossed the line except their panting breaths.

“Scott, you there?”

“Yeah I’m here. I just about swallowed my tongue.”

Dean chuckled, “What do you want me to do now?”

“Take your jeans and underwear off, and then lie down on the bed.”

“Just jeans, no briefs.”

“Shit. Shed ’em, babe.”

Dean grinned at the hoarsely voiced curse and complied. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Where are you, and what are *you* wearing?”

“Well, now, I’m glad you asked.” Dean could hear the smile in Scott’s voice. “I’m lying on my bed, totally naked, with a hard-on that could drill wood. You see, every time I think of you, a certain part of my anatomy stands up and takes notice.” Scott inhaled deeply. “I’ve been thinking about you all evening ... and wanting you so bad, it hurts.”

“Scott, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t expect too much, or you’ll be disappointed.”

There was a small silence, then “You’re still fighting this, aren’t you?”

Dean’s temper flared. “I’m trying, I really am. It’s just that I’ve spent so long steering clear of just this kind of situation.” He grimaced and ran a hand through his hair in agitation. Uncertainty had him growing angry in self-defense. “Jeez, Scott, it’s been jack-off sessions in bathroom stalls, anonymous fucks in back rooms, and me holding back, never letting anyone close. *What the fuck do you want from me?*”

“Hey, calm down. I wasn’t criticizing you. It was a simple observation.” Scott’s voice was pitched to soothe. “I know this isn’t easy for you. You have no idea how gratified I am that you’re making this effort.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, then. I’m fucking this up.”

“You haven’t fucked up anything, sweetheart, believe me. Will you do something for me?”

“What?”

“You got your clothes off?”

“Yeah.”

“Lie down, baby. You don’t need to say anything. Just stay on the line with me for a while, close your eyes, relax and breathe. Can you do that for me?”

Dean shivered as Scott’s voice washed gently over him. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Dean settled himself comfortably in bed. Holding the receiver to his ear, he shut his eyes and audibly exhaled.

“Comfy?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Good. Let’s be quiet.”

Instead of feeling silly, Dean could sense the tension flowing out and his body relaxing. The hush between them was soothing, the open connection helping to form a much-needed bond. Dean smiled. Even though Scott was a few miles away, Dean had never felt so linked, so joined to another person. It was the most incredible, unbelievable thing.

He floated, fully at ease, his mind at rest, his emotions at peace. The passing minutes went by without remark or regret. After a time, a soft sound caught his attention. Breathing. Scott’s breaths were coming faster and noticeably louder. A trickle of excitement stirred in Dean’s belly while his cock stiffened. Without a word, he reached down and took his shaft in hand. A soft squeeze brought the blood rushing rapidly in. Several pumps up and down his swelling flesh completed the job. Dean tugged at his fully erect cock.

With his eyes still closed, his senses seemed suddenly inundated with sexual stimuli, but the build-up toward climax was slow and sweet. He savored every moment. Lips parting, he could hear the panting of his own breath echoing Scott’s. Heat swept over his body, the chill of a sheen of sweat coated his skin. He smelled the musk of his own rut and it drove him on. His strokes became firmer, faster. A small moan ghosted over the phone line, causing his groin to tighten further, an answering groan slipping from his own throat.

Dean’s world became a bright, burning flame, building pressure and the desperate grunts that traveled between him and Scott to vibrate in his cock. Velvet-clothed steel filled his hand and an urgent rumble crawled from his chest. His fingers constricted around the thick, full circumference of his straining shaft. With his thumb teasing the plump head, he used long, sweeping pulls to coax and urge the sensations to grow. The movements, habitual and instinctive, went on and on. His heart pounded, blood streaming through his veins as it rushed to the site of such overwhelming pleasure. His cock surged impossibly thicker and unyielding.

Scott’s voice rasped with strain when it sounded. “Ready?”

“*Yesss*,” Dean hissed through clenched teeth.

“*Now*.”

Exquisite pleasure ripped through Dean with the hot pulse of semen his balls unloaded. His eyes shot open and his cry echoed Scott’s, while thick, creamy spurts of his come spattered across his abdomen, painting a pattern of pure passion against his skin. Gasping,

Dean shuddered with every aftershock, his muscles contracting and releasing into gradually decreasing ripples. Finally easing down, his straining muscles loosened and relaxed. Totally sated, a dreamy sigh passed his lips.

Dean's eyelids fluttered, a contented smile curving his lips. "Are we still supposed to stay quiet?"

Scott's chuckle was lazy and warm. "I'd say it's safe to talk now. You all right?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You sound damned fine."

"I feel damned fine. That was amazing."

"Yes, it was. Imagine what we could accomplish if we were in the same room together."

"I don't want to imagine it."

"No?"

Dean could hear the consternation and disappointment in Scott's voice and hastened to reassure him "No. I want to do it. For real. With you."

There was a lull. Dean tensed.

"Have lunch with me again tomorrow?" Scott's tone was gruff, as though he were having trouble getting the words out.

With perfect understanding, Dean nodded silently. "Yeah. Martha's? Around noon?"

"I'll pick you up at your office."

"I'll be ready. G'night, Scott."

"Night."

Dean hit the end button and cut the connection, but his relationship with Scott was now established and growing. Dean waited for the familiar fear and dread to move in, but his emotions left him in peace. He took a deep breath and absently slid his hand over his belly. Cooling semen slid beneath his fingers. At first he grimaced, and then he chuckled. Aside from a little nervous tension, he was excited about what the next day might bring. Scott was proving to be the remedy Dean never thought to find. The cure for his broken heart.

Smiling, he started to roll out of bed when a noise from outside caused him to jump. His gaze snapped to the window in time to see a hint of movement. Dean grabbed his jeans, pulled them on over his moist skin and rushed into the living room. He stopped long enough to grab a flashlight out of a drawer in the small table near the door. Not bothering with shoes, he flicked a light switch, opened the door and exited. The light in the yard illuminated the front area and driveway. There wasn't a sign of anyone having been there.

Still, snapping on the flashlight, Dean went down the front steps, sucking in a breath of shock when his feet hit the cool, damp grass. There was a stiff breeze blowing; he shivered while he made his way cautiously around the house, where large, willowy spirea bushes

were at evenly spaced intervals. Filled with a growing tension, he carefully approached each one and shone the flashlight over and around it, making sure the space on the other side was empty before passing by.

Reaching his bedroom window, he examined the large bushes that flanked each side of it, the branches close enough to brush the window. There was no one there, not that he'd expected to see anyone. If someone had been spying on him, they'd have seen him look toward the window before he'd hurried out of the room.

More movement at the corner of the house caught his eye, and he whipped the flashlight around, catching a lambent green gleam in its beam. A swift thrill of fear gripped his stomach until the startled raccoon chittered and rushed away.

Dean relaxed, relief making him weak, and shook his head. "Fuck." He swore softly, then shivered again as the breeze kicked up and swept over him. Branches from the spirea bushes rattled against his window, and he resolved to purchase some pruning shears. "Just the wind," he murmured and headed back inside.

In the shadows of the building that housed Dean's practice, a dark-clothed figure watched, satisfied as Dean retreated into his home. Seconds later, the outside light went off.

Breathing a sigh of relief, the watcher accepted a round of self congratulations. *I couldn't have picked a better night. He's so beautiful and so wicked. My poor Dean. So lonely that he had to call a nine-hundred number to get release.*

At first puzzled about why Dean was on the phone, masturbating, the watcher had finally figured it out. There was no one in Dean's life, so what else could it be but Dean calling a phone-sex line? A tender smile crossed lips below glittering eyes. *Soon, my love, soon.*

Still waiting patiently, the watcher remained until the last light went off inside the house before retreating to a car hidden by a stand of trees beside the road.

* * * * *

As usual, lunch with Scott was fun but this time the underlying sexual excitement was palpable. They exchanged looks that had Dean struggling to breathe right. Neither of them referenced what they had done the night before; instead they allowed the heat to build as they talked about inconsequential matters, such as what they'd done earlier in the day. Dean even told Scott about the incident that had taken place after their call.

"That damn raccoon scared the shit out of me!"

Scott laughed. "I can just see you jumping. You know, you're lucky it was just a raccoon. I went out late one night 'cause I kept hearing what sounded like two animals fighting. I've got a fenced-in compost pile and, sure enough, wrestling around in front of it were two skunks."

“Skunks!”

“Skunks. All I did was yell at ‘em to break it up, and the big one charged right at me. I’ll tell you right now, I didn’t hold my ground. No way, no how. I stood there long enough to say ‘Oh, fuck!’ and took off running for the house.”

Dean’s guffaws drew smiles from several other diners. “Did it follow you?”

“I don’t really know. I didn’t stop running until I was back inside and slamming the door shut!” Scott’s sheepish laughter joined Dean’s.

They finished their meal, paid, and then Scott drove Dean back to his office. The two of them chatted easily during the short drive, their comfort level increasing with each moment they spent together. Scott pulled the truck around to the back, switched off the engine and turned to face Dean. “I’m gonna be out of town for the next couple of days; I bought a filly from a guy over in Westerton, and I have to go pick her up.” He reached for Dean’s hand, his thumb rubbing across the knuckles, “When I get back, I’d like you to come to my place for supper. I was thinking maybe we could ...”

“Get to know each other better?” Dean asked softly. He felt his insides tighten, a quiver fluttering inside his stomach.

“Yeah,” Scott breathed.

“How ‘bout we start right now?” Dean cupped the back of Scott’s head, pulling him in for a hard, needy, open-mouthed kiss. Pent-up desire flared inside Dean, and Scott was right there with him, just as hot, urgent and willing. Dean groaned around the insistent tongue that swept into his mouth, his own welcoming the intruder with slithering strokes and teasing sucks.

Scott leaned in, firmly pushing Dean back against the seat. One of his hands slid down and under to squeeze Dean’s ass, the other moved from Dean’s shoulder and settled against the thick bulge of Dean’s already hard cock, which strained against the buttons of his jeans. Scott’s fingers rubbed the swollen organ and Dean arched his hips, increasing the pressure.

“Ah, yeah,” he groaned, lifting his mouth free of Scott’s.

“Is this what you want?” Scott’s mouth was fiery against Dean’s ear. “More?”

“Yeah. Fuck, yeah.”

Scott released his grip on Dean’s ass and both hands worked the buttons on Dean’s jeans, spreading the fabric wide. He tugged the waistband of Dean’s briefs away and down, freeing the eager cock below, and tucked the elastic under Dean’s balls. Scott’s mouth found his, initiating another scorching kiss even as his slightly rough and callused fingers wrapped around Dean’s cock, rubbing and massaging. Dean pushed up, pumping his hips, working himself in the firm grip that held him.

Scott broke the kiss. “I know this is a hell of a time to ask, but you clean, babe?”

“Yeah,” Dean panted. “Got tested a year ago, haven’t been with anybody in three. You?”

“Yeah. Tested clean six months ago. Never fuck without protection. Till now. Lean back.”

Dean slid down along the back of the seat, his head coming to rest in the space formed by the seat, the passenger door and the arm rest. Scott shifted and bent down. Before Dean could say something, anything, Scott swallowed Dean’s cock, lips holding him snug, hot mouth sucking and clever tongue swirling over Dean’s taut flesh.

“Fuck!. Feels so good. So fucking good!”

Scott’s hands gripped Dean’s hips, allowing him short, shallow thrusts while Scott worked his mouth up and down the thick, hard length of his cock. Their combined movements drove Dean higher and higher. Wound tight from the tension that had been growing between them for days -- the previous night notwithstanding -- it didn’t take long before Dean lost it.

“Gonna come. Now!”

The other man growled, the vibration arrowing straight to Dean’s balls, setting him off like a rocket. He froze for a split second, his cock pulsing hard once, twice, again, each spasm pushing forth a spurt of warm seed that filled Scott’s mouth a moment before it was greedily swallowed.

Muscles that had gone rigid relaxed, and Dean collapsed, breathing hard. He lay still for just a moment, then struggled to sit up, shoving Scott back and claiming his mouth. The taste of Scott and his own release exploded between his lips as he frantically unfastened Scott’s jeans and reached in to capture the stiff pole, jacking him hard and fast.

“Wanna taste you too,” he growled.

“Can’t wait, Dean. Too much, too much.” Scott gasped and spilled himself into Dean’s pistoning fist.

Dean squeezed him dry and grinned. He knew his expression must be feral and he reveled in the boldness he felt. He raised his hand to his mouth, licking his fingers. “I still get to taste,” he declared and shifted forward, his mouth claiming Scott’s still semi-hard cock, his tongue lapping him clean.

Scott grunted and held him in place for a few moments before gently setting him away. “You haven’t been with anybody in three years?”

Dean shook his head.

“You haven’t forgotten anything.”

Dean chuckled lazily. “What about you? How long since you’ve been with someone?”

Scott straightened and started to tuck himself in. Dean followed suit. “About a year and half now. Always casual stuff. Never what you’d call dating anyone.”

“Same here.”

Scott shifted slightly, his arm lifting and his hand urging Dean closer until their lips met in a soft, questing kiss. "Hoping to change that, Dean."

"Me, too," Dean managed through a throat gone tight with emotion.

"I'll be back late Thursday. Come over Friday when you close the office. We'll fix supper together."

Dean nodded. "Have a safe trip."

They exchanged one more deep, unhurried kiss before Dean opened the passenger door and exited the truck. Scott watched him walk to the back door, and they traded a last look before Dean stepped inside and disappeared.

Scott sighed. A wealth of emotion washed through him. "Damn," he whispered. "Who'd have thought this would ever happen?" He grinned and began whistling through his teeth. Driving home, his thoughts were not on the coming trip but on a pair of soft, brown eyes.

* * * * *

Obsession drove pen across the paper. A deep need, an emptiness that longed to be filled, gnawed at the awareness of the watcher. Words were necessary, the right words to draw out the longed-for love. A suspicion had begun to grow when Dean had been spotted having lunch with Scott Whittaker. There was something there, something in the way they looked at each other.

No! No, it couldn't be.

The hand paused; frustration and anger boiled up and spilled over. The paper was snatched up, shredded, torn apart. Shaking hands fisted, until fury-filled eyes lit upon the pictures. Dean, sweet, beautiful Dean.

Each picture brought a growing wave of calm. Dean walking from his house. Dean entering his office. Dean standing in front of a smoking grill at the Joshua Finch Days' celebration. Always and everywhere, Dean.

A tuneless humming began through softly smiling lips. Pen again met paper, fixation becoming the written word.

Chapter Five

Later that evening, Dean sat at his kitchen table and began going through the mail. He mentally tallied the lot -- bill, bill, junk, bill -- until he was pulled up short by a pale lavender envelope. He noted there was no return address before slitting it with his letter opener. Removing a single sheet of paper, he read, a furrow forming between his brows. He gave a startled jerk when the phone rang.

"Damn," he exclaimed, then crossed the room to pick up the portable hand set. "Hello?"

"Hey, there, sweet thang, you miss me?"

Dean laughed, "Hey, Scott. Yeah, I do. How's it going?"

"Fine. I pick up the filly tomorrow, and then I'll be home late Thursday night, just as planned."

"That's good." Dean's gaze went back to the note paper on the kitchen table. "You didn't take up writing poetry did you?"

"No. Why?"

"I got something weird in the mail. Listen to this." He strode back to the table and sat, then read it out loud. "Inside your soul, a flame burns bright./ A single fire to light the night./ Cold, alone, my soul draws near./ To revel in your heat, so dear./ Flame's nature is to ignite./ Passion flares and burns the night./ We burn together soul to soul./ Our love is born, it makes us whole."

Silence reigned for a moment, followed by a low whistle. "Well, I guess you could call that poetry. Somebody sent you that in the mail?"

"Yeah, first the rose, then the fudge and now this."

"Hold a minute, what rose?"

“Oh, yeah, I didn’t tell you about that. I just made the connection myself. Two days before the fudge showed up, there was a red rose on my doorstep.”

“Sounds like someone’s got a crush on you, babe.” Scott’s voice was filled with concern. “Have you noticed anyone watching you or anything else out of the ordinary?”

“No, not really. I mean there was that incident the other night, but I didn’t see anyone around the house. Just the raccoon. You think this is something I should be worried about?”

“It’s probably nothing. Maybe some teenager who’s too shy to approach you. As far as somebody peeping in your windows, well, maybe you should pull the shades. Just to be on the safe side.”

“I think I will. The thought of someone watching me is just creepy.”

“I know what you mean. Well, it doesn’t really matter who it is. You aren’t gonna need ’em. I’m gonna pound your ass into the mattress when I get home.” Scott’s growl was a sensual rasp.

“Shit. Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“You know damn good ’n’ well what. You’ve got me so hard it hurts.”

“Mmm, that’s real interesting. Guess what I’m doin’ right now.”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m stroking my cock, wishin’ it was you in my hands.”

“Scott, fuck! You need to be here if you’re gonna say shit like that.”

“Soon, babe. Very soon. Why don’t you go to your bedroom and strip off? I think we’re both ready for some fun, and there’s no use you ending up on the floor.” He laughed.

“You’re a real comedian,” Dean grouched. He rose and left the kitchen, not about to argue.

The lavender sheet and envelope were caught by an errant breeze that drifted in through the open window. They fluttered and floated, forgotten, to the kitchen floor.

* * * * *

Five o’clock Friday found Dean in his car, heading up the Whittaker driveway. His palms were sweaty with nervous anticipation, and his heart was pounding. He kept telling himself to calm down, but the silent pep talk had little effect. Considering the fact that he fully expected have sex with Scott tonight, he knew why he was anxious. But in this case, knowing the reason didn’t help.

It was one thing to indulge in teasing over a phone line, and a quick grope in the front seat of a truck was familiar. It was the thought of once more sharing a bed with someone who was coming to mean something to him that gave him a case of the quakes.

He parked the car and got out, carrying the bottle of merlot he'd brought that might accompany their supper, depending on what they ended up fixing. Dean stopped for a moment to admire the house, a white, two-story clapboard, turn-of-the-century farmhouse complete with wraparound porch and a porch swing. There was also a small, round patio table and a pair of comfortable patio chairs tucked away in a corner where a honeysuckle vine, full of blooms and wafting its sweet fragrance, wound around a sculpted wood pillar.

He imagined what it would be like to sit outside on the swing, watching the sun go down, or perhaps enjoy an intimate meal for two at the table while the warm evening breezes blew over them. Dean grinned at the notion, momentarily picturing mint juleps and crawfish gumbo. *Wrong state*, he thought ruefully.

He climbed the porch steps; just as he reached the top, the front door opened and Scott stood there with a welcoming smile. Dean paused, arrested by the sight.

Scott had to be the most devastatingly handsome man Dean had ever seen: six-foot-four inches of pure masculine power and grace. He could definitely see Scott in the Old West. No one would have dared cross such a man. He exuded confidence and an unmistakable sensuality that drew Dean like a magnet to steel. He felt his fears slip away. He knew Scott wanted him, and he certainly wanted Scott. Here and now.

With a self-assurance he'd never experienced before, Dean strode across the porch. "Inside," he ordered softly.

Scott's brows lifted, but he whirled back and made way for Dean, who entered and shut the door behind him. Dean set the bottle of wine on a hall table and turned to Scott. Placing his hands on Scott's shoulders, he backed Scott into the wall.

"I've waited forever for this," he whispered, taking Scott's lips with his own.

Scott groaned and open his mouth for Dean's probing tongue. Their arms wrapped hard around the other as their tongues dueled, then gentled, stroking, caressing, loving. Coming up for air, Dean leaned away, studying the intent expression on his lover's face. Scott's blue eyes were deep sapphire pools, his lips moist and swollen. Dean returned his mouth to Scott's, extended his tongue and slowly bathed Scott's lower lip with one long swipe.

Scott's breaths were hard and heavy. "Hello to you, too. I take it you're not hungry?"

"Oh, I'm hungry, all right. Hungry for you," Dean breathed. "Seems to me you said something about pounding my ass into the mattress."

Scott's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring as a fire kindled in his eyes. "Bedroom's upstairs."

Dean stepped back and gestured for Scott to take the lead. His gaze hungrily followed the flex of Scott's buttocks under his jeans as he mounted the stairs. Scott reached the landing and walked rapidly down the hallway, entering the second door on the left. The bedroom was large and airy, the walls and ceiling a creamy parchment color. The furniture, dresser, bedside tables and an old-fashioned dry sink were of heavy, solid oak.

The bed, king-size, was centered at the far wall and sat in a huge frame that consisted of an intricately carved and molded headboard that stood at least six feet at the curved midpoint. Carved boards ran the length of the bed's sides along the bottom of the box spring and were attached to the matching footboard. The mattress was covered in a square patterned quilt, the colors consisting mainly of reds, browns and creams, and had a distinctly masculine flavor. Across the room was an open doorway that led into the master bath. Another door revealed a large walk-in closet. A fresh breeze fluttered the curtains at several open windows.

Scott walked to the bed and pulled the quilt down and off, tossing it onto a heavy oak chair with a padded seat. He turned to Dean and, without a word, began to unbutton his own shirt. Dean observed for a few seconds as a rush of testosterone and adrenaline hit him with stunning effect. Dean began to mirror Scott's every move, starting with undressing.

They eyed each other like rutting stags, sizing up the other's strengths and weaknesses. Lost in a wave of aggression and need, Dean had no time to think about tender emotions. Like the stag, his only concern at the moment was to mate.

Their shirts were opened and discarded. Scott's chest was heavily muscled and smooth, the skin warm and golden. His six-pack abs rippled. Dean's heart rate increased. They kicked off their shoes, and unfastened jeans that strained to hold back the thick bulges that steadily grew behind stressed fabric. Metal buttons slid slow and smooth from each worn opening, the material parting.

Dean could swear his and Scott's eyes must be absorbing and reflecting the sparkles and flashes of light that filled both their gazes until it felt as though an electrical current discharged between them. The air thickened and was punctuated by their hard, panting breaths when the thick, hard columns of their throbbing flesh were revealed. Neither lost time discarding the rest of his clothes.

Their aroused bodies were beautifully, utterly male. Dean was relieved to see that physically, at least, he measured up to his soon-to-be lover. They each had broad shoulders and wide chests that formed the classic V shape to a tapered waist, slim hips and long, defined legs with slim feet. The movement of their muscles was elastic and fluid under smooth skin, whose tones ran from golden tan to pale cream. And centered at their groins, anchored in patches of curls, rose the unmistakable evidence of males ready to service their chosen mates.

As one, Dean and Scott moved toward each other; Dean knew his lover was as hot, needy and maddeningly excited as he was. Their bodies slammed together, and they grunted as their lips collided, opening to perform a mutual ravaging. Their hands traveled and grasped firm, rounded globes of flesh, even as their hips undulated and ground together, squeezing, kneading. Dean felt both of their heavy, blood-engorged cocks press against his own belly, sliding together with exquisite friction.

Heat and scent rose and moisture formed until their skin gleamed with a fine sheen of sweat. The musky, tangy scent of carnally stimulated males filled Dean's nostrils, drugging him, dragging him deeper into mindless need. They slid to the floor and rolled, each struggling for supremacy. Their muscles flexed and rippled, gasps and groans echoing in the room. The intense struggle added to Dean's growing pleasure, pleasure that filled, encompassed and inundated him until writhing mindlessly against Scott, it burst the bonds that held it captive and in turn captured Scott, imprisoning them both in its agonizing spell.

Thick, creamy streams of fragrant semen jetted between them, each cock spewing its load, bathing both men as they clung, bodies arched and taut. The ecstasy seemed to bind them as one, its tendrils weaving tight, the liquid seed anointing their union. As the spasms slowly eased, they released their stranglehold on each other and lay together exhausted and stunned. The only sound beyond the flutter of the curtains was their harsh breathing. The breeze found their heated, sweaty skin and cooled them.

Ever so slowly, reality returned.

"What the fuck was that?" Scott asked, his breathing almost restored to normal.

"I have no fucking idea." Dean felt as though he'd just finished a marathon.

They looked at each other, slowly smiling. Their smiles grew wider and soon turned into laughter. Eventually they recovered and lay staring at each other.

"I hope this doesn't happen every time we're together," Dean commented, "I don't think my heart could take it."

"You started it," Scott accused.

"What do you mean, I started it?" Dean rose up on his elbow.

Scott followed suit. "You came in here all aggressive and demanding. Something about your attitude brought out the same in me. I gotta tell you, babe, I never expected that from you." He reached out and brushed his fingers against Dean's cheek. "What happened to the shy, brown-eyed angel? Thought I was gonna have to seduce you into my bed."

Dean flushed with happiness and embarrassment. "Surprise, surprise. When I saw you standing there, I couldn't think. All I wanted was to touch you, be with you ... take you."

"I'm glad. I like knowing you want me every bit as much as I want you."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

Scott took Dean's lips in a gentle kiss. They melted against each other again, and Dean was lost in the feel of smooth naked flesh meeting, melding, until his stomach rumbled.

Scott chuckled, "I guess you want supper after all, huh?"

"So it would seem."

"Quick showers, then we'll fix supper. Me first. I'd have you join me, but we'd probably never get to the food and I'm starved myself. Want to save your ass for dessert."

“What makes you think it’s not *your* ass that’ll end up dessert?” Dean quirked a brow.

Scott laughed and scrambled to his feet. “Sounds sweet however it ends.” He took off for the bathroom.

Dean rolled to his back with a sigh, a slow grin spreading over his face. In no time at all, Scott was done and back in the bedroom, wearing a towel and using another to rub his dampened hair. Dean jumped to his feet and headed for the shower. As he walked by, Scott dropped his towel and bent to pick up his jeans. Dean couldn’t resist the call of the firm, exposed cheeks. He reached over and goosed Scott. His lover jumped.

“Very funny, smart ass.” Scott grinned as he quickly rolled his towel and flipped it at Dean’s own retreating behind. Dean’s startled yelp accompanied the snap of the towel.

“Come on down to the kitchen when you’re done,” Scott called over the splash of water.

Dean quickly washed up and dried off with the towels Scott had left out for him. Returning to the bedroom, he retrieved his jeans and noted that Scott’s shirt, briefs, shoes and socks still littered the floor, as did his. He grinned and yanked on his own jeans.

Dean jounced downstairs, feeling lighthearted and easy. At the foot of the stairs, he saw a large living room to the right, through which an open doorway on the left led to a dining room. Guessing that the kitchen would be close to the dining room, he crossed the rooms and pushed open the swinging door at the far side. Sure enough, there, bare-chested and bare-footed, stood a softly whistling Scott with his back to him. Dean slipped around the kitchen table and moved behind Scott, sliding his arms around his waist.

“I wondered if you’d try to goose me again,” Scott rumbled, wiggling back into Dean’s arms.

“How’d you know I was here?” Dean asked, then added softly, “Hey, cowboy.” He pressed firmly against Scott’s back, holding in a gasp as his nipples tightened where they rubbed against Scott’s silky skin. Pushing Scott’s hair aside, he placed small, nibbling kisses on the nape of his neck, his hands sliding up to find that Scott’s nipples were as hard as his own.

“Air displacement when the door opened. For a guy who just won a draw in the best wrestling match I ever participated in, you’re awfully frisky.” Scott moaned softly. “Shit, babe, you keep that up and we may end up going round two on the table.”

Dean smiled, moved to Scott’s side and leaned against the counter, watching Scott slice a tomato. “What are you doing and how can I help?”

“I thought we’d have some sandwiches, since it’s kind of late to be starting anything else. I’ve got deli ham, chicken, turkey and roast beef. There’s also Swiss and American cheese. Why don’t you turn the oven on to four hundred twenty-five? There’s a baking sheet in the drawer at the bottom of the oven. I thought we could also fix some french fries to go with the sandwiches. Hell, toast the sandwiches, too, while we’re at it.”

He watched as Dean performed his tasks, then directed him to the bag of fries in the freezer. "I suppose we should have a salad instead of the fries," he ventured. "It'd be more nutritious."

Dean paused in the act of taking the bag out of the freezer. The two of them looked at each other doubtfully, simultaneously voicing their sentiments. "Nah."

They laughed. "We'll put lots of greens and tomato on our sandwiches," Scott conceded.

"Now you're talking."

Dean spread the fries out on the baking sheet and slid them into the already warming oven. Scott had finished with the tomatoes and had set the lettuce, pickles, onion and olives on the table. Now he was pulling various other deli bags out of a refrigerator drawer. Dean ambled over and took some of them from him, placing them on the table. Scott completed their haul with a bag of large, crusty sandwich rolls.

The two of them began assembling sandwiches of epic proportions, preparing them on another baking sheet. Lightly bantering and teasing each other, they built layer after layer, and then Scott slid the sheet into the oven beside the fries. While they waited for everything to heat, Scott got a couple of beers from the fridge, and they sat at the table, munching on bits of lettuce and talking about Scott's trip to Westerton.

The oven timer went off and Dean took the potholder Scott handed him to remove the baking sheets from the oven. Using a spatula, Scott maneuvered their sandwiches onto plates while Dean divvied up the fries and dumped them beside each sandwich. Back at the table, Scott started to reach for a slice of onion, his hand pausing above the plate.

Dean cocked his head questioningly. Scott grimaced, shook his head and winked. Dean chuckled. No onions, it was agreed. They finished loading their sandwiches with condiments and greens, sat down and dug in.

After several bites took the edge off his appetite, Dean spoke. "So tell me about this filly you bought, she something special?"

Scott took a swig of his beer and swallowed. "Oh, yeah, she's a real beauty, a roan or snowcap ghost. When she's ready I've got the perfect stud to cover her. I'm hoping to produce another good, strong line of roans."

"You'll have to give me a tour of the stables and show her off. I didn't see that much when I was here before."

"We'll do that. Tomorrow, after breakfast."

"After breakfast?" Dean asked with some surprise. He hadn't known that Scott had counted on him spending the night. He found he liked the idea.

Scott nodded decisively. "After breakfast."

Dean felt his gut tighten as the two of them locked gazes, a silent message winging between them. "Okay."

Scott smiled, satisfaction written on his face “I was thinking after we eat, we could settle in the den for a while and maybe watch a movie while the food digests. I could light a fire in the fireplace.”

“Planning to light any other fires?”

“You’ll know when you’re burning, baby,” Scott intoned wickedly.

Dean grinned and laughed, even as a shiver of worry slid down his spine. Things had gone unexpectedly well earlier. His relative inexperience hadn’t been an issue. But now that they were slowing down, he knew there was no way he’d be able to cover the fact that he’d hadn’t exactly been a Romeo. No one had had his ass since his erstwhile lover in college. And later, during those few anonymous fucks he’d engaged in, he had been the pitcher, never the receiver.

Remembering the size of Scott’s cock caused Dean to squirm in his seat. Scott wanted to fuck him. He had to admit he wanted it, too. But wanting it and not having done it more than a few times years ago was a precarious combination to work with. Having to admit his ass was the next best thing to cherry versus letting Scott possibly hurt him because the other man didn’t know held little appeal. He mentally cringed.

Dean succeeded in pushing the problem away while they finished their meal and the cleanup. Scott made coffee and they took their cups into the den where Dean picked out a movie as Scott lit the fire. With the flames flickering, they settled onto the sofa, drinking their coffee and intently following the images on the screen as the movie began.

Eventually, Scott set his cup aside and took Dean’s as well. He leaned back into the corner of the sofa, and Dean moved closer, wrapping his arms around Scott and laying his head on his lover’s shoulder. Scott’s left leg came up and draped over Dean’s right, one arm curling around Dean’s shoulder. Tangled together, they sighed and relaxed.

Partway into the movie, Scott’s hand cupped Dean’s chin. He urged Dean’s face up and leaned down, softly joining their lips. Dean enjoyed the gentle pressure and opened his mouth, his tongue seeking Scott’s. Scott didn’t disappoint and their tongues swirled in a slow, sensual dance that caused Dean’s blood to heat, and his heart to beat stronger. Dean moaned at the growing pressure of his thickening cock. Scott’s other hand moved down, covering the bulge, slowly massaging. Dean’s hips strained upward, seeking to increase the friction.

“Oh, yeah,” he panted. “Feels so good.”

“Just lightin’ another fire, babe,” Scott breathed. “You feel the heat?”

“Umm, yeaah.” Dean’s moan was muffled as Scott sealed their lips together once again, even as his fingers skillfully worked open the buttons on Dean’s jeans. When the last one was undone, his hand slid in, fingers wrapping around the hard, pulsing flesh of Dean’s cock. Dean jerked, grunted ... then flinched as the phone rang.

Scott swore in a vehement undertone. “Fuck!”

“You gonna answer that?”

He gave Dean a quick peck and withdrew his hand. "Don't want to, but they might need something down at the barn." He picked up the receiver, barked a greeting and lay back, Dean collapsing against him. Scott listened a moment, then handed the phone to Dean. "It's Cassie."

"Crap. I told her I'd be here in case of an emergency." Dean sat up. "Hi, Cassie."

"Dean! Man, I'm really sorry to bother you, but Sheriff Gates called. He arrested a guy on a drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace and several other charges, including cruelty to animals. There's a dog; the sheriff says it's tied out in back of the guy's house." Cassie's voice was anxious. "He says it's in pretty bad shape. I didn't know what else to do. Nobody's on duty in animal control this time of night."

"It's okay, Cassie. Have you got an address?"

"311 South Pomeroy Road. You want me to meet you there?"

"No, I'll take care of it. Stay home and enjoy your evening. Thanks, Cassie." Dean hung up and looked at Scott. "I've gotta go. There's an abused dog that needs help."

Scott nodded. "Let's go."

"You're coming?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. I guess the first order of business is to get dressed."

They headed for the stairs, Dean filling Scott in on the details. Once fully clothed and on the way out, Scott dug two jackets out of the closet by the front door.

"It's getting chilly," he explained.

Dean accepted the jacket and slipped it on, warmed by Scott's concern. They'd decided to take Scott's truck, so Dean went to his car and pulled out the emergency kit he carried in the trunk, which consisted of medical supplies, a blanket and anything else he thought might come in handy. He placed it in the back of the truck and climbed into the cab.

Chapter Six

Although they made it to the address Cassie had given Dean in record time, it was dark by then and he was grateful to have Scott's company, especially since the other man knew where Pomeroy Road was, whereas Dean would have had to consult a map. A sheriff's car was parked in the driveway, and outside lights shone in both the front and back yard. As they pulled up and got out, a deputy exited his car and approached them.

"Doctor Conlon?"

"Here," Dean acknowledged. "This is Scott Whittaker, he's going help me."

"Sure thing. The dog's out back, Doc. You better watch yourself; he's not actin' too friendly."

The three of them walked around to the back, which was littered with junk. Old tires, a dilapidated swing set and other assorted scrap and trash formed a large pile. From inside a dark hollow, a warning growl issued, followed by a round of vicious barking.

"Told you," the deputy said.

"Deputy ... ?"

"Harris."

"Deputy Harris, I'd like you and Scott to wait at the corner of the house," Dean told them as he walked back to the truck. He returned with a long pole from which dangled a loop of thick nylon rope, a leash, a muzzle and a box of dog biscuits. As he started to pass Scott, his lover reached out and grabbed his arm.

"What are you going to do?"

"It's okay," Dean reassured him, addressing the concern in his eyes. "Watch."

Scott released him, albeit reluctantly, and Dean walked to within six or seven feet of the dark opening, greeted by nonstop barking. A stake had been hammered into the ground

and attached to it was a short chain. That the dog had apparently paced often along the edge of his prison was indicated by a well-worn path. Dean slowly seated himself cross-legged on the ground just beyond that bare and beaten track. A series of rough growls accompanied his every action. Moving cautiously, he spoke softly to the animal, and then breaking a biscuit in half, he tossed it into the dark hollow. The growls ceased and Dean could hear snuffling, then muffled crunching.

He continued to speak gently to the dog. The second piece of biscuit he threw landed just outside the entrance to the junk pile and a questing nose eased out, muzzle snatching the treat before hastily retreating. Each time Dean threw another morsel, it landed further from the dingy hole and closer to him so that the dog had to come further out to retrieve it. As the canine moved into the light, his condition became evident. He was a mess: his hair was dirty, tangled and matted, and he was pitifully thin, his body quivering and odoriferous. It was hard to judge how old the animal was under all the dirt, but Dean thought he was likely still young. Finally, when the dog was within a foot of him, Dean held the treat in his hand. By this time, the creature's attitude had changed from aggression to that of a scared child expecting to be beaten. His tail wagged tentatively, the dark eyes seeming to plead for succor.

"It's okay, buddy," Dean crooned. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

Slowly, very slowly, the dog extended his head and meekly took the biscuit from Dean's hand with his teeth. He quickly crunched down the food, then sniffed at Dean. Dean carefully reached out, letting the dog smell his hand, then lightly tickled under the animal's chin with the tips of his fingers. The dog leaned in and Dean smoothed his hand over his fur, comforting and petting, his voice low and calm.

At last, tail wagging and groaning tiredly, the dog dropped to the ground, his head in Dean's lap. With practiced ease, Dean slipped on the muzzle and leash, and unsnapped the chain from around the dog's neck. He stood and the dog got to his feet, resisting the leash, the whites of his eyes showing. Dean stayed still, encouraging the animal until the dog eased and followed when Dean gave the leash a tiny tug.

Deputy Harris spoke as Dean walked toward him and Scott. "I've never seen anything like that. Most animal wardens just grab 'em with a capture pole, shove 'em in a cage and cart 'em off to the pound."

Scott's gaze was glued to Dean. "He cares about them."

"I'm going to ride in the back of the truck with him. Can you take us to the office?" Dean asked, ignoring their words as he came even with them.

Scott nodded. Everyone moved to the vehicles and left. When Dean and Scott arrived at his office, Dean took the dog into an exam room and prepared a needle.

"You're not going to put him to sleep, are you?" Scott was clearly appalled at the idea.

Dean looked at him indulgently. "Course not. I'm giving him a small dose of tranquilizer. Just enough to keep him calm while I examine him and get him cleaned up." He quickly administered the shot before the poor creature even knew what was happening.

Together, Dean and Scott watched the drug take effect. Dean lifted the patient to the table and inspected him. He listened to the dog's heart, lungs and bowel sounds, determined the dog needed to be de-wormed and made a note of it along with all the other shots he was sure the dog had never had. After removing the muzzle and checking the animal's teeth, Dean estimated the dog was fairly young, not more than a year or two old, which bore out his initial impression. He seemed to be a mix of Labrador retriever and unspecified spaniel, and was mostly black, with a patch of white on his chest. His hair, when clean and brushed, would be long and silky on his legs, and he had a tail like an Irish or English setter.

"I don't want to leave him filthy like this. Wanna help me?" Dean grinned.

"Sure."

As soon as they entered the back room, the boarders and patients being kept overnight began a racket. Dean spoke to them and passed out a few treats to steady everyone. Most of them quieted, but a few seemed determined to make sure their presence was known.

Ignoring them as best they could, Dean and Scott tackled the job before them. The first order of business was a shave. With his hair so severely matted, there was no way to save it. Dean worked as quickly as possible. With the shaving done their charge was even more pitiful looking. Every rib stood out even his pelvic bones were prominent. They two men exchanged glances over the dog.

"The bastard who owned this dog ought to be horsewhipped. Or better yet, staked out on a chain for a few weeks with short rations," Scott declared softly.

"It's a tempting thought for sure," Dean agreed

A bath was next and they soon had the poor guy soaped and rinsed ... but not without splashing a considerable amount of water on themselves. Dean used the products he found in the grooming supplies, including a hair conditioner that was supposed to help untangle furry messes. He'd left some of the longer hair on the dogs head and ears. They towel-dried their charge and used a blow dryer, brushes and combs to finish the job, working what snarls were left free as gently as possible. By this time, the dog had come to the conclusion that he'd found his two best friends. By this time, the small bit of tranquilizer Dean administered had worn off and, he squirmed and wiggled with muted joy at the tender attention being lavished on him.

Finished with the grooming, Dean set up one of the kennel runs. He put out water and a special bowl with a nourishing, vitamin-enriched broth, along with another bowl containing a small amount of dry food. He didn't want the dog to have too much too soon, especially on top of the biscuits he'd already had, in case it should make him sick. Dean finished the arrangement by placing a thick pad on the floor with a folded blanket on top.

Scott brought their latest boarder in, and the dog immediately attacked the food and water. A few of his kennel-mates greeted him with barks and sniffs, which he happily returned between bites of food. Eventually, he went outside through the flap door to

investigate the small yard and anoint the grass. He then returned inside, smelled the blanket and lay down with a satisfied sigh. He seemed to think he'd found his home.

Scott clapped Dean on the shoulder, "That's one happy dog, and you are one amazing man."

"What did I do?"

"It was like magic the way you handled him, the way you won his trust."

"I think animals can sense who does or doesn't mean them harm, if you give them the time to figure it out. I gave him the time." Dean looked at his watch. Nearly three hours had passed since Cassie had called. He gave Scott a stricken glance. "Jeez, I can't believe how long this took. I'm really sorry."

"Hey, I enjoyed it. It's a good feeling to help an animal in need. Don't worry about it." He slid an arm around Dean and leaned in for a kiss. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah." Dean relaxed against Scott to return the kiss. Pressing against his lover, he realized he could feel dampness between them. He looked down, his gaze taking in the clinging dog hair and the wet spots on Scott's shirt, which matched the condition of his own clothes. "Looks like it's our turn to get cleaned up."

"Not a problem, babe. You've seen the shower in my bathroom. It's plenty big enough for two. I'll scrub your back, you'll scrub mine. It'll be fun."

Scott grabbed Dean's hand and led him, unresisting, out of the office and back into his truck. The trip to Scott's place was made as quickly as they could safely manage it. After they got there and raced to the house, they locked up and shut off the lights downstairs before finally returning to Scott's bedroom. Dean toed off his shoes and reached for his shirt buttons.

"Nuh uh," Scott said softly, placing his hand over Dean's. "Let me."

Dean gave him a tired smile.

Scott shook his head. "You're giving me that look again."

"What look?"

"The one where your eyes go all soft and liquid. It turns me inside out. Makes me think of angels with big brown eyes."

Scott leaned in, gently kissing Dean as his fingers deftly worked open the buttons on his shirt. Dean drifted in a fog of pleasure, absorbing Scott's heat, the soft touches of his fingers and the smooth warmth of his kisses sliding like whiskey through his veins. Scott slid his hands inside Dean's shirt, his palms moving sensuously over Dean's abdomen, chest and shoulders, and Dean moaned softly at the slightly rough, yet silky glide of Scott's hands over his skin. His shirt drifted to the floor..

"I know, baby," Scott whispered. He moved to the fastenings on Dean's soft, worn jeans and again slowly opened each one. The backs of his fingers brushed Dean's burgeoning

erection, sending electric tingles through his groin and into his balls. Dean's hips pushed forward, his body craving the contact.

"Scott?"

"Umm?"

"Need you."

"Gonna get me, babe. Wanna savor it."

Scott skimmed his lips along Dean's lightly stubbled jaw line, his teeth nibbling and finding his ear. He was rewarded with Dean's breathing kicking up to a soft panting. His hands shifted around Dean's hips and down, easing under his jeans to cup the tight globes of his ass while firmly kneading them. A groan slid from Dean's throat.

Scott's mouth moved down along Dean's throat. He continued to his collar bone, then lower, to the center of Dean's chest, rubbing his nose in the silky-soft patch of hair. Dean shivered at the misty heat of Scott's breath as it drifted over his skin. A wisp of warm, moist air caused his nipples to tighten a split second before Scott's mouth closed over one taut peak.

"Oh, fuck." Dean gripped Scott's shoulders to anchor himself against the wave of pleasure that threatened to knock him off his feet. He remained clinging to Scott, his fingers massaging the firm flesh under his hands as Scott's warm mouth worked the small, hard nub on his chest, laving, sucking and gently biting. Eventually, Scott drew back, examining his work. Seemingly satisfied, he left the stiff kernel with a final lick and moved to its mate.

Dean couldn't hold back a grunt at the contact. Every moment Scott worked his nipple, small electrical charges were set off in his groin. His cock pulsed with each suckle, and his hips found a rhythm to wordlessly broadcast his need.

After a delicious moment, Scott released his prize, his mouth now following the faint trail that led down to Dean's flat belly. Scott's tongue circled the shadowed indentation of Dean's belly button, and Dean felt his lover smile at the convulsive heave of his abdominal muscles. He looked down to see Scott drop to his knees, and Dean closed his eyes when Scott slowly eased his loosened jeans down the long length of his legs to the floor. Lifting first one foot, then the other, he aided Scott in pulling them off, then again lifted his feet at Scott's urging so the other man could remove his socks as well.

Naked, vulnerable and desperate, Dean quivered at the faint abrasion of Scott's callused hands as they slid from his ankles upward over his calves and the back of his knees. They halted at the crease of his thighs where they met his ass. Scott leaned forward, drawing in a deep breath.

"Smell so good, babe," he whispered.

He gently, yet insistently, urged Dean to spread his thighs. Dean complied and moaned at the caress of Scott's lips on his inner thighs. Scott's mouth moved upward, and Dean braced himself for that first touch on his aching cock. Nonetheless, he jumped with surprise

when lips and a warm moist tongue partially engulfed and bathed his full and lightly furred testicles.

A wild wave of dizzying pleasure swept over Dean, groans issuing from his open mouth. He shuddered at the feel of Scott's heated breath over the damp skin of his balls, feeling them tighten and draw up. So lost was he in the sensation that Scott's withdrawal didn't register until his tongue flicked the tip of Dean's copiously leaking cock.

"Mmmm, sweet," Scott breathed, then engulfed the plum-shaped head, his tongue sweeping over the swollen flesh.

"Oh, fuck, Scott!" Dean cried, unable to keep from rocking his pelvis forward.

Knees locking, he struggled to keep from melting into a puddle right there. Tremors of bliss shook his body when Scott's mouth and tongue worked the length of his rock-hard cock. The hot slide of Scott's lips combined with the teasing touches of his tongue were sending Dean closer and closer to the edge. On the verge of coming, he groaned with frustration when Scott pulled away.

Scott stood and steered him into the bathroom. "Come on, Magic Man. Time for that shower."

Dean stood dazed and shaking, watching Scott quickly strip off his own clothes. He followed Scott into the shower stall and his lover turned on the water. After adjusting the temperature, Scott reached back and pulled Dean closer, immediately taking him into his arms and kissing him with unrestrained passion. Their bodies moved together, their hard cocks standing proudly side by side as Scott ravaged Dean's mouth.

After a long moment, Scott released Dean, his breath coming in hard gusts. "Christ, you go to my head."

Dean smiled weakly, overwhelmed by the depth of Scott's desire and the attention that had been so meticulously lavished on his unresisting and welcoming body. He was drowning in a sea of sensations so deep that he could only pray that Scott would rescue him. He watched while Scott lathered his hands, managing only a rumbling moan when Scott gently ran soapy hands over him. So sensitized had Dean become to Scott's touch that he could swear his skin quivered at the sensual contact.

Scott turned Dean to face one wall of the shower, scrubbing his back, his hands sliding over the firm globes of Dean's flanks. Scott's fingers slid through the trench between, the tips brushing the tight pucker they found there. Dean gasped, his muscles automatically drawing tight. This was it then; Scott was going to take him. He was torn between desire and dread.

He felt his cheeks being parted, the thick length of Scott's cock nestling in between. He let out an involuntary whimper of distress. "Scott, don't. I'm sorry. I haven't done this in a long time. It's been years."

All movement ceased until Scott rested his chin on Dean's shoulder. "I know you said you haven't been with anyone in what, three years?"

Dean nodded. "But it's been longer than that since anyone had my ass."

"How long?"

"Eight years."

"The guy from college?"

Dean scrunched his eyes closed, nodded, waiting for Scott's ridicule.

It never came.

Big hands reached up to massage the tension from his shoulders, long fingers working the muscles slow and easy. Scott kissed the side of his neck. "So did you decide not to bottom because you didn't like it, or because of what he did to you?"

"Because of him."

"So what do you want to do about it, babe?"

"All I know is I want you."

"You trust me?"

"I really want to."

Scott nodded against his shoulder. "Good enough."

Holding Dean's flesh apart once more, Scott bent his knees, the head of his cock hitting dead center on Dean's hole. Dean's indrawn gasp sounded over the force of the running water.

"Shh, baby, it's all right. I'm not going to penetrate you. I just want to do this." Scott demonstrated by moving closer and sliding the length of his cock up and down the cleft. Dean's anus was stimulated by the long, silky motions and twitched with the unfamiliar contact. "Is this all right?" Scott asked softly.

"God, yes."

"How about if I do this, too?" Scott reached around and captured Dean's cock in his hand, deftly stroking, masturbating him to the rhythm of his lightly thrusting hips. A deep guttural groan tore from Dean. He undulated back into Scott's cock and forward into the firm grip of Scott's caressing fingers.

"Oh, yeah, you like this, don't you, babe? I told you I'd light a fire. Let's fucking burn."

Like a wild animal claiming its mate, Scott bit the curve of Dean's neck and shoulder. He shifted his cock, so that it slithered between Dean's thighs, the fat tip thumping Dean's balls with every lunge. Dean tightened his thighs, increasing the pressure on Scott's cock while Scott's hand sped up, the grip firm and sure as he urged Dean to completion.

Dean was flying, dizzy with the myriad sensations that bombarded his senses. Scott's body slapped against his, matching the relentless, rhythmic pump of Scott's hand on Dean's aching, engorged erection. It felt as though their cocks had joined, that he was pierced by that fearsome length, but instead of pain, it brought only mind-numbing pleasure. Pleasure that twisted and coiled like a snake until it struck with mind-blurring speed. Pleasure that

ripped through his veins like a joyous poison until every cell exploded. Pleasure that blinded and warped and wrapped his body in an endless shuddering release.

His cry and Scott's echoed together.

Waves of semen rushed forward and exploded against the tiled shower wall; Dean felt the warm spatters as they dotted his thighs, as the liquid heat of Scott's release bathed his balls and ran down his legs. Their bodies continued to rock, a sultry movement that gradually eased them down from the heights. Dean's overworked lungs pumped air like bellows as he sought to find the oxygen his body craved.

He came back to reality with Scott draped against his back. Scott's harsh breaths and racing heartbeat matching and mimicking his own. They rested quietly, recovering slowly from their mutual orgasm. Scott straightened and turned Dean until they faced each other.

"You all right?" Scott's blue-eyed gaze searched Dean's face.

"Just dazed, but I think I'll recover."

Scott's eyes sparkled. "Let's finish this. I need to lie down," he confessed.

Dean chuckled weakly. They quickly rinsed off, each helping to dry the other, and then they collapsed onto Scott's big bed. Totally relaxed and sated, they drifted off, wrapped around one another.

Sometime in the night, Dean woke up moaning, his cock stiff and full. He lay on his left side, his right leg pushed forward and up, his hips slightly undulating. Through his waking haze, he thought he felt the head of Scott's cock pushing at his relaxed pucker until he realized whatever was there was not just rubbing against him, but was already penetrating him. Reflexively, his body clamped down on the intruder.

"Easy, babe. Relax, just relax," Scott whispered

Dean shivered at the knowledge that Scott was slowly finger-fucking him. He felt the long, gliding push and pull of Scott's lubricated digit as it lightly abraded the highly sensitized nerve endings of his hole. Each inward journey took it deeper until it was fully buried inside him.

Long moments passed while Scott patiently worked him. Dean felt the aching tension building inside, yet he felt oddly relaxed, moving easily with the slow thrust of Scott's finger. He moaned quietly and shuddered at the touch of Scott's lips and tongue as he placed nibbling kisses and licks to Dean's neck, shoulders and back. Distracted, Dean barely registered the increased bulk as a second finger joined the first. Together they opened him, widening his passage. He felt the stretching of his sphincter, grateful for the pleasure and lack of pain.

Scott continued the slow glide of his fingers, in and out, a deliberate, steady rhythm that felt to Dean as though it could go on forever. The tension and desire began to simmer. Dean found himself needing the contact, craving the invasion more and more. Unbidden, he pushed back into Scott's burrowing fingers, eagerly seeking to bury them deeper.

“Does it feel good, babe?” Scott’s breath was warm against Dean’s ear, his tongue flicking the outer curve, his teeth moving in to nibble.

“Yesss,” Dean hissed, shivering at the edged pinch of Scott’s teeth.

“Want to fuck you, Dean.”

Dean’s body had taken control, overriding his doubts, his fears. “Do it.”

Scott withdrew his fingers. “Turn over on your back.” He reached out and turned one bedside lamp on dim, while Dean rolled and settled himself comfortably. Scott moved back and loomed over him. Their mouths melded together, tongues tangling. Dean found he couldn’t stop the small, rhythmic thrusts of his pelvis. His body was demanding satisfaction.

Scott drew away and smiled, his fingers wrapping around Dean’s stiff, quivering cock, giving it a few firm pumps. Releasing him, Scott’s shifted his hand between Dean’s thighs, trailing a finger up his crease and lightly stroking the hidden entrance to Dean’s body. “For a guy who hasn’t had anything up here in eight years, you’re awfully eager. I like that.”

“Fuck! Stop torturing me.” Dean arched into Scott’s touch. “I should have humped a cucumber. Then I wouldn’t have had to tell you.”

Scott’s laughter rang out. Dean gave him a jaundiced glare, but the sound was so infectious he couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his lips. Scott leaned over him as his own mirth edged down to a chuckle. “Well, I’m glad you did tell me. I’m always careful, but now I know to be extra careful. You’re practically a virgin. And I gotta tell you, I find that sexy as hell.” Scott’s mouth crashed back down on Dean’s, their lips sealing together, tongues wrestling. Dean was gasping for air before Scott released him.

Scott sat up a bit and Dean met his gaze. Seeing the raw emotion in his eyes, Dean nodded shortly. “Glad I didn’t use a cucumber then.”

Scott chuckled and reached for the bedside table, retrieving the small bottle of lube he’d set there earlier. Re-anointing his fingers, he urged Dean to bend his knees and lift his legs so that Dean’s already partially prepared hole was again presented and easily reached. Scott trailed his fingers over Dean’s balls, slid them teasingly down and in. Dean groaned at the penetration.

“When I finally get inside you, it’s gonna kill me. You’re so damn tight.”

“Don’t start that virgin stuff again,” Dean growled.

“Didn’t say anything that wasn’t the truth. You look so hot like this. It feels good to have any part of me inside you, knowing I’m the one who put that look of pleasure on your face.”

“Stop talking. Fuck me already.”

“Too soon. Gotta loosen you up some more, babe.”

“I feel ready now.” Dean tightened himself around Scott’s slick fingers.

“Feel this instead.” His lover’s digits slid deep. Dean felt Scott twist them as he searched for and found the firm nut of Dean’s prostate. Agile fingers glided across it.

“Oh, fuck!” Dean ground his hips hard against Scott’s hand.

Scott withdrew a bit and pushed in three fingers, stretching Dean’s relaxed hole wider. Wild tendrils of pleasure kept Dean’s mind occupied. “That’s your prostate, babe. A magic little button that’s gonna make you scream when my cock’s sliding against it.”

He continued to finger-fuck Dean, dilating his constricting sphincter, opening him and distracting him with fiery touches against the firm, spongy gland that sent spasms of pleasure ripping through his groin. Dean twisted and bucked against the delicious invasion of Scott’s fingers, his body greedily begging for more.

“That’s it. Ride my fingers. Take ’em in. All the way.” Scott worked his digits in and out, fast and deep, hard jabs that pushed in to the knuckle.

“Scott, please!”

“Yeah, you’re ready now.” Scott’s voice was raspy and tight. He removed his fingers.

“Nooo!” Dean gasped, his body clamping down to hold him in.

“I’ve got a rock-solid cock for you, babe. There’s more,” Scott soothed. “So much more.”

He knelt between Dean’s widely spread thighs and crowded close, pulling Dean’s legs to his shoulders. Scott deftly slicked his own thick, pulsing cock with lube before he ran his hand over Dean’s quivering shaft again, then pulled back, squirting more lube on his fingers and adding it to that which already glistened the puckered flesh of Dean’s waiting hole.

Tossing the bottle aside, he gripped his erection and guided it to the opening of Dean’s heated chute. “Bear down, Dean,” he ordered, then pushed.

Dean uttered a long, guttural groan as he felt the head of Scott’s cock ease through the ring of muscle that guarded his ass. Fiery pain and piercing pleasure accompanied the incursion. He lay unmoving save for panting and shaking, torn between wanting it gone or wanting it deeper. Above him, Scott stilled, allowing Dean’s body to adjust.

Dean felt his muscles ease at last and took a deep breath, grunting when Scott slid deeper. He tensed, expecting more pain and was surprised to feel only pleasure. He felt almost unbearably full and taken as Scott glided in even more. His muscles spasmed, seeking to hold Scott’s cock in place when Scott reversed direction. Again his lover surged forward, back, deeper in, further out, each return journey drawing gruff moans from Dean.

Once completely seated, Scott moved Dean’s legs to clasp his waist. Resting his weight on his elbows, he lay over Dean. Their joined bodies generated waves of heat and a fine sheen of sweat. The warmth brought an increase of the hot, spicy, male musk that strengthened with their mounting arousal.

Scott looked deeply into Dean’s eyes, his hips undulating slightly, just enough to tease and pet the velvet-skinned sheath that held him in a snug, hot grip. “Brown-eyed angel,” he whispered before lightly touching his lips to Dean’s again and again.

“Scott,” Dean whispered desperately. Reaching up, he captured Scott’s face between his hands and joined their lips for a long, passionate kiss. He welcomed Scott’s invading tongue and suckled it lightly. Scott moaned and increased the pace and pressure of his thrusts. They plunged together, bodies joined in a harmonic symphony of pure passion. The pleasure mounted, climbing higher with each glide of Scott’s cock.

A fiery outpouring of base, primal lust pounded through Dean’s veins. Without thought, his body moved eagerly with Scott’s, responding to every brush of skin on skin. Dean pressed his chest against Scott’s, their nipples taut, hard, boring into each other’s flesh. His cock, sandwiched between their bellies, lubed and moistened with sweat and precome, was caressed and stroked by their rhythmic movements. The thick column of flesh that filled him touched and erotically tormented every nerve ending. Scott pumped faster, harder.

Dean cried out, his ears catching the sounds of the bed creaking, his own moans and Scott’s rapid panting. Incredible bliss built as his stomach constricted, his cock swelled and his vision dimmed. His consciousness rode the wildly careening swell of sensation, was swallowed, then violently spat forth, bursting like an over-inflated balloon.

His cock erupted. Thick, pearly streams of semen burst between the two of them, melting over their skin. Scott levered up onto his hands, hips lunging quickly and fiercely, panting and grunting with the effort. His cock slid relentlessly against Dean’s prostate, causing Dean to stay erect and to feel his peak swiftly building again.

Dean groaned, his head tossing on the pillow, denying the demanding need until with a wild cry, he climaxed again, his release spurting free. Scott’s unrestrained cry joined his. He unloaded deep inside Dean’s ass as it clenched and milked him dry.

Scott collapsed against Dean, come squelching between them, both of them shivering and wheezing, riding out the receding waves of rapture. Scott’s cock slid from its berth inside Dean, and then he rolled weakly away, removing his weight from Dean, allowing Dean to breathe more easily. Eventually he stirred, opened the drawer in the bedside table again and pulled out a clean, dry towel. He wiped his own chest, belly and cock, then turned to Dean and began gently doing the same for him.

Dean stirred, his eyes blinking. “Am I still alive?” he croaked, then coughed to clear his throat.

“We both are. Barely.”

“Oh, good, that means we can do it again.”

“We will. But later. Much, much later.”

Dean managed a weak chuckle. Scott balled up the towel and dropped it to the floor beside the bed. He snuggled into Dean, head on his shoulder, and one arm and a leg draped across his body. Dean smiled contentedly, wiggled a bit to get that just-right feeling of comfort and drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

Dean woke slowly, arm draped over a large mound that radiated warmth. Groggily he registered two facts: his pillow was breathing and he had to take a piss. His eyelids fluttered, and his vision filled with smooth, golden skin. A slow smile curved his lips as the memory of last night's activities returned. He and Scott had devoured each other, teased and tormented and, finally, in this bed, they had made love. He felt a swell of emotion that gripped his belly and thawed his heart. It hardly seemed real until the tightening muscles of his well-used ass made the truth irrefutable.

Heeding the persistent clamor of his over-laden bladder, Dean carefully lifted his arm and moved to the edge of the bed, rising as quietly as possible. A frisson of possessive pride ran through him as he studied Scott. His lover lay on his side, his blond hair tousled and tangled. Uncovered to the waist, Scott looked strong and powerful even in sleep, his sculpted, muscular physique a work of art.

Shaking his head and grinning irrepressibly, Dean walked quietly to the bathroom and gratefully used the toilet, suppressing the moan that escaped his lips as his bladder emptied. He yawned, debating whether to stay up or return to bed. The decision was taken out of his hands when Scott, full hard-on leading the way, entered the bathroom.

He slung an arm around Dean's shoulder and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Morning, babe," he rumbled. "*Man*, I gotta piss."

Dean made room for Scott at the toilet. "You got an extra toothbrush somewhere?" He stepped over to one of the two sinks to wash his hands.

"Left top drawer," Scott answered around a yawn.

Dean found several new, unopened packages. He sent Scott a teasing wink. "You keep all these extras for your lovers?"

Scott joined him at the double sink, cleaning his hands and smirking. "Nope, my dentist's nurse likes me. She gives me two every time I get my teeth cleaned."

Dean raised a brow and opened a pack, rinsing the new toothbrush, then squirting on a dollop of the toothpaste Scott handed him from behind a mirrored sliding panel that fronted the medicine cabinet. They brushed their teeth, eyes occasionally meeting in the mirror as they studied each other's technique. Scott began to grin and before long, both of them were hard pressed to keep from laughing and spraying foam everywhere.

After they were done, Scott indicated that Dean should store his toothbrush on the rack in the cabinet next to his own. It almost seemed they were performing a ceremony of sorts.

"It looks real natural there," Scott said quietly. He turned to Dean and pulled him close. "I could use a proper good-morning kiss."

Dean obliged, and being young, healthy males, they both grew hard. This time Dean pulled Scott into the shower, turning on the water and regulating the temperature. Light billows of steamy air surrounded them. Apparently content to let Dean lead, Scott gave

himself up to Dean's ministrations. Dean soaped a washcloth and thoroughly bathed his lover.

Starting with Scott's shoulders and back, his cloth-covered hand drifted, sliding over and massaging every inch of Scott's enticing body. Dean lovingly lathered the taut, hard globes of Scott's tempting ass, easing the sudsy fabric through the furrow between, and was rewarded by Scott's gasp as Dean grazed his puckered opening. Dean smiled with satisfaction and continued down Scott's legs, then moved to the front and worked his back way up. By this time, Scott was clearly tense with anticipation and groaned with obvious disappointment when Dean bypassed his hard, throbbing cock.

"Patience, lover," Dean murmured and continued the upward journey.

He scrubbed Scott's abdomen and chest, then moved in close, rubbing the front of his own body along Scott's slick length. Their hot and slippery cocks came together, and Scott abruptly wheeled around until Dean's back was flat against the shower wall.

Scott stood in front of him, his hands planted above Dean's shoulders. He slanted his mouth across Dean's, moaning as they teased each other. Dean reached between them, his hand wrapping as far around their rigid shafts as possible, holding them side by side, pumping and stroking.

"Oh, yeah, so good. Don't stop," Scott breathed. "Bring us, babe. Wanna come just like this."

Scott's sounds of want and need were driving Dean insane. He took a firmer grip, pulling strongly, and slid his free hand into Scott's wet hair, clutching a handful and holding him still for more hard, rough kisses. His tongue twisted against Scott's, ravaging the hot cavern, sucking Scott's flavor down, enflaming them both.

"Can't hold back," Dean ground out from swollen lips.

"Don't. Fucking. Stop!" Scott growled each word, his body stiffening, a wild cry tearing from his throat.

Dean felt the twin pulses of two unloading cocks in his fist, and semen gushed like a fountain between them, hitting their heaving chests and bellies. The hot wash of the last weakening jets of come dribbled against his fingers as he slowed his strokes to long, soothing, yet firm, caresses, working their shafts and milking them dry before he released them. Leaning back fully against the wall, his arms circled Scott's waist and held him.

They rested together for a time, not speaking, lost in the feel of mutual pleasure and warm wet skin on skin. His hands skimmed over Scott's back and over the curve of his ass. Not arousing or demanding, just gentle, lazy sweeps to ease and fulfill his need to touch. Scott's head rested on Dean's shoulder, his own hands gliding up and down the firm muscles of Dean's arms. Scott pulled them both under the shower spray to finish cleaning up.

Turning off the water, Scott retrieved towels from a cupboard beside the shower, handed one to Dean, then started drying himself. Scott seemed lost in thought, so Dean

remained silent as well. His gut started to churn and his chest constricted when it struck him that the dinner invitation was done, the night was over and a parting of the ways was inevitable. He felt himself tense, his movements taking on a stilted snap as he got ready for the rejection he was suddenly sure was coming.

Yeah, sure, they'd spent the night together, and a lot of things had happened between them other than the lovemaking. They'd exchanged words that had seemed to hold the promise of more, but of course, such pledges had been known to be made in the heat of passion -- sometimes once the itch was scratched, that was all there was to it.

The familiar ice forming around his heart left Dean barely able to breathe. All he wanted to do was go as quickly as possible. He draped his towel over the shower door and entered the bedroom. Grabbing up the pile of clothes on the floor, he dumped them on the bed and began to separate his stuff from Scott's.

Dean was unaware that Scott had followed him until he spoke. "You gotta go to the office, huh?"

Dean sent him a quick glance. Scott was rubbing at his hair with a towel. Dean nodded abruptly but said nothing, afraid of what his voice might reveal.

"What's on your mind, Dean?"

Clearing his throat, Dean continued sorting the clothes. "Nothing."

"Don't 'nothing' me. That's a woman's trick. Tell me."

Dean's head snapped up. "Are you calling me a woman?"

"You know I'm not, and you trying to start a fight isn't going to get you off the hook. Talk to me."

Dean glared mutinously before swallowing his pride and insecurity. "You gonna invite me back?"

"Hell, yes, you're invited back. I don't want you to go *now*." His eyes widened in seeming understanding, and he approached Dean, throwing the towel over Dean's head. "This is that awkward morning-after crap, isn't it?"

Dean pulled the material off his head, pushed back his damp hair and stood silently, waiting.

Scott fixed him with a steady, unblinking gaze. "Listen to me very, very carefully. I want you here as often as I can get you here. Whenever you're free, come over. Don't think about it, don't hesitate and don't call to ask if it's okay. Get in your fucking car and get your ass over here. And while we're at it, am I invited to your place? Or are you gonna try to keep the fact that we're seeing each other a secret?"

Scott's words gave Dean a momentary shock. They were seeing each other; that was tantamount to a declaration, and Scott's tone of voice made it more than apparent that he wouldn't appreciate Dean trying to hide their relationship. A flare of warmth melted the chill that had tried to recapture his heart. A tentative smile tugged at his lips. "You're

welcome at my house any time you want to come.” Scott’s grin was immediate, and Dean instantly caught the significance of his own words. “What I meant was ...”

“That’s okay. I like the way you worded the invitation.”

“You would.”

“Damn straight.” Scott started to yank on his clothes. “Get dressed and we’ll have breakfast.”

Dean sighed as the anxiety drained out of him. “I think I’m gonna head out.”

“Nope. You’re having breakfast. Can’t work on an empty stomach.”

“You’re bossy. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Scott admitted without hesitation. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

“Me, too.”

Current issues put to rest, they dressed and went downstairs. They cooked and ate, bantered easily. After they took care of the dishes, Dean was on his way out when he was stopped at the door for a scorching kiss. Without hesitation he welcomed Scott’s embrace and returned it with interest. Wiggling against the growing discomfort of his jeans when his cock thickened, he rubbed against the bulge of Scott’s erection.

His lover’s hands palmed his ass and kept him close. “It’s Saturday, you know.” Scott’s hips moved in a slow, heated rhythm that had Dean groaning.

“Yeah, I know.” Dean closed his eyes and swayed with the motion, letting the arousal crawl up his spine.

“You’re gonna spend the night, aren’t you?”

“Was hoping to.”

“Good. Pack some extra clothes and spend Sunday, too?”

“Sounds good.”

“Hurry back.”

“The office closes at two. That soon enough for you?”

“Guess it’ll have to do.” Scott kissed him one last time and stepped back.

Dean opened his eyes and saw his lover’s knowing smile. “You did this on purpose,” he said, indicating the hard swelling behind his buttons.

“Just wanted to rush your return.” Scott ran a finger over the tight denim fabric of Dean’s jeans. “By the time you get back, this’ll be primed to shoot. Only thing we’ll have to decide is whether I suck it or fuck it out of you. ‘Course with you here the whole weekend, there’s gonna be plenty of time for both.”

Scott's promise, uttered in his signature growling tone sent a surge of lust straight down to Dean's toes. His eyes widened and he cursed softly. "*Son of a bitch*. I gotta go. If you say another damn word, I'm gonna come in my jeans."

Dean opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. The sun was up and shining, the birds were singing and the air was fresh and crisp. Walking away with his back straight, Dean maneuvered himself a little stiffly into the driver's seat of his car. He sent an exasperated look toward Scott, who was standing on the porch, a big grin on his face. Dean shook his head and struggled with the smile that tugged at his own lips.

He hit the window control and the glass slid down. "Smartass."

Scott's laughter was bright and infectious. Dean grinned and drove away. He could see Scott in the rearview mirror, the weight of his regard warming him as he left.

Chapter Seven

Dean's day at the clinic passed much faster than he would have supposed, especially since Saturdays were always busy. People who worked during the week took advantage of the weekend to bring their pets in for non-emergency check-ups and vaccinations. He smiled as he was thanked for the third time by a pet owner for the reminder cards Cassie sent out.

There was little time between patients, still those fleeting moments were filled with thoughts of Scott. Dean spent the day with a perpetual smile on his face.

"You're in a good mood," Cassie had commented earlier. "Not that I've ever seen you in a bad one. You just seem ... happy."

"I am."

"Good."

Nothing more was said but Dean had a feeling Cassie understood the reason for his happiness and surprisingly enough, he wasn't bothered by it one bit. *Maybe I'm finally letting all the crap go.* He considered the idea for a moment before taking a deep breath. Nodding his head slightly, he called for the next patient.

By the time the office closed, he was anticipating his return to Scott's with more than a little excitement. Throwing some things from his home in a duffle, he first took a short detour into town, making a quick trip to the grocery store for vanilla ice cream and the cherry pie he'd called and asked the bakery to hold for him.

Whistling softly under his breath, Dean returned to his car and set the bags on the passenger seat. He rounded the vehicle and was just about to get in when he noticed a man come out of the bank across the street. Dean froze. "What the fuck?" The man, his back to Dean, walked to his own car, got in and drove away.

Dean stood looking after him. The man bore a striking resemblance to his father's aide, Richard Rand. *That's more than possible,* Dean reasoned with himself. *Rand's a pretty*

average-looking guy. Then he shook his head. It couldn't be. What would he be doing here? The senator's call has got you spooked, man.

Momentarily somber, Dean slipped into his seat, buckled up and started the engine. He headed to Scott's, singing along with the radio while letting thoughts of the coming evening replace any residual worry. A vehicle drove slowly past when he turned into Scott's driveway.

Dean had no sooner parked and levered himself out of his car than he was hailed from one of the stables. Scott stood waiting for him, smiling, his gaze following Dean's progress as he walked across the big open area between the house and the barns. Dean stared back, focusing on that tall, rangy, broad-shouldered figure. Scott's body was pure sin and every part of it was making Dean's mouth water. His lover's faded jeans fit like a second skin, encasing his slim hips and those long, muscular legs in a way that made Dean want to say prayers of thanks to any deity who'd listen.

"I know what you're thinkin' about," Scott commented when Dean joined him.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Scott chuckled and reached out, but Dean stopped him. "Don't you have guys working around here somewhere?"

"The part-timers are already gone, and I gave Steve and Tim the rest of the day off. I figured you and I could handle the evening feed. This way we get to do what we want, when and where we want without having to worry about shocking the boys outta their boots."

This time when Scott moved to pull him close, Dean went without a protest. They kissed, hard and deep, their lips meeting, mouths opening and tongues greeting each other like long-lost friends. When Scott withdrew, his words were husky and totally unexpected. "You know how to ride a horse?"

Dean nodded in surprise. "Yeah. It's been a while, but I think I can manage if you pick a calm mount."

"That's not a problem. Come on."

"Hold on a sec. I've got ice cream and pie in the car. I better stick them in the fridge -- at least the ice cream. I'd hate to be stuck trying to get melted goo off my upholstery."

"Hurry it up then."

Dean spun to make a quick run to the house but was sidelined by a firm smack on the ass. "Yeow! What was that for?"

"Just puttin' a little starch in your stride."

Dean rubbed his abused posterior, noticing how Scott's interested gaze followed the movement of his hand. "You may have bruised me. Want to kiss it and make it better?"

"While that's a real tempting offer," Scott's eyes twinkled, "I'm afraid it's going to have to wait for a bit. There's chores to be done. Get a move on, babe."

“Well, shucks,” Dean complained, backing out of reach.

This time, he was able to make the trip without incident and rejoined Scott in record time. They ended up in front of a couple of stalls that housed a pair of well-groomed quarter horses.

“This is Slick,” Scott said, indicating a sorrel with a white blaze down his nose. “And that’s Grumble.”

Grumble was a buckskin with a dark mane and tail, and big brown eyes that watched the men with amiable interest. Scott gathered tack and Dean lent a hand. Although Slick took the bit and halter effortlessly, he shied away from the saddle. Scott quickly soothed him, then had him saddled in no time. Grumble, despite his name, was easier and stood quietly when the saddle was placed on his back.

Scott tightened the cinch. “This is where the grumble comes in. He likes to suck in a bit of air to keep the cinch from being tightened all the way. He’s not mean about it -- I almost think he looks on it as a fine joke if his rider slides off ‘cause it’s loose.” Scott gave the horse a firm nudge, and Grumble expelled the air he was holding with a low, rumbling neigh.

Dean chuckled. “Sounds like he cussing you.”

“Maybe just a little,” Scott agreed with a smile. “But he’s a sweet-natured horse. I’d trust him with even the most green rider.” He handed Dean the reins. “He’s your ride. Head on out to the front, and we’ll mount up there.”

Dean took the lead, Grumble following without protest. In the yard, both men got on their respective horse, and Scott pointed across the fields. “I’ve got a mare in heat and a stud with his nose in the wind who knows all about it. The only thing we have to do is ride out and open the gate between them.”

“It’s a good thing these guys are geldings,” Dean said, indicating their horses. “I’d hate to be the one standing between them and a piece of the action.”

“Yeah, thank God for geldings. The studs can be a real pain. They don’t like being on their own, but I have to be careful which of the other horses I put them with. It’s a balancing act.”

“I can imagine.”

They set off around the side of the barn and through the fields, stopping now and then to open and close a gate. Scott kept parts of his pasture land separated, one field for mares in foal, one for yearlings and so forth. Dean expressed surprise that the horse breeder kept two of his stallions in the same field.

“These two get along just fine unless there’s a receptive mare nearby and I keep those ladies well separated from them.”

They rode at a leisurely pace, Dean soaking in everything around him. The day was beautiful, the sun warm, but not enough to bring on a sweat. A light breeze sent fluffy clouds floating across the sky. Butterflies and bees danced across the grass and made fluttering visits

to any wildflower that caught their fancy. As Scott had promised, Grumble was an easy horse to sit, his gate smooth and his attitude laid back.

At last, their destination came into view. The appaloosa stallion was waiting at the gate as though he knew their purpose for being there. His ears were pricked up tall and alert, nostrils scenting the air, obviously testing to see whether or not the new arrivals threatened his chance at the mare. For her part, the mare was across the adjoining pasture, quietly grazing, ignoring her suitor's impatient whinny.

Scott and Dean dismounted a distance from the gate and tied their horses to the fence. Scott smiled at Dean as they walked the remaining way to the gate. "Like I said, Dapper's impatient but he doesn't get loco when there's a mare to service unless a rival's near. Then he tries to take down the fences. Wait here, babe. I just gotta open the gate."

There were actually two gates. The first to gain access to the mare's pasture, and the second to provide access between the stallion and the mare. Scott went through the first, which Dean held. Scott crossed to the second gate, unlocked it and quickly pulled it back wide, careful to stand clear. Dapper didn't waste a second bolting past. By the time Scott rejoined Dean and the gates were locked behind him, Dapper had his lady cornered and was preparing to mount her.

The whole thing from start to finish lasted only minutes, but Dean was unprepared for the wave of pure lust that swept through him. He and Scott had been leaning on the fence to watch. Heat sheered over his skin leaving him flushed and sweating. Driven by desire, Dean stepped behind Scott and plastered himself to the man's back. With a twist of his pelvis, he ground his burgeoning erection against Scott's ass while his arms wrapped around his lover.

"Tell me I'm not the only one who got turned on all to hell by that," he growled in Scott's ear before biting the lobe and sucking it into his mouth.

Scott pushed back and groaned. "You're not. Hell, it's sex. I see two June bugs goin' at it, I get hard."

Dean released Scott's ear with a breathy chuckle and sent his hands questing for the button on Scott's jeans. He found it, opened it and slid the zipper down. His hands burrowed in to find Scott's cock, hot and swollen. Wrapping long fingers around it, Dean started to pull at it slow and easy.

"Oh, fuck yeah," Scott rumbled, his hips finding the rhythm of Dean's strokes.

Gratified by the other man's response, Dean once again set his lips to Scott's ear, his tongue swirling over the loops and whorls before doing a fuck-tease at the canal entrance. Scott ground his ass against Dean, eliciting a moan from him while Dean lowered his mouth to the tender spot behind Scott's ear to lick and suckle lightly. From there, he let his lips wander, mouth and tongue teasing Scott's neck from the side to the back and down to the collar of his tee-shirt.

Returning to the sensitive curve where Scott's neck met his shoulder, Dean bit down gently and sucked, branding Scott as his. Releasing him, Dean withdrew his hands despite

Scott's protest and spun him around. Dean kissed him with all the raw passion sweeping through him before he went to his knees.

Yanking Scott's jeans down, Dean buried his nose in the bush of curls at the base of Scott's cock. "You smell so good," he breathed. "Noticed it that first night. Leather and horse, a little musk, a whole lot of you. Wanna gulp you straight down."

Dean moved below, nuzzling his mouth against Scott's balls, his tongue tasting and teasing before he took the firm pouch into his mouth. Scott loosed a husky sigh and spread his legs wider, leaning against the fence for support. One hand went to Dean's head, fingers combing through Dean's hair and clutching convulsively when Dean's mouth slid the length of his cock and closed around the swollen tip.

"Damn, babe!"

Dean moaned around the slick flesh filling his mouth, his thoughts a silent litany. *So good, so sweet. Scott.*

He worked the hot length of Scott's cock, his tongue swirling, nudging, sliding over satiny skin and pulsing veins. Pulling up, his tongue found the tiny slit in Scott's plump cap and dug in, tasting the clear precome. Easing back just a little more, he held Scott in a firm grip and painted his own lips with that bulbous head, licking at the warm fluid before swallowing the thick column once more.

Scott was making needy sounds that swamped Dean with an even greater desire. His own cock was hard as hell, and he worked his jeans open one handed. Freeing himself from the tight confines of his pants, he desperately pumped his own engorged flesh. His mouth tightly engulfed Scott's cock and sucked in earnest, and his mouth and hands moved in concert, the passion building between them with each passing second.

"Yeah, baby. Oh, yeah. Just like that."

Dean felt both of Scott's hands on his head, holding him firmly but carefully. He relinquished control to Scott, letting the movement of the other man's hips slide that big cock forward and back, fast, staccato jabs that took Scott to the back of Dean's throat. Dean groaned, his own orgasm rapidly approaching.

With a strangled cry, Scott came and Dean released himself, his hand finding Scott's balls, fingers cradling and caressing the drawn-up sac. A warm gush of semen landed against his tongue and he swallowed, the taste bittersweet, sharp and wild. Again and again, Dean drank, his mouth moving slow and easy now, his tongue soothing and petting Scott's pulsing shaft while consuming every drop of fluid his lover had to give.

The sound of their panting filled his ears and, with a final lick, Dean let go of Scott's cock and peered up to find Scott's gaze on him. Before he could say a word, Scott dropped to his knees and pushed Dean into the grass. "Come for me," he rasped out and took Dean's still swollen cock in his hand, tugging firmly, his movements quick and precise. "Give it to me, babe. Give it all up."

Dean's need returned in a fiery rush and exploded when Scott's mouth closed over his erection. Wet heat covered every inch. When Scott swallowed, the movement of his throat muscles compressed and massaged Dean's sensitized cock head and threw him over the edge. His hips jerked, his cock pulsed and warm seed rushed up and out with a force that bowed his spine. Dean cried out, eyes squeezed tight, lost to the agonizing pleasure that inundated every sense with a sharp, thrusting stab before draining away in sluggish waves that left him sated and weak.

Scott's hand continued to work him gently while Scott moved up his body. "Look at me," he ordered, his voice low and rough. He cursed softly when Dean opened his eyes. Scott cupped Dean's cheek and Dean rubbed his face against the enveloping warmth, his tongue sliding out to sweep over kiss-swollen lips.

Scott shook his head slightly and let his thumb glide across Dean's bottom lip. "When you look at me like that I-I just --" Clearly unable to express his feelings in words, Scott leaned down and feathered soft kisses on Dean's lips before settling in, his tongue finding Dean's and petting with languid, drugging strokes.

Dean's arms circled Scott, and he moaned. His consciousness, which had yet to recover from the rapture of his orgasm, floated like a care-free cloud. One hand roamed Scott's back while the other curled around his neck. Dean's fingers brushed against the sweat-dampened skin at Scott's nape while he let himself be subsumed into the magic that wove itself between him and Scott. No hurry, no demands, just slow, steady heat and pleasure that bound them intimately.

Eventually, Scott rose with a sighing groan. "Guess we should be getting back. We need to feed the horses." He gave Dean a teasing smile. "You don't mind, do you?"

Dean smiled back and swept back a lock of Scott's unruly blond hair. "I don't mind. You keep treating me like this, and I might do anything you say."

Scott raised a brow, his eyes sparking with interest. "Oh, yeah?"

"Within reason."

"Your reason or mine?"

Dean laughed and sat up. Scott climbed to his feet and reached down to give Dean a hand up. They righted their clothing and walked the fence line to where they'd tied their horses.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I guess it depends on what you want to do. What have you got in mind?"

"Not really sure. Give me a little time and I may come up with something."

They reached the horses and mounted up. Dean gave Scott a speculative look. "Why do I feel like I just poked a hornet's nest?"

"Maybe 'cause I got a big stinger?"

Dean's laughter rang out across the pasture as they headed back, and Scott grinned at the happy sound. He was delighted to see Dean relax. The tension that had seemed to be such an inseparable part of him was melting away, and Scott took pleasure in the knowledge that he'd helped to make it so.

They arrived at the barn, and Scott showed Dean what was involved in the evening chores. All during the work, they exchanged light banter and innuendos which turned into passionate looks that sent the blood surging through Scott's veins. By the time they'd finished, Scott knew exactly what he wanted.

He waited patiently for Dean to fill the last water bucket, and when Dean stepped out of the stall, Scott was on him, backing him into a wall. "I thought of something within reason."

"Yeah?" Dean's lips were parted, his breath coming quickly.

Scott held up the jar in his hand.

Dean's brows rose into his hairline. "Hoof cream?"

"Makes an excellent hand cream," Scott read from the label. "I figure it'll make a great lube, too."

"Oh."

"Too beyond reason?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

Dean took a deep breath. "When I pictured it, I had a hard time catching my breath."

Scott grinned. "Come with me. I'll have you breathing harder and faster in no time."

"No doubt."

Scott led Dean into a stall that was empty of everything but bales of sweet, fragrant hay. "Strip," he ordered. "I'll be right back." He walked out with a laugh at Dean's "Bossy bastard."

Impatiently, Scott trotted down to the tack room. Opening a large chest, he pulled out a couple of clean horse blankets and threw them over his arm. When he got back, Dean had his shirt and shoes off and was just removing his second sock.

"What are those for?"

"Watch and see." Scott draped first one blanket, then the other over a waist-high stack of hay. He turned to Dean, his gaze running up and down the other man's body admiringly. "These are to keep the hay from pricking all that sweet skin."

He approached Dean, gratified beyond words when Dean easily stepped into his arms. Their kiss was deep and hungry and Scott savored the flavor and heat of his lover. He drew away slightly, his hands working on Dean's jeans. Opening them, he urged Dean to turn and bend over the covered hay bales.

Scott stripped out of his own shirt, pulling it swiftly over his head, dropping it on top of the clothes Dean had discarded before him. He pressed himself to Dean, his furred chest against the warm, soft flesh of Dean's back. Leaning forward, his lips and tongue worked their magic on Dean's neck and shoulders. Dean whimpered, shivering under his teasing licks and gentle kisses. The sounds lodged in Scott's gut, twisting tight and forcing a groan from him.

"I love the sounds you make when I touch you," he whispered against Dean's ear. His hands smoothed over Dean's spine, forerunners to the slow glide and pressure of his lips and tongue. He moved ever lower until encountering Dean's waistband; he paused long enough to shove the offending fabric down and away. Scott knelt at Dean's feet and urged him to lift one after the other so the jeans could be completely removed. Tossing them aside, Scott placed his hands on the outside of Dean's thighs and slid them up until he was holding his lover's hips.

His hands made firm, circular movements while slipping inward, thumbs meeting at the vertical crease of Dean's ass. He teased the indented line, smiling at the taut jump of Dean's muscles. Once more he bent to tease and taste. Finding a spot on the upper right curve of Dean's cheek, he fastened his teeth there and sucked, raising a mark. He heard Dean's raspy moan when he released the skin and his tongue soothed the angry red spot.

"I've put my brand on you. You're mine."

"Scott, please." Dean wiggled impatiently.

Scott rose to his feet, smiling. "What do you want?"

"You, naked. Want you *in* me!"

"That's easy enough," he growled.

He toed off his boots and shucked his jeans before plastering his naked length along Dean's. His cock, full and erect, nestled against Dean's butt. "You feel so good, like silk. Silk and satin. Beautiful." His tongue found the ultra-sensitive spot behind Dean's ear and languidly teased.

"Men aren't beautiful." Dean gasped and shuddered, pushing back into Scott's embrace

"Didn't say *you* were beautiful. Just your skin. But if a horse can be beautiful, why not a man? Or at least parts of him." Scooping up the jar of hoof cream, Scott opened it and knelt again, placing the container on the floor next to him. His hands slid down the length of Dean's back. "There's so much beauty here, Dean. Your skin, the noises you make when I touch you. The strength of your muscles and the way they feel under my hands. The way you smell." His face rested against the trim curve of Dean's buttock, his tongue flicking out to lave the flesh. "The way you taste. And here." Scott's hands held the firm cheeks of Dean's ass and parted them, revealing the puckered opening he would soon be plundering.

His thumb smoothed over the lightly crinkled skin. "This is truly gorgeous." He dipped his fingers in the hoof cream. "Sort of dark pink and flush." A slick digit slid over Dean's

entrance. "There's beauty in the way it tightens up when I touch it, yet it gives in when I do this." He swirled his fingertip around the clenched opening and pushed.

Dean groaned, his body bowing and unfurling. "Scott! Fuck!"

Scott chuckled softly. "We will, babe. We will. You should see this, Dean. The way my finger looks moving inside you."

"I don't need to see it. I can feel it and I want more."

"Anything you need, babe." A second finger joined the first. Scott was fascinated with the appearance and sensation of his fingers sliding deep into Dean's body. The sight was mesmerizing.

Scott stood, his hand maintaining a steady rhythm as he slowly, relentlessly expanded Dean's anus for his possession. A third finger joined the first two, stretching delicate tissue, probing deep. Seeking fingertips found the spongy nut of Dean's prostate and brushed against it again and again. Dean's body rocked, his groans coming non-stop, his thighs spreading wider and his body tensing as he arched back into Scott's invading fingers. Deeming the time right and no longer able to hold out against his need, Scott used his free hand to gather more hoof cream to slick down the thick and hard length of his own cock. Pulling his fingers free of Dean's body, his cock head immediately took their place and he lunged, sinking smoothly into the depths of the snug channel.

Dean's cry was inarticulate, immediate and loud, causing Scott to freeze. "Did I hurt you? Dean? Baby, answer me."

Panting, Dean shook his head. "No, it's good. *So damn good.*"

Scott smiled fiercely, gritting his teeth. "You got that right. Fuck, you're so hot and tight. Gonna burn me up."

Jerking forward, Scott hugged himself against Dean's ass, his hips doing a circular grind that stirred his cock in the sheath that held him. The movement drew rough groans from both of them and caused Scott's desire to skyrocket. Angling back, he drew his greased cock nearly free, then propelled himself forward, repeating the sequence again and again, faster and faster, until he was stroking effortlessly, plunging in and out like a well-oiled piston. His hands moved to Dean's shoulders, holding his lover in place for every slamming thrust.

Dean's own hands were clenched against the bale, the knuckles white. When he shifted, one and reached down toward his own cock, Scott stopped him with a word. "Mine."

He guided Dean's hand back to the bale, then reached around Dean's body, fingers engulfing the thick circumference of Dean's cock. Each forceful shove of Scott's hips drove Dean forward. The remnants of cream on Scott's hand glided over the silky skin of Dean's cock so that it slipped easily within the close confines of Scott's fist.

Scott's body went on automatic. Every move was instinctive and constant, muscles bunching and releasing with the effort. Sweat trickled down his back and belly, leaving tingles in their wake. He'd never felt so alive. The thought was there, formed not of words

but of impressions, smells, flavors and sounds. Sounds that swamped his senses with hunger and pleasure and pure driving need.

And it built. Grew hotter. Climbed higher. Reached the point where it burst the bonds that held it and exploded, gut deep, wrenching a howl from Scott's chest that was startling in its sheer animalistic glory. Dean was thrashing under him, crying out as hot seed spilled over the fingers Scott had clenched around Dean's cock. Scott shuddered at the smell of fresh semen and came powerfully, thrusting deep and holding himself high and securely inside Dean. The clutching grind of Dean's body around him had Scott's hips jerking convulsively with each forceful spurt of come that anointed his lover's snug, clasping channel.

Scott dropped onto Dean, chest heaving, sweat gluing them together from breast bone to knee. Dean shuddered under him, his chest rising and falling fast. Scott could feel the echo of Dean's heartbeat match his own and the steady but rapid thumps satisfied something primitive inside, some instinctive need to know he was no longer alone.

"Now *that* was truly beautiful."

Dean chuckled weakly, the small bounces tightening his body, forcing Scott's waning erection free.

Scott groaned and did a half turn, leaning against the blanket-covered bales. Dean looked up at him; dazed brown eyes, dark and wide, met his gaze full on. Scott's breath caught. Intellectually, he knew that Dean was a grown man, with a man's experience, yet something in those amber-flecked orbs spoke of an innocence and trust that struck him soul deep and humbled him as nothing before. Dean was letting him in and in that moment, Scott knew it was a trust more precious than gold.

He leaned down, brushing his lips tenderly over Dean's. "Brown-eyed angel. I'll never let you down. Swear it on a stack of bibles, Dean."

Dean's eyes showed surprise and pleasure, and Scott felt his face flush with embarrassment. He started to step away but was stopped by Dean's restraining hand. Dean straightened and curled his fingers behind Scott's head, holding him for a sweet, searching kiss. When Dean released him, he was smiling. "Thank you."

Scott nodded, afraid to try to speak around the knot that had formed in his throat. Instead, he started gathering clothes. Foregoing the need to dress, he slid his bare feet back into his boots and stomped them on for a more comfortable fit. He glanced up to find Dean staring at him.

"Didn't you forget something?" Dean indicated the clothes draped over Scott's arm.

"Nope. I don't see the sense in putting them on when I'm just gonna strip down again to take a shower. There's no one here but you and me, so get your shoes on, and let's go. Unless you want to brave any rocks that might be on the driveway."

Scott shifted to leave the stall, then looked back when Dean snickered. "What?"

Dean's gaze had apparently been glued to Scott's ass. "That's a sight I never thought to see. A naked cowboy wearing just his boots." Still chuckling, he slipped on his shoes.

"Yeah, well, count yourself lucky. Now, hurry up, 'cause I'm telling you right now ... last one to the house buys dinner."

"Hey!"

Scott took off, Dean following in his wake. Scott was sure that the sight of his pale ass cheeks flexing in the dimming light of the setting sun as he ran across the driveway would be more than Dean could take. Judging by the laughter that slowed his lover and the way Dean leisurely made his way to the house, Scott was right. He waited on the porch with a big grin. "Think that's funny?"

"Hell, yeah. But you know something?" He climbed the steps to the porch, patted Scott's rear and opened the front door to walk inside. "Seeing that's gonna be worth every dollar I spend on dinner."

Scott entered behind him. "Hmm. By the way, your stuff's still in the car and, uh, last one upstairs has to scrub the winner's back."

Scott scrambled as Dean shook his head and went out again. He was soon back with his duffle. Leaning over the banister, Scott called to him. "Hey, hurry up! I'm starving."

"Yeah, yeah. Keep your shirt on."

"Not till you scrub my back."

Dean climbed the stairs. "You know I'm just humoring you, don't you?"

"I beat you fair and square."

"You cheated."

"Didn't."

"Did."

Scott stroked his chin. "Well, maybe just a little." Dean reached the landing and Scott trailed him into the bedroom. "Tell you what. I'll scrub your back, but you still buy dinner."

"I'll tell *you* what." Dean dumped his bag and the clothes he had shed earlier. "Let's scrub each other's backs, and I'll still buy dinner. Deal?"

"Deal."

From the stand of trees that stood a ways from the house, a flash of light reflected off glass. The binoculars trained on Scott's house shook slightly in a white-knuckled grip.

It can't be true. Not my Dean. Unreasoning rage took a turn and focused on another target. *It's your fault, yours.* Eyes glittering with hatred pinned Scott with a glare. *You won't be laughing when I get through with you.*

Muttering curses, the watcher walked back to a waiting car, filled with determination to set things right. The car was started, the drive begun and plans formed.

A few yards ahead a hapless rabbit hopped out onto the road. The driver gunned the engine, deliberately taking aim. A cruel smile curved satisfied lips at the muffled thump under the tires.

"I'll get you Scott Whittaker, and your little dog, too." Laughter, tinged with madness, accompanied this macabre parody of the *Wizard of Oz*.

* * * * *

After a quick shower, Dean and Scott went to the local steakhouse and ordered the best steak on the menu. The meals came with salad, yeasty dinner rolls and huge baked potatoes smothered in butter and sour cream. As they waited for the main course to arrive, the men took advantage of the opportunity to sip light beer and eat unshelled peanuts, tossing the shells to the floor as was expected.

"I'd hate to have to sweep this place up every night," Dean commented.

"They probably have one of those heavy-duty wet/dry vacs for the job." Scott chucked more empty shells on top of those littering the floor.

"You keep eating those, you won't have room for the steak."

"Don't you worry about that. I've got plenty of room."

Dean smiled and leaned forward, forearms planted on the table. "So, tell me, how come you live alone in that big house? Where's the rest of the Whittaker clan?" A shadow clouded Scott's eyes and Dean was suddenly sorry he'd asked.

"My dad's sister and her husband live up around Columbus, Ohio. I don't see too much of them. We exchange Christmas cards and an occasional phone call. Mom's family is up north near Fort Wayne. Same thing there. I just don't see much of them."

"What about your parents?"

"They're both gone."

"I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay. I figured we'd talk about this sooner or later." Scott picked up his water and took a sip before carefully setting the glass back on a coaster. "My mom got uterine cancer and died when I was nine. It was tough for a while; I missed her more than I can say. Dad took it hard, too, but he kept on going. Threw himself into the horses but took good care of me. I knew I was loved; Dad made sure he was there for all the important things and even the not-so-important ones, like me playing baseball all through school. He never missed a game."

Dean nodded his understanding, wanting nothing more than to reach across the table and hold Scott's hand. He knew what reaction that might provoke in the other diners, so he stayed still. "It's good he was there for you. Sometimes when people lose their spouses they turn their backs on whoever's left."

“Not Dad. He was front row and center when I graduated high school and college. Taught me everything I know about the horses, something we both had a passion for. It kept us close. Turned out to be a good thing when I finally got up the nerve to tell him I’m gay.”

“What, you think he’d have turned you out if not for your shared interest?”

“No, not really. It’s just that the animals gave us something more to concentrate on, I guess.”

“What did he say?”

Scott grinned. “He got this sort of thoughtful look on his face and said, ‘Well, son, guess there’s no tellin’ what pasture you’re gonna end up grazin’ in.’”

Dean snorted out a laugh. “That’s it?”

“Pretty much. He did add something about watching out for fractious stallions and to be careful.”

“God, I envy you. My father ... well, you know all about him. So what happened to your dad?”

“A semi jackknifed out on the highway. The weather was bad, the roads slick. Dad’s pickup got slammed into a pole. According to the highway patrol, he’d have hardly had time to realize anything was wrong before it was all over.”

“It’s good he didn’t suffer.”

“Yeah. I was grateful for that at least.”

“How old were you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Six years ago.”

“You remembered.”

“What?”

“That I’m thirty-two. I didn’t think you’d remember”

Dean felt a flush creep into his cheeks. “I remember a lot about what happened the day you told me that.”

Scott smiled. “What was your favorite part? When I kissed you or when you punched my lights out?”

“Well, I have to admit the kiss was pretty spectacular. Still, if I hadn’t felt so guilty about hurting you, laying you out with one punch would have made me feel pretty macho.”

They were still laughing when their dinner arrived.

Afterward they walked out to the parking lot and discovered two flat tires on Scott’s truck. “What the devil?” Scott exclaimed as he examined them. “Someone took a knife or something to these.” He looked at Dean from where he squatted next to the tire.

“Are you serious?”

“Look at it, Dean.”

Dean joined him and ran his finger over an inch long slit in the rubber. “You’re right. Who would do such a thing?”

“Some jackass idiot who thought it would be fun.”

“So what are we gonna do?”

“Lucky for us, I have a friend who runs the garage where I get my tires. I’m gonna give him a call and see if he’s home.”

Scott pulled the cell phone from his belt and dialed a number. While he waited, Dean opened the truck door and sat sideways on the seat with his legs dangling out. He admired the long, solid length of Scott’s back, while listening to his lover explain things to the friend.

Scott ended the call and faced Dean with a grin. “Pete’s on his way. He’s got a wheel that’ll fit the truck, and he’s gonna put a tire on it and haul it out. Until he gets here, you and I can change the other one with the spare.”

“Sounds like we’re in business. Are you going to report this?”

“I suppose I should, not that the sheriff will be able to do anything. It’s not like we’ve got a parking lot full of witnesses.”

Once more Dean watched Scott make calls. First he dialed 4-1-1 to get the number for the local sheriff’s office, then dialed the number. Scott explained the situation. “Yeah, we’re at The Old Smokehouse.” He listened for a moment. “Okay,” he answered, then closed the phone and replaced it at his side. “They’re sending someone over to take a look. Now jump down from there before I slide between your legs and make a public spectacle of both of us.”

Dean jumped; Scott turned away with a laugh and went to the back of the truck for the spare and jack. Scott insisted on doing most of the work, claiming that Dean needed to watch his hands. Despite Dean’s protest that he was a vet not a brain surgeon, Scott stood fast, so Dean helped by handing Scott the tire iron and rolling the spare to him when Scott was ready for it. They finished the job and waited another twenty minutes before Scott’s friend arrived in a tow truck.

Pete hopped out, an easy smile on his face. “Thought I’d bring the wrecker with me just in case. How you doin’, Scott?”

The two of them shook hands, and Scott introduced Dean. “Pete Miller, this is Dean Conlon.”

“Pleased to meet you, Dean.” Pete took Dean’s hand, then addressed them both. “I’m sure it will fit, but let’s see.” In no time at all, they had the wheel with its new tire on. “There now, I knew it.” Pete grinned and nodded toward the old tires. “Somebody mad at you, Scott, or is this just Saturday night stupid shit?”

“Stupid shit as far as I know.”

The conversation halted when the sheriff's car pulled up. A tall, dark-haired man dressed in a uniform levered himself out of the car as Scott walked forward to meet him. "Matt! Didn't know they were sending you out."

"Scott, how you doin'? Or should I ask?" the man asked with a grin.

"Been doin' all right up till now. How are Melissa and the kids?"

"Just fine. Brad's on the football team this year. Starting line-backer."

"Takin' after his daddy, huh?"

"Guess you could say that." Matt's smile was proud. "So somebody slashed your tires, huh? Let's take a look."

Matt and Pete greeted each other and Scott introduced Dean to the deputy. The tires were examined and everyone agreed the damage was deliberate.

While Matt began writing up his report, Pete took his leave. "Dean, it was good to meet you. Scott, drop by the garage next time you're in town. I'll have your new wheel ready, and we can use that one," he said, indicating the one now on Scott's truck, "for your spare."

"That'll work. Thanks, Pete. Appreciate you coming out this late."

"No problem. Just sittin' home with the wife. Take it easy, Matt," Pete called before climbing in his truck and driving away.

Matt acknowledged him with a wave. "Here ya go, Scott. It's just a quick write-up. If you agree with what's there, just sign right at the bottom above my signature." He pointed to the spot and handed the clipboard over. Scott gave it a quick read-through and signed it, then returned it.

"That it?"

"That's it. We'll let you know if we find out anything, but I'm sure you're already aware that's not too likely. Something like this is pretty hard to follow up on. If we get a rash of similar incidents, the department might take special measures to catch the person but otherwise, one isolated incident isn't going to shake things up too much."

Scott nodded. "Yeah, I figured that. Don't worry, I'm not gonna be pounding on the doors of city hall demanding action any time soon."

Matt chuckled. "Didn't figure you would. Dean, it was good to meet you. You fellas enjoy the rest of your evening."

"We will," Dean replied.

Scott stepped closer to Dean when Matt drove off. "We will?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Tell me more."

"Get in the truck and maybe I will."

“Are you gonna talk dirty to me on the way home?” There was a twinkle in Scott’s eyes.

Dean rolled his own and shook his head. “Get in the damn truck.”

Chapter Eight

The weekend went by at a speed Dean would never have believed possible. It seemed he'd no more than crossed the threshold a few hours ago, and yet it was now late Sunday with the sun sliding below the horizon. He and Scott sat on the slowly rocking porch swing, the sway hypnotic, watching the clouds turn from gold and orange to fuchsia pink and purple.

They sat close together, Scott's arm slung over Dean's shoulders. Dean rested a hand on Scott's thigh, absently squeezing and rubbing the jean-clad flesh under his fingers. A buzzing sound caught Dean's attention and he looked over to see a hummingbird feeding from the flowers of the honeysuckle vine twined around the nearby column.

Scott followed the direction of Dean's gaze and tightened his hold to gain Dean's attention. "They come around all the time for the honeysuckle," he said softly.

"Can't say as I blame them. It smells good enough to eat."

"Ever do that when you were a kid? Pluck the blossoms and suck the sweet out of the end?"

Dean grinned. "Yeah. My grandmother had this huge trellis with honeysuckle all over it. Three or four times what you've got here. My brothers and sister and I would pick them after we got worn out running around getting into whatever mischief we could scare up."

"Sounds like you had some fun growing up," Scott prodded gently.

"I did. It wasn't all bad. Just at the end. It seems almost like my father got colder, harsher as we got older. He was never what you'd call doting, but he wasn't always the prick he is today. At least it didn't feel like it then."

"What about your brothers and sister? You ever hear from any of them?"

Dean shook his head. "I was hoping at least one of them would be on my side, but I'm not really surprised they weren't. I think if they had tried to help, they'd have been

disinherited, too.” Dean had tensed up and was fidgeting a little, but he settled down when Scott started rubbing his back. “Actually not everyone abandoned me. My grandmother made me the main beneficiary in her will. That’s how I was able to buy the practice.”

“That’s unusual. Are we talking your father’s mother?”

“Yeah. And you know why she did it.”

“Because of those things your father said about her not being a good wife when his dad left.”

“Yeah. When I went away to college, Grandma and I kept in touch. I visited her during holidays and such. After she died, her lawyer gave me a letter she’d left. It said that she’d understood why my grandfather had to go, that it was only natural to want to be with the person you really loved. She said she was actually glad when the lie between her and Grandpa was over. Grandma told me I was a good person, and that she was ashamed at the way her own son had disowned his child.” Dean’s voice thickened at the memory, and he gratefully accepted the strong arms that wrapped around him.

“I wish I could’ve met her. She had sound instincts.”

“She’d have liked you. She had a wicked sense of humor ... sort of like you.”

“Me? Wicked?”

Dean’s shoulders shook with his laughter. “Yeah, you. But don’t change. I like you just the way you are.”

Scott’s hand slipped under Dean’s chin and lifted his head. Their gazes locked. “You’re pretty damn fine yourself,” he whispered before bringing their lips together.

The swing halted its movement as they concentrated on the kiss. Scott’s mouth was moist and sleek against his, slanting and settling into the perfect fit. Their tongues met, greeting each other with pleasing touches, bringing flavored warmth and a kindling desire.

Dean turned as best he could and slid his arms around Scott’s neck. He eased back and gazed passionately at Scott, his words provoking a shiver in his lover. “I want you.”

Scott’s eyes grew dark, their blue color turning stormy and deep. “How?”

“Naked. In bed. Inside you.”

Scott closed his eyes and released a long groaning sigh. Reopening his eyes, he nodded. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

“You have?”

“Mmm, hmm.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I wanted you to find your own way. Wanted to let things progress naturally, I guess. In case you haven’t noticed, I sometimes have a tendency to be a little pushy.”

“I’ve noticed,” Dean answered, a teasing lilt to his voice. “But so far you’ve been nice about it.”

A rumbling chuckle formed in Scott's chest and eased out like a slow, distant roll of thunder. Dean savored the vibration against his own chest.

"Thanks. I'm glad you appreciate my restraint. How about we head upstairs? I'll just lie back and let you do all the work."

Dean stood and offered his hand. "Actually, I had something a little different in mind."

They crossed the porch and entered the front door. "Yeah? Like what?" Scott stopped to close and lock the door while Dean started up the stairs.

Dean paused a couple of steps up and looked back. "How'd you like to take a ride, cowboy?"

Scott's eyes widened before a slow, wicked smile curved his lips. "*Oh, yeah.*"

Dean's grin was immediate. "Come on, then."

Wasting no time, Scott followed Dean up the stairs. What followed was something Dean thought neither one of them expected. Instead of the hot hurried rush that usually drove them, this time things moved at a slow, deliberate pace. They leisurely stripped each other, each move designed to arouse. The parting of buttons was accompanied by the brush of caressing fingers against warm, silky skin. Unhurried kisses were exchanged, lips eventually finding sensitive places on throats and chests.

Dean found that they seemed to unconsciously mirror each others movements. Scott bent and swept his tongue across Dean's nipple, just as Dean brushed his fingertips over the taut bead of Scott's. They both moaned, and their shirts, jeans and briefs hit the floor moments later. The bed bounced when their entwined bodies abruptly dropped on its surface.

Mouth and limbs locked with Scott's, Dean floated in a world that consisted of warm, lingering kisses that were mixed with their own unique tastes. Tastes that fueled his desire until both their needy groans and sighing moans breached the bounds of patience.

Scott pulled back from Dean, bringing his mouth to Dean's ear. "Get me ready."

Dean reached over Scott, grabbing the bottle of lube that had taken up permanent residence on the bedside table. He rolled to his back and scooted up until he was propped against the pillows and headboard. With a smile, he patted his upper thigh. "Straddle me."

Scott grinned and followed orders by placing a knee on either side of Dean's thighs. He moved up as close as possible and settled his butt on Dean's slightly spread legs.

"Huh uh. Up on your knees for a bit, lover."

When Scott rose up, Dean set the bottle of lube down by his own hip, then reached out and placed his hands on the back of Scott's thighs. Hands and fingers molded to the curve of skin and muscle while gliding upward to the cup the firm mounds of Scott's ass. Dean rubbed and kneaded the pliant muscles, his movements slowly rocking Scott forward and back.

Leaning over, he swept his tongue over the plump head of Scott's cock, swallowing down drops of clear precome, and sighing with pleasure at the flavor that teased his taste

buds. He smiled at Scott's groan. Dean grabbed the lube, poured a generous amount in his hand, anointed his fingers, then closed the bottle before tossing it aside. This time his fingers skimmed over the sensitive skin of Scott's scrotum, gently rolling the tender sac before sliding further back to glide the pad of one finger over Scott's perineum.

Scott tossed his head back and directed his groan to the ceiling. "Mmmm. Feels so good."

"I know. I love it when you do that to me." He reached further back between Scott's legs, sliding his still lube-slick fingers into the crease between Scott's cheeks. Finding the soft, crinkled skin of his opening, Dean stroked softly over and around the rim. "How does this feel?"

"Good. It feels good. Put it in," Scott demanded

Dean chuckled and complied. Curling his finger, he entered the tight ring of flesh and eased in to the knuckle. "Is this what you want?"

Rocking against Dean's finger, Scott growled a husky "Yes."

Using the same moves Scott had used on him, Dean worked the entrance until it relaxed and eventually accepted three fingers. The process was thrilling, empowering and arousing beyond belief. Scott's pants and strident demands for more had Dean aching to replace his fingers with cock.

"Enough, enough." Scott's voice was tinged with desperation. "Gotta have you in me. Now. Yes? Now?"

"God, yes," Dean hissed, more than ready. "Move back and let me stretch out a little."

Their positions were quickly adjusted; now, when Scott lowered himself to Dean's thighs, Dean had no objection. He held the hard, rigid length of his cock steady, his sharp intake of breath acknowledging the contact between his body and Scott's. Scott's gaze was fixed on Dean's as he descended, his mouth slightly open, small, breathy grunts issuing with each inch of Dean's thick column he took inside.

The gradual engulfment of his cock, the heat and pressure an ongoing, immersing caress, drove Dean mad with lust. He fought the instinctive desire to thrust, giving Scott the control he needed to make the downward journey a painless one.

Finally Scott's ass came to rest on his thighs and Dean cursed softly. His cock held securely within his lover's channel, Dean released his hands and placed them on Scott's hips, his fingers tightening and loosening as he struggled to contain his pleasure. "Son of *bitch*. Do you have any idea how this feels?"

Scott's short laugh jostled their connection and drew involuntary groans from the two of them. "Umm, remember me? The guy who's been up your ass? Correct me if I'm wrong but, you should know what it feels like from the other side.

"It's been a while, and I don't recall it being quite like this."

"I hope that's good 'cause I gotta say, being the catcher has its points."

“Like this one?” Dean pushed up.

“Oh, God, yeah. Just like that one. I think it’s time to start this ride.”

With those words, Scott raised himself slightly, then came back down, drawing a breathy groan from Dean. Once started, their rhythm was quickly established. It wasn’t long before the ride settled into a steady canter. The tight glove of Scott’s hole squeezed and released. With each upward motion the massaging, pulling sensation drew Dean closer and closer to climax. He breathed in the heat building between them, the scent of their rutting heavy in the air.

Reaching out, his sticky fingers enfolded the length of Scott’s cock. His lover’s up-and-down motion sent the organ sliding repeatedly through Dean’s fist. Scott’s guttural groan broke free, the agonized sound of pleasure sending a current straight to Dean’s gut. His hips moved, thrusting up hard, meeting Scott’s every downward stroke, their bodies connecting with repeated slaps of flesh against flesh.

“Gotta *come*, Scott. Ride my cock, lover. Ride me hard!”

Wordlessly Scott’s steady canter became a wild gallop to the finish line. The hard, bucking motion was all it took for Dean, whose orgasm ripped through him, pulling a strained yell from his throat. His cock pulsed in the unrelenting grip of Scott’s channel, the warm flood of his release bathing the muscles that clamped down on him.

The forceful spill of Scott’s release sent splats of white cream over Dean’s hand, chest and belly. Dean retained enough sense to loosen his grip on Scott’s cock, gently massaging the last of his semen free, then bringing his fingers to his mouth to lick them clean. Scott’s heavy lidded eyes shone with satisfaction, and he leaned forward, kissing Dean. Their lips and tongues met, Scott’s flavor shared between them.

Rising, Scott lifted himself to let Dean’s dwindling erection slide free, then collapsed at his side, one leg still slung over Dean’s thighs. “You’re hell on a horse,” Scott groaned.

Dean laughed softly, trying to recover his breath. “It was a wild a ride, cowboy.”

“Yee haw,” Scott replied before a yawn overtook him.

Dean shifted and felt something digging into his hip. Reaching down he came up with the bottle of lube and restored it to the bedside table. Though his position made it awkward, he managed to open the drawer and grab one of the small towels Scott kept there. Wiping himself down, he glanced at Scott and smiled to see the big man already asleep. Scott’s lips were parted slightly, audible puffs of air passing between them.

Dean folded in the damp side of the towel and dropped it to the floor before easing over on his side and wiggling his butt into the curve of Scott’s body. Even unconscious, Scott reached for him, slinging an arm over him while the leg that was already laid over Dean’s tightened its grip. Dean slid his arm from under Scott’s and rested his hand on his lover’s forearm. Heavy lids fluttered closed, and with a sigh of contentment, Dean, too, drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

Monday morning started with a deliberate and drowsy mutual jack off followed by another shared hot shower. Afterward, breakfast was prepared and polished off with gusto. Over a last cup of coffee, Scott brought up the coming weekend.

“Think you could take this coming Saturday off?”

“I might be able to manage it,” Dean answered. “I’ve been talking with another vet, Dr. Wayland, about a rotation which would give us every other weekend off. Wayland’s practice is over in Winchester, so that’s only a forty-five minute drive from here. We could handle each other’s patients and any emergencies that might come up on alternate Saturdays.”

“I know Doc Wayland. He used to cover for Doc Dennison. He’s a good vet. If Doc Dennison hadn’t been closer we’d have given Wayland all our business. Still would have if you’d turned out to be a dud.”

Dean’s brow rose. “Gee, thanks.”

“Hey, it could have happened. Just because a person goes through medical school and training, doesn’t necessarily make him perfect. There are degrees of competence, and I want the best care for my horses.”

“I know that, and you shouldn’t expect anything less. So I take it you think I’m competent.”

“You proved that the night we met. The way you took care of my mare and her colt -- I couldn’t have asked for better.”

Dean nodded, flushed and ducked his head. “Thanks. So you think this rotation with Dr. Wayland is a good plan?”

“I think it’s a stellar plan. You should be able to have more than just one full day off a week.” Scott grinned broadly. “Besides, that’ll give us more time together.”

Dean returned his grin. “So what have you got planned for this weekend?”

“Horse show.”

“Really? You showing some of your babies?”

“Babies!”

“Don’t try to deny it. You dote over those horses like you’re their daddy.”

Scott tried a quelling frown that didn’t quite pass muster. Giving it up, he sent Dean a rueful smile. “That obvious, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Hmm. Yes, I’m showing some of my babies.”

Dean stood, coffee cup in hand, and leaned down to place a kiss on the top of Scott’s head. Scott’s arm came around Dean’s thighs, trapping him. He looked up expectantly,

clearly wanting a real kiss. Dean readily complied and Scott rose to his feet, holding the kiss for several long and thorough moments.

"I'll try to get the weekend off," Dean breathed against his lover's lips.

"Good." Scott reluctantly let him go and picked up his own cup, following Dean to the sink where they rinsed the dishes before stacking them in the dishwasher. "The show's in Tarleton. I thought I'd drive the horses over on Friday and get them settled. I've already got reservations at a hotel, so I'll come back to pick you up after the office closes. We can spend Friday and Saturday night over there and come home Sunday with the horses. Does that sound all right to you?"

"It sounds great. I'm looking forward to it. Especially the part about you and me in a hotel room for two nights."

"You're incorrigible, you know that, don't you? Now that I've got you revved up, I can't turn you off."

Dean gave him a cautious, narrow-eyed look. "Do you really want to?"

"Hell *no*."

Dean headed for the front door. "Then quit bitchin' and give me a good-bye kiss. I gotta get going or I'm going to be late. If that happens, Cassie'll never let me live it down."

Scott was close behind, and before Dean made it to the door, he was wrapped in two strong arms, spun around, and Scott's mouth descended on his, his tongue demanding entrance, which Dean willingly gave. The other man's kiss seemed filled with a desperate passion and Dean groaned under the drugging assault. Their embrace, wild and untamed, gradually slackened, the stabbing thrusts of Scott's tongue becoming gentle sweeps that tenderly aroused and caressed.

Parting their mouths, Scott rested his forehead against Dean's. "I'm sorry. It was meant as a joke. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't."

"Babe, you've got to know how important you are, how important this is to me. The last thing in the world I want you to do is turn any part of yourself off or to hold yourself back from me. I don't think I could ..." Scott cleared his throat. "I just couldn't ..."

Seeing how difficult it was becoming for him, Dean hugged him hard enough to draw a grunt from Scott. "Cut it out. I'm fine. You're fine. We're fine. Everything's fine. Okay?"

Scott nodded against his shoulder. "Okay. Fine."

Dean was surprised by a snort of laughter. Scott grinned and squeezed him tight before stepping back. Dean's smile was easy and genuine. "I'll see you tonight."

Scott opened the front door and ushered him out. "Don't work too hard, Doc. Got plans for you later."

"A man with a plan. Hmm, I like that."

* * * * *

A few hours after Dean left, Scott decided to take a quick trip into town. He let Tim and Steve know he was leaving, then climbed into his pickup. His first stop was going to be to get his spare and settle up his account with Pete. Afterward, he planned to look in on the local farm store and pick up a couple of new salt and molasses blocks for the horses.

He knew this area like the back of his hand, so the drive was soothing and relaxing, something he'd done more times than he could count. The radio was on and he was humming along with the song that played when he felt movement against his feet. Frowning, Scott looked down in time to see the thick, reddish brown and black coils of a snake pushing against his boot.

"Holy friggin' shit!"

Without thinking, he jerked the wheel of his truck and sent it careening off the road. Bouncing over the rough terrain, Scott's head slammed against the side window. Dazed but still conscious, he managed to slam on the breaks and stop before the truck plowed into one of the regularly placed thick posts that surrounded the nearby fenced-in acreage. As soon as the vehicle came to a shuddering halt, he frantically scrambled for the seatbelt latch and released it. Grabbing for the door handle, he pulled it and shoved the door open, tumbling out of the truck.

Slamming the door shut again, he backed away until his heel caught on a small hillock of rough grass. With a muffled curse, he lost his balance and sprawled backward onto the thick ground, amidst grass and weeds. Stunned, Scott lay there for a few minutes, staring up at the sky until his breathing and heartbeat returned to near normal. When he felt able to, he sat up, then got shakily to his feet. One look told him it was going to take a wrecker to pull his truck out. The front axle sat straddling a ditch, not a big one but large enough that he knew he'd never get the truck free on his own. Even if he were willing to brave the snake in the cab.

Returning to the truck, Scott took a cautious look inside. The snake was curled up on the passenger side floorboard.

"How the hell did you get in there?" he murmured, then pulled his cell phone free from his belt. The number he'd used the other night was in his outgoing calls list, so Scott rang the sheriff's office again. "Yeah, I'd like to report an accident, and I'm gonna need an animal control guy out here, too."

After explaining the circumstances to the sheriff, Scott called Pete to ask for a tow. By the time the sheriff and Pete arrived, he had the beginnings of a severe headache.

The animal control warden, arriving a few minutes later, gave a long whistle when he saw the snake. "That's a copperhead. I've never seen one that big. Looks to be at least three feet long."

The snake was dealt with and another report made out. "You sure you don't want to get checked out at the hospital?" asked the sheriff's deputy.

"No. I hit my head against the window, but I didn't pass out. I'm not dizzy or sick to my stomach, and my vision is fine, which means no concussion. I just have a headache."

"You're damn lucky that snake didn't bite you. Even though a copperhead's bite is seldom fatal, they're very painful."

Scott sighed. "Then I consider myself lucky. I just can't figure out how it got in my truck."

"Doesn't seem too likely it got in there by itself does it?"

"No, it doesn't. Not unless snakes can grow legs or fly."

"You piss anybody off lately, Mr. Whittaker?"

"If you'd asked me that a few days ago, I'd have said no; now I'm not so sure." Scott related the incident about the slashed tires to the deputy.

"Maybe you'd better give it some thought," the deputy advised. "If you come up with anything or notice something suspicious, give us a call."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks," Scott answered as he watched Pete winch his truck across the ditch and pull it to the side of the road.

Fortunately, the vehicle hadn't sustained too much damage, but by the time he assured Pete he was all right and avoided more questions, Scott was exhausted. The drive home seemed interminable, especially with his head pounding. The question of how the snake had gotten into his truck circled around and around, but no reasonable answer was forthcoming. Arriving home, he went in the house and called the barn.

When Tim answered he explained about the accident. "Can you and Steve handle the rest of the chores?"

"Sure, boss, no problem. Sounds like you could use some aspirin and an ice pack."

"That's a damn good idea. I'll see you boys in the morning."

Scott hung up and made for the kitchen. He riffled through a couple of drawers searching for the ice pack his dad had used whenever the older man got his infrequent migraines. Finding it, he filled it with cubes from the freezer, then took it upstairs with him. He made a quick stop in the bathroom to wash up and to down some ibuprofen, then returned to the bedroom. He wrestled his boots off and crawled onto the bed. Rolling to his side, he set the ice pack over the lump on the side of his head and closed his eyes.

He woke when he felt the ice pack start to slide, but before he could catch it, Dean spoke.

"It's okay. I've got it. I just wanted to see if you needed more ice. How do you feel?"

Scott yawned and opened his eyes to find Dean sitting beside him. He blinked several times and gave him a sleepy smile. "Hey, babe."

Dean stroked his cheek. “Hey, lover. I ran into Tim on my way in. He told me what happened. Are you all right?”

Slowly sitting up, Scott experimentally twisted his head side to side. “Fine. Headache’s mostly gone. My neck’s a little stiff and sore, but I’m good.”

“So. There was a snake in your truck?”

“Yeah, and before you ask, I don’t know how it got there.”

“What kind of snake?”

“A copperhead.”

“Copperheads are poisonous.”

“I know.”

Dean stood and started to pace. “What the fuck’s going on? First the tires on your truck, and now this? You don’t think this has anything to do with those presents that keep showing up for me, do you?”

“I don’t know. Have you gotten anything else besides the rose, fudge and poem?”

“Nothing,” Dean replied, stopping in front of Scott. “What if there really was someone outside that night I heard the noise at my window? Maybe it wasn’t just the wind blowing the branches against the house. I never noticed them before.”

Scott scooted to the edge of the bed and got up. Dean immediately went to his side to offer support, but Scott shook his head. “I’m okay. And as to whether or not anyone was peeping in your windows?” Scott shrugged. “There’s no way of knowing now. Any signs of someone being there would be long gone. I think all we can do at this point is be cautious. Lock things up, be aware of our surroundings, that sort of thing. If someone’s playing tricks, hopefully, we’ll catch them at it.”

Dean slid his arms around Scott. “You could have been seriously hurt, either from crashing the truck or the snake bite. I think we should talk to someone. How about your deputy friend, Matt?”

“We can do that.” Scott returned Dean’s hug. “I’ll call him and see if I can get him to come out tomorrow evening. Will that work?”

Dean nodded, and Scott squeezed him tighter, swooping in for a kiss. “I’m starving. Let’s fix supper.”

“You got it. Afterward, I’ll massage your stiff neck.”

“Umm, I like the sound of that. You know, I’ve got something else that gets stiff. It could use a good massage, too.”

“I’ll just bet.” Dean slid out of their embrace and moved to the bedroom door.

Scott went as well. “So, will you?”

“Will I what?” Dean asked while starting down the stairs.

“Massage everything that’s stiff?”

“I’ll let you know after supper.”

“Oh, man, come on! Hello? Injured man here.”

Dean snickered and kept on walking.

Scott looked at his watch again for the fifth time in the past hour. It was Thursday, Dean’s office had closed nearly an hour ago and still there was no sign of him. Out in the barn, Scott busied himself with extra chores after having sent Steve and Tim home for the day. In the tack room, he checked over the equipment he was planning to take to the horse show, making sure everything was clean and in perfect condition. He took pride in the appearance of his “babies,” as Dean called them, and smiled at the memory of that conversation.

A worried frown furrowed his brow at the thought of subsequent events and conversations. Tuesday evening. Matt had come to the house as requested, and they’d spoken to him at length about the anonymous gifts Dean had received and about the second of the two not-so-nice surprises Scott had gotten. Matt advised them to be extra careful while he saw to finding someone experienced in stalker cases, which he thought this situation might be. He also asked Dean to call him if anymore gifts arrived. Having Matt bring up the word “stalker” had caused Dean and Scott even greater concern. It gave the whole situation a more sinister air.

Checking the time again, Scott decided he was going to find Dean. He closed the tack room and walked out of the stables. The first order of business was to call Dean’s cell phone, but then he was pleased and relieved to see there was no need to. Dean’s car was parked in front of the house.

He crossed the driveway and yard at a fast clip. Bounding up the front steps, he opened the front door and walked in. “Hey! Where are you?”

A muffled answer from the direction of the den caught his attention. A few eager strides took him there and he found Dean, slouched in the corner of the sofa. The television was on, the news a soft drone.

Rounding the sofa, he took a seat next to Dean. “Hey. Been here long?”

“‘Bout twenty minutes.”

“You all right?”

Dean gave him a half smile. “I’m just tired.”

“Rough day, Doc?”

“Yeah.”

Scott leaned back on the couch and moved one arm behind Dean’s shoulders. “Come here.” With a sigh, Dean settled against Scott, and they sat quietly watching the news. Scott nuzzled his cheek against Dean’s hair and dropped an occasional soft kiss near his forehead

and temple. His hand pet gently over Dean's chest and the hard muscles of his abdomen. The news was ending when a distinctly loud grumble emanated from Dean's stomach.

Scott snickered. "Sounds like somebody's hungry."

"I didn't have lunch today."

"Why not?"

"Too busy."

"Well, come on," Scott said, encouraging Dean to sit up. "I stopped in at Martha's and picked up a roast chicken, macaroni salad and a cherry pie."

"Oh, man, that sounds good. I really am hungry."

"Then let's get you fed. Gotta keep your strength up. You never know when you'll need some extra energy."

Dean's smile was fuller and reached his eyes this time. Scott was pleased as he led the way to the kitchen. During the meal, Dean seemed to perk up and ate a decent portion of what they prepared. After the cleanup, Scott slid an arm around Dean's waist and guided him down the hallway that led to the back of the house.

"It occurs to me you haven't seen the back yard," Scott said as they stopped in front of the door that led outside. With a flourish, Scott opened it.

"You have a hot tub! I knew you were a hedonist," Dean exclaimed, his eyes shining.

"I've been accused of worse things. How about a soak?"

"That sounds great."

The hot tub was enclosed in redwood. One corner and two sides were shaded by a latticed fence that had built-in towel bars. Two steps with non-slip treads led up and into the tub where the water was bubbling. He and Dean stripped down, leaving their clothes on a nearby lounge chair and climbed into the water.

Dean sat back with a sigh. "Damn, this feels good. Just what I needed besides that supper you fixed."

"All I did was warm stuff up but it *was* good. It's nice to be able to get proper food without having to make it myself all the time." Scott gave Dean a speculative look. "Now that I've mellowed you with food and got you trapped naked in a tub, why don't you tell me what's bothering you?"

Dean compressed his lips and looked away a moment before turning back and training his gaze on the swirling water. "I had to put a dog to sleep today."

Scott moved closer and slipped an arm around Dean's shoulders. "That couldn't have been easy."

"It's part of my job."

"That's not an answer, Dean."

“No, it’s not easy. It’s not like I haven’t had to do it before. It’s just that ... I can’t *not* feel it, especially when the owner so obviously loves their pet. The lady today, she really got to me. Her dog was sixteen and just out of time, you know?” Scott tightened his arm and nodded. “She knew it and agreed that putting her dog to sleep was the best thing for him. The dog, a little tan and white mixed terrier, was lying on the table. She put her arms around him and stood there, talking quietly to him, while I gave him the shot, and he went under. All the time, these big silent tears were running down her face, but she didn’t make a fuss. Just stayed calm for her dog, letting him know she was right there. Ah, jeez. Damn it!”

Dean’s voice had thickened, and he choked on a muted sob. Scott pulled him close. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

Dean recovered quickly and exhaled on a shuddering sigh before relaxing against Scott. “Sorry.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry about. If something’s bothering you, I want know about it. I’m here for you, and I want to be able to count on the same from you.”

“You know you can. I’ll listen anytime you need me to.”

“That’s good to know. You feeling a little better now?”

“Yeah, a lot better.”

“Good. I was worried about you.”

Dean met Scott’s gaze before leaning in and kissing him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

The two of them rested back against the hot tub, and let the water do its soothing work.

“Speaking of dogs,” Scott said a short time later. “How’s that pooch we rescued?”

“He’s doing real well. He’s a happy-go-lucky little shit now that he’s getting decent care. Cassie and Doreen are spoiling him rotten.”

Scott chuckled. “Figures. Any idea what you’re going to do with him?”

“Guess I’m going to have to try to find him a home. I can’t keep him at the clinic forever; he deserves to be with a nice family.”

“Um.” Scott nodded but said nothing further on the subject.

After a time, fully relaxed, they got out and dried with the towels Scott had stashed in one of the built-in cabinets at the base of the tub. Donning just their jeans, they returned to the den and watched a couple of shows they both liked, then headed off to bed.

Dean came in the bedroom after brushing his teeth. “I forgot to tell you something.”

“What’s that, babe?” Scott asked as he turned down the covers.

“When I got home this morning there was another package on my doorstep.”

Scott looked up, concerned. “Did you call Matt?”

“No. I didn’t want to alarm Cassie and Doreen or have to explain why a sheriff’s deputy was dropping by. I called the sheriff’s office to see if Matt was there instead; he was, so I used gloves to handle it and took it to him. When I got there, Matt opened the package.”

“What was it?”

“A CD. ‘Rhapsodies for Lovers.’”

“Shit. Flowers, candy, poems, romantic music. Whoever it is isn’t missing a trick. This nutball’s really got a thing for you.”

“So it would seem. Anyway, Matt kept the CD and packaging. He’s going to see if they can get fingerprints off any of it.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do unless this person has a criminal record. I wonder if there’s any way to set up a surveillance camera at your house. One that couldn’t be seen.”

Dean shrugged. “I’ve no idea.”

“I’ve been thinking about having a security system installed here for a long while. In fact, I talked to a guy about it a few months ago. It would have cameras trained on the barns and the house. I’ve got some very valuable horses. Most of the time there’s someone here, but occasionally not.”

“Like when we went out to dinner Saturday night.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, it sounds like a good idea. Especially now.”

“I’ll call the guy tomorrow. I think it’s time we start taking a proactive role in catching this kook.”

Dean grinned. “I like your attitude.”

Scott jumped in bed, reached out and pulled Dean in with him. They wrestled around for a bit with Scott finally coming out on top. He looked down intently at Dean. “In the meantime you keep your eyes open. Be cautious when you’re alone or go somewhere by yourself.”

“I will.” Dean settled back and tried to muffle a wide yawn. “No offence, but I really am tired. Is it all right if we just go to sleep?”

“Of course. Much as I like sex, we don’t have to go at it constantly. I’ll wake you up early.”

“You’re so good to me.”

Scott laughed and stretched to turn off the lamp on the bedside table. He settled on his side and heaved a contented sigh when Dean spooned him, his arm sliding around Scott’s waist. Scott rubbed his hand over Dean’s forearm while Dean kissed the back of his neck, an action that sent a shiver down Scott’s spine.

“G’night, babe.”

“Night, lover.”

Scott didn't get a chance to wake Dean early. It was he who was roused in the early morning hours just after dawn when a hot, wet mouth engulfed the length of his ready erection. Scott groaned, his hands reaching down to find silky hair sliding against his fingers.

"Dean. Oh, fuck, baby, feels so good." His answer was a soft purring growl that sent tingles shooting through his balls. "Come here," Scott ordered, urging Dean to shift around so Scott could reach his cock.

Dean repositioned himself without taking his mouth from Scott's cock, his moans of need vibrating in Scott's testicles when Scott took Dean's hard-on deep and sucked. They echoed each other's rhythm, both of them moving in concert, heads bobbing, mouths sucking. Dean's long fingers cradled Scott's scrotum. He petted and rolled Scott's testicles while one clever finger moved behind his balls to stroke the tender skin there before sliding further back to tease his taut hole.

Scott felt his balls drawing up and groaned when Dean pulled them down, effectively cutting off his orgasm. His lover's hand released him for just a moment, and then Scott felt a finger slide into Dean's mouth alongside Scott's cock. The feeling was electrifying but not nearly as galvanizing as when that same wet finger repositioned itself at Scott's hole and slid in.

Scott nearly choked on Dean's cock but recovered quickly. Not to be outdone, once more he mimicked Dean's movements and was satisfied to hear a muffled wail when his own finger breached Dean's entrance. Together they rocked. One finger became two, stretching and sliding deep within the other as their hips danced forward and back between mouth and fingers.

The constant muffled keening of Dean's cries sent a steady buzz of sensation through Scott's groin that brought his release closer and closer. There was no stopping this time when his balls drew tight. The veins in his cock throbbed, each pulse bringing forth a shot of pure male seed.

Scott's own growls of pleasure resonated around Dean's cock and he swallowed every bit of the warm come that shot into his mouth, sliding easily over his tongue and down his throat. Afterward they lay relaxed, mouths moving slow and gentle over each other, bringing them down from the high.

They freed each other, Scott smiling as Dean wiggled around to face him. He chuckled when he got an armload of happy man and groaned softly at the melting kisses that combined the flavors of himself, Dean, sex and sated desire. Scott found himself unsurprised by the thought that nothing had ever tasted sweeter.

Dean moved back slightly, his smile lazy and warm. "Good morning."

Returning the smile, Scott touched Dean's face, a rumbling growl flowing from his throat as Dean nuzzled his palm. "Biggest understatement I ever heard." Dean's happy laugh sent another wave of pleasure over him.

“Come take a shower with me.” Dean’s nod was all he needed. Scott climbed out of bed, satisfied, sated and content. It promised to be a beautiful day.

Chapter Nine

The day was hot.

“Thank God there’s a breeze blowing,” Dean said as he and Scott sat in the stands watching the draft-horse pull.

“Be glad these stands aren’t metal; I went to a drag race once where they were. Ninety-three degrees in the shade -- and there wasn’t any shade. No wind either. I like to have melted in my seat.”

Below them in the center of the ring, teams of Percheron, Belgian, Clydesdale, and Shire horses took their turns hauling a weighted sled, the object being to see which could pull the most weight the furthest.

“Isn’t it cruel to make those poor animals pull so much weight?” a woman asked her companion. The man she was with merely shrugged, but Dean caught her attention.

“Excuse me, I couldn’t help overhearing your question, ma’am. I’m a veterinarian and I can assure you that this sport is by no means cruel to the horses. These types were bred for just this kind of activity. In fact, the ones you see out there now are treated like professional athletes. They’re worked every day to keep their muscles and tendons in shape, and they receive the best food and care their owners can provide. The short distances for the competition are barely enough to raise their heart rates.”

The woman gave him a coquettish look. “Why, thank you, Dr. ... ?”

“Conlon, ma’am. Dean Conlon.” He tipped the brim of the cowboy hat Scott had bought for him.

“Thank you, Dr. Conlon. It was nice of you to explain. I’m Suzanne Emmet.”

Dean shook the hand she held out. “Pleased to meet you, Ms. Emmet.”

“Oh, call me Suzanne,” she insisted coyly. “You don’t mind if I call you Dean, do you?”

Dean shook his head, inwardly rolling his eyes. *Shit. She's flirting with me. I should've kept my mouth shut.*

"Do you live around here?"

"No, actually I don't." *Thank God*, he thought. "My practice is in Middleton."

"Oh, what a shame. That's quite a ways from here. Are you working or just taking in the show?"

"My friend and I came for the show. Scott's got a couple of appaloosas in the halter class," Dean said proudly, leaning back to give Suzanne a look at his lover. The woman's eyes widened.

"I take it you're Scott?"

"Yes, ma'am. Scott Whittaker."

"And do you live in Middleton, too, Scott?"

Dean noticed that she had gone straight to calling Scott by his given name. Dean was none too happy about it but kept his expression pleasant.

"Yes ma'am, I do."

"Mmm, it looks like I need to take a trip to Middleton some time. There certainly seems to be a lot of good-looking men over there."

Dean froze, unsure what to say, and felt Scott stiffen beside him. Before anyone could add anything, Suzanne's companion spoke up.

"Jeez, Suzanne. I said I was sorry about the other night. How long you gonna keep puttin' me through the ringer?" The man stood, glared at Dean and Scott and started to clomp his way down the steps.

Suzanne's face reddened. "Sorry about that. Excuse me. Hope you enjoy the rest of the show," she called as she hurried away. "*Danny!*"

Dean and Scott looked at each other and grinned.

"Damn. What is it with some people?" Dean asked.

"You started it. *Conlon, ma'am, Dean Conlon*," Scott imitated and tipped his hat.

"I was just being friendly." Dean said defensively. "I didn't ask her to climb all over me. Besides, I lost her when she got a look at *you*."

"Don't try to blame this on me. *I didn't say a thing.*" Scott faced forward, his smile gone. He watched the next pulls without another word.

Considering where they were, surrounded by too many people too close to have any privacy, Dean let it go. Scott was pissed, that much was clear. Dean was finding it hard to believe that Scott was jealous, but he couldn't think of any other explanation. And the more he thought about it, the more steamed he became. The whole thing was ridiculous. What did Scott think he was going to do? Dump him for Suzanne? A total stranger? A *woman*?

Dean was glad the competition was nearly done. With Scott at his elbow, quiet and broody, it was distinctly uncomfortable. The way he felt right now, Dean didn't want to talk to Scott anyway. In moments, he'd talked himself into believing that Scott was a colossal ass.

When the last pull was over, Scott rose. "You ready? I want to check the horses one more time before we leave."

"Yep," Dean answered shortly and, without waiting, led the way.

An unaccustomed silence wrapped itself around them as they walked through the crowds, heading for the stable where Scott's horses were bedded down. Brooding over the present situation, Dean nearly ran into the couple that crossed his path. He halted with a jolt, looked up and discovered a smiling Doreen.

"Hi, Doc! Hi, Scott!"

"Hi, Doreen," Scott responded.

"Hey, Doreen. I didn't know you liked horses. I thought you were a dog kind of gal."

"I am." She giggled. "I'm just keeping my brother company. You remember Sean, don't you?"

Dean turned his gaze to the young man at her side. "Sure I do. Hi, Sean. How's the Chevelle running?" Dean had ogled Sean's car with envy every time he'd picked up his sister from work. It was a red classic 1970 454 with double white stripes on the hood.

Sean's eyes lit up and he gave Dean a shy smile. "Real well, Dr. Conlon."

"You can call me Dean or Doc like Doreen does," Dean said, giving Scott a sideways glance.

Scott seemed to be waiting patiently, but Dean didn't want to press his luck any further. He turned back to find that Sean had followed the look he'd given Scott. The pleasure in Sean's face had disappeared to be replaced by a rather stony expression that gave Dean a moment's pause.

"Well, we need to get going. Scott's got a couple of horses that need seeing to. Are you going to be here for tomorrow's events?"

"Yes, we are," Doreen chirped.

"Good. Maybe we'll run into you again. If not, enjoy the rest of the show."

"You, too, Dean. Good luck tomorrow, Scott. Come on, Sean, let's go. I'm starving!" Doreen latched onto her brother's arm and dragged him away.

Scott and Dean continued to the barn and went straight to the horses. Dapper and Mizz Dotty were contentedly chomping hay. Scott gave each a measure of oats and checked to make sure the water buckets were filled with fresh water. Again, silence reigned and Dean decided he'd had enough.

"You didn't have to be rude to Doreen and Sean."

“I wasn’t rude. I said hello to Doreen. And for your information, I’ve never been introduced to Sean. If anyone behaved badly, it was you.”

Dean flushed. “Well, if you weren’t in such a snit and had me flustered, maybe I’d have remembered my manners and properly introduced you. Just what’s got you so pissed off, anyway?”

Scott backed Dean against the stall door. “*Suzanne.*”

“I knew it. God damn it, Scott, you can’t be serious!”

“I know it’s stupid, but I can’t help it. It’s making me mad, and *I don’t like it, Dean.*”

Before Dean could open his mouth, they were interrupted.

“Trouble in paradise, Whittaker? Your girlfriend giving you a hard time?”

Dean stiffened in affront and watched a mask cover Scott’s face, his blue eyes turning cold and hard. Scott turned to face the speaker.

“Dave Feaster. I heard a rumor you were here. Too bad it turned out to be true.”

Feaster was shorter than Scott by an inch or two, but his body was trim and well muscled. Dark hair peeked from under his hat and accented his green eyes. If not for the insolent expression on his face, he would have been an attractive man.

“What’s the matter, Whittaker? You afraid of a little competition?” Feaster ambled closer and gave Dean a brazen once-over. “I gotta say, this is a nice piece you got here. Wanna share like we did in Houston?” The man reached out, zeroing in on Dean’s crotch. “How about it, honey, you up for a hard ride?”

Before Dean could react, Scott’s hand struck like lightning. His fingers wrapped around Feaster’s wrist, white knuckles testifying to the strength of his grip. “Didn’t your momma teach you any manners? Never touch unless you’re invited -- and you’re not invited. Not now, not *ever*. I thought I already taught you that lesson.”

“I never did like being told what to do.” Feaster growled and tensed, his free hand clenched, clearly signaling his intention to throw a punch.

“Good evening, gentlemen. Is everything all right here?”

They all turned to find another man had appeared quietly on the scene. He was older, seemed to be in his mid-fifties, with salt-and-pepper hair. “Scott, good to see you. Dave, you’ve been drinking I hear. You know the rules about liquor in the barns. It would be well within my purview to have you and your horses expelled from tomorrow’s competition.”

Scott released Feaster’s arm.

“Judge Lykins ...” Feaster began, his cheeks flushing.

The older man held up his hand. “I don’t even want to hear it. Why don’t you go get yourself a meal and some coffee and sober up. I’ll overlook it this time, but if I hear of any trouble involving you, you’re out of here. Understood?”

Feaster nodded shortly and strode away without a backward glance.

The judge focused a twinkle-eyed look on Scott and extended a hand. "How are you, Scott?"

"I'm fine, sir, just fine. You look like you're holding up."

The man laughed. "Thank you. My wife takes good care of me. I'll relay your compliment." He turned to Dean and held out his hand again. "We don't know each other. I'm Robert Lykins; as you've probably guessed, I'm one of the show judges."

Dean shook hands and returned his smile. "It's nice to meet you, sir. I'm Dean Conlon."

"Ah, yes, the new vet over in Middleton. So that's how you got acquainted with this fine upstanding citizen," he said with a grin, indicating Scott.

Scott snorted.

"Yes, sir. Scott pulled me out of bed in the middle of the night to help birth a foal at his place."

Judge Lykins commiserated. "The ladies always do seem to want to drop their babies at the most ungodly hour. Conlon's a familiar name in this area. Would you be related to Senator Douglas Conlon?"

Dean struggled to keep his smile in place. "Yes, sir. He's my father."

"That's too bad," the judge commented. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, young man, but Conlon's an ass. I'm doing my best to see him voted out of office next term."

Scott laughed and Dean relaxed, grinning at the judge. "I don't mind at all, and I actually wish you luck with that."

"I see you're a sensible young man, too. Well, I'll be on my way. Betty gives me hell if I stay away too long. It was nice to meet you, Dean. Good luck tomorrow, Scott."

Both of them tendered their goodbyes and silently watched the judge go on his way. But with his departure, tension returned and stretched between them. Finally, Scott spoke.

"We need to talk. But not here. At the hotel, all right?"

Dean agreed with a nod.

Back at their room, the door closed behind Dean with a thud that matched the anxious pounding of his heart. Scott took a seat at the table by the windows that overlooked a long stretch of trees and the highway in the distance. Dean took the other chair and waited.

"You'll want to know about Feaster."

"Yeah. What did he mean about you two sharing in Houston?"

"First of all, it wasn't like that. Not at all!" Scott denied vehemently, then visibly calmed himself down. "My dad and I were at a show in Houston. Back in those days, when I had an itch, I went out trolling for someone to scratch it. There was this bar I knew of, so one night I went looking and I found a guy. His name was Rick, and he turned out to be a nice guy. We hooked up and went back to his room." Scott looked at Dean. "I'm not going to lie to you. We had a good time. He was more than just an anonymous fuck, but I wasn't in

love with him or anything. I liked him. When I left, Dave Feaster must have spotted me. For some reason, that son of a bitch has always hated my guts, and the feeling is more than mutual.

“Feaster went after Rick. He introduced himself and told him we were friends. At that time, it was all just fun and games, you know? Guys simply searching for a good time. Rick thought I’d sent Feaster to play with until we got together again.” Scott sighed. “We were supposed to meet up at that same bar the next night and when Rick didn’t show, I went to his hotel. Feaster had treated him pretty rough. Hell, if it wasn’t rape, it was close enough that I couldn’t see the difference. I got Rick to tell me who’d hurt him; he told me about Feaster and how he’d lied about me and him being friends so Rick would trust him. I went after the son of a bitch, and when I found him, I beat the shit out of him. It didn’t change anything, except maybe made him think twice about treating somebody that way again.”

“What about the guy, Rick? Was he all right?”

“Yeah, I took him to a doctor myself. I paid for it, too.”

“That was good of you.”

“Shit. It was my fault. It was the least I could do.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Scott.” Dean reached across the table.

Scott gripped his hand, trembling slightly, his expression bleak. “I hate this shit. I can do confrontation with the best of them, but I swear, Dean. If that bastard ever touched you, I’d kill him. I’d fucking *kill* him.”

Dean let go of him and rounded the table. Scott rose to meet him and went into his arms.

“It’s over. Just let it go,” Dean crooned. “You don’t need to think about killing anybody. Nothing’s going to happen. I’m not exactly helpless, you know?”

Scott held on tight, shaking with obvious anger and excess adrenaline. Eventually, the tension drained out of him, and he relaxed for a few moments before pulling away. “I’m sorry. I know you’re not helpless. I’m sorry, too, about the whole Suzanne thing. It was just plain stupid; I was jealous, is all.” He turned away to look out the window. “I’m really fucking things up today.”

“You’re not fucking up anything. I’ve had time to think about it, and I would have reacted the same way if some woman came on to you.”

“You would?”

“Hell yeah! I didn’t like the way she was eyeing *you*. It didn’t matter that she’s a woman and you don’t swing that way. It’s about another person expressing interest in my guy and the fact that I couldn’t do anything to make her understand you’re mine. Not without maybe causing a ruckus. If a couple are the opposite sex and someone’s coming on to either one of them, the other partner can put their arm around their lover or say something

to stake their claim. Do we have that option? No. Not unless we want to face the possibility of taking a whole lot of hell for it.”

“Exactly, I’m glad you understand.”

“I’m not totally thick-headed.” Dean gave his lover a teasing smile.

“Not up here anyway,” Scott joked. “Down there’s another thing altogether,” he said running teasing fingers down Dean’s zipper.

“Remember what you said about fucking things up?”

“Yeah?” Scott replied with a cautious frown.

“I’ve got a bottle of lube in my bag. How about you come over here and fuck me up, or in, or in and out -- whatever gets the job done?”

“I can get behind that plan,” Scott answered, his voice going low and husky. “Or better yet, in front of it. Definitely in front of it. I want to see your face when you come on my cock.”

Dean groaned. “You keep saying things like that and it’ll be over before we get naked.”

“Can’t have that now, can we?”

Scott moved in close, his lips finding Dean’s. One hand started working the buttons on his shirt while the other palmed Dean’s ass and tugged him close, Dean rode the undulation of Scott’s hips. Their cocks, filling fast, already thick and heavy, pressed together. Their hot breaths and deep moans met in their joined mouths, mingled and were swallowed down. Dean’s shirt floated to the floor, followed by Scott’s.

Scott pushed Dean down on the bed, and Dean landed with a bounce. “Gotta get you naked, Doc,” he growled and bent over, yanking Dean’s boots off.

Dean grinned and opened the button on his jeans, sliding down the zipper under Scott’s eager gaze. “See something you like, cowboy?”

“You know it.”

Making quick work of the boots, Scott removed Dean’s briefs and jeans before leaning in. His hands circled Dean’s hips and he set his lips to Dean’s belly, kissing and licking while swirling his tongue around Dean’s belly button. The head of Dean’s cock bumped insistently under his chin.

Dean groaned and chuckled. “Tickles.”

“How ‘bout this? This tickle?”

Scott’s mouth moved lower. One hand released Dean’s hip, free now to wrap around his cock. Giving it a squeeze, he held the shaft while his tongue swiped over the plump head. Dean’s groan was louder, no amusement to be heard.

“Guess not,” Scott murmured, sliding his mouth down the shaft, sucking hard.

“Fuck!” Dean writhed under him, hips undulating. Scott let him have a couple of strokes before pulling free.

“See,” Scott said, rubbing his thumb over the wet crown of Dean’s cock. “Thick headed. Just the way I like.”

“You’re something else, Scott Whittaker.” Dean’s voice was gravelly with need.

Scott got rid of his own boots, gaze wandering the length of Dean’s body. “When you figure out what that is, you gonna let me know?”

“I will.” Dean moved up on the bed.

Scott’s clothes joined the rest on the floor. He started to climb onto the mattress but was halted by Dean’s reminder to bring the lube. “It’s in the right-side pocket of the duffle.”

“Mine’s closer.” Scott grinned wickedly and pulled a bottle from under the pillows.

Dean’s laughed. “You came prepared.”

“Didn’t think I wouldn’t did you?”

“Not really.”

“Smart man.”

Dean welcomed him as Scott settled between his spread thighs. His mouth opened for Scott’s questing tongue, his mind whirling away with the pleasure as he lost himself in his lover. Side by side their cocks rubbed, the silky slide of skin on skin creating currents of need that chased themselves in a never ending loop up and down his spine.

Dean moaned, panting into Scott’s mouth, sucking desperately on his partner’s tongue until Scott leaned up.

“You want something, babe?” Scott growled.

“Fuck me. I want to feel you inside me, lover.”

“No place else I’d rather be,” Scott drawled softly and pushed back, kneeling between Dean’s legs. He reached for the lube and slicked up a couple of fingers. Crowding close, he positioned his knees against Dean’s butt and lifted one of Dean’s legs to rest over his shoulder. Slippery digits moved into Dean’s crease, a searching fingertip finding the tight rear entrance. With steady, deliberate pressure, Scott’s finger sank deep.

Dean groaned, his back arching with the zinging sensation that slid down his spine to land in his balls. Without thought, he bent his other leg, opening wide and offering himself to Scott. An urgent need settled in his groin, a steady, growing ache that set him rocking against first one, two, then three long fingers that stretched and worked his channel.

Dean kept his gaze on Scott’s eyes, those blue orbs filled with heat and want. He felt Scott’s fingers curl, seek and find his prostate, the tips sliding lightly over the firm swell of the sensitive gland. Dean couldn’t hold back the wild cry of pleasure torn from deep inside him. “Scott, lover. Fuck! Need you.” His broken words had the desired effect.

Scott withdrew his fingers, the plump cap of his cock taking their place. Shifting Dean’s other leg over his shoulder, Scott leaned in, pushed. Dean bore down eagerly against the pressure, surrendering himself to Scott and gasping at the long slide of the shaft that filled

him. One smooth glide saw Dean completely breached and taken. Scott's pubes tickled his stretched entrance, his balls resting tight and heavy against Dean's crevice.

"Yessss," Dean hissed, shifting to get more cock deeper. "Good. Feels so good."

Scott's chuckle was strained. "Guess I don't need to ask if you're all right." He lowered Dean's legs from his shoulders, urging him to wrap them around his waist. Dean complied, moaning at the change of angle and the jostling of Scott's cock inside his body. He gave his lover a scorching kiss as Scott settled heavily against him. Chest to chest, groin to groin, mouths locked together, they started to rock.

The sensations were incredible. Eyes closed, Dean gave totally of himself, arms and legs clasp Scott to him. All he could do was feel and taste and smell. Fire swept across his skin and he shivered. Scott's tongue was in his mouth, exploring, touching, teasing. Dean caught it and suckled lightly, forcing a moan from Scott and a convulsive thrust of hip that buried his lover harder with the next thrust.

Dean's hands roved over Scott's skin, soaking in the smooth warmth as muscles worked and shifted with every move. The sinfully male scent of them, musky, tart testosterone and sweat, filled his nostrils and tickled his palate, making his stomach twist with yearning. Scott's actions were slow and steady, a pace designed to last and last and last. Dean followed where Scott led, legs tightening with each inward plunge.

Scott released his mouth and pushed up, leaning on his forearms. Dean whimpered at the loss of his lover's lips, his eyelids fluttering open. Sparkling dark-blue eyes filled with emotion stared down at him.

"Damn. I wish you could see yourself. So fine, Dean. So damn fine."

"Don't care, just need you."

"I'm right here, baby. Right here."

"Faster."

"Not yet. I got somethin' to say." Scott stilled even the slow, rocking motion of his hips.

Dean struggled to dampen his ardor, to pull his mind from the chaos of passion that filled it. Vision clearing, he stared into Scott's eyes. A tendril of fear curled in his belly and his hands tightened on Scott's upper arms. But only for a moment. This was Scott, not some apparition from the past. Scott who talked with him, laughed with him, lay with him.

Scott who ... Dean swallowed heavily against the lump that filled his throat. "Tell me," he breathed, barely speaking the words.

"I love you."

Dean closed his eyes and waited for the panic. It didn't return. Instead, a feeling so big and so pure filled him that he felt near to bursting with it. A single tear slid from the corner of one eye and was caught.

"Dean?"

His eyelids lifted, his throat tight and body trembling with the tension of holding his emotions in. Scott was watching him, eyes filled with yearning shadowed by uncertainty. “Anything you want to say to me?”

Dean nodded, still unable to speak. Scott’s fingertips brushed over his stubbled cheek.

“Think you can say it anytime soon?” Dean’s tension broke, and he chuckled, the movement bouncing them together. “Say it, babe. Please?” Those simple words, crammed with longing, broke every doubt and every restraint, shattering the final locks on Dean’s heart.

“I love you, too, Scott.”

His lover nodded, eyes glistening. “Never wanted to hear anything more.” Scott swallowed hard, eyes closing for a second before they reopened. The deep-blue orbs took on an impish cast. “Course, it was inevitable. Once I set my sights on you, no way you were gettin’ away.”

“Really?” Dean grinned. “Pretty damn cocky, aren’t you?”

“I like to think so, but you tell me what you think.” Scott started moving again. The reply Dean was about to make caught in his throat for a second before coming out as a moan. Scott watched him intently, blue eyes shining with a happiness and desire that burned through Dean all the way to his toes and back. He planted his feet against the bed, shoving up to meet Scott’s every stroke. Their lunges became faster, heavier, almost brutal until they were racing for their climaxes.

“That’s it, babe. So sexy. So hot the way you take me in so deep. Wanna feel you come, wanna feel your body grab me tight.” Scott gasped, breathing hard, working Dean fiercely. The passionate words shot another flare of lust burning through Dean, drawing more moans from him.

Scott’s cock plunged in and out, the blistering glide of it sliding across Dean’s gland to send fire racing through his veins. Dean’s belly clenched, the muscles flexing and the ecstasy building. A bursting bubble of sensation detonated deep in his gut and forced a guttural cry from his lips. His cock, trapped between their straining bodies, pulsed and jerked, the warm spill of semen bathing the muscles of his abdomen.

Scott’s shout echoed Dean’s, hips slamming against Dean and body bowstring taut. Dean felt the rhythmic thump of Scott’s cock like a second heart beat deep inside that signaled Scott’s release. By gradual increments they both relaxed, Scott’s head dropping next to his, chin resting on Dean’s shoulder. Dean held on tight, gently undulating his hips, bringing the two of them down from the high of orgasm. With a replete sigh, he settled into the mattress and lifted his head, kissing Scott’s shoulder before falling back to the pillow. Arms still wrapped around Scott, he slowly rubbed up and down the sweat-dampened skin of his lover’s back drawing a contented rumble from Scott.

Dean felt a sleepy smile curve his lips, a gentle wash of happiness filling him. “Know what you are now.”

“Hmm?”

“When I said you were something else.”

Scott lifted his head, blue eyes puzzled. “And what’s that?”

“Mine.”

Scott’s grin was wide, carefree and joyous. He nodded. “Yours.”

Dean shut his eyes and gathered Scott snug in his arms, the weight of him heavy and welcome. Scott hummed softly, the sound low and pleased. Relaxed, totally at peace, they slept.

Chapter Ten

Scott turned over, a growl of frustration burbling up from his chest. He looked over at the bedside clock. The glowing numbers practically shouted at him Two fifteen a.m. Fuck. It was Monday night, the first after that great weekend at the horse show ... and he and Dean had argued again during supper tonight. Dean had stomped out, got in his car and left. Scott wasn't even sure that what had happened qualified as an argument precisely, or knew what had triggered it. Both of them had been tired and grumpy and anything said or done just seemed to irritate the hell out of one or the other of them until they were growling at each other like junkyard dogs.

He'd spent the evening parked in front of the television, nursing a beer and watching a ballgame before turning in at eleven. And that's when the real fun started. Dozing, waking, tossing and turning. The bed felt empty, and he'd never felt more alone. With another growl, Scott threw the covers off, turned on the light and dressed.

Ten minutes later his truck pulled up in front of Dean's house. Though the curtains were drawn, he could see a bluish flicker of light that made him think the television was on. With any luck, Dean was up, too. In seconds, he was out of the truck and pounding on the front door. When it opened, he was struck by a sense of déjà vu.

Dean stood in the doorway, hair ruffled, deep brown eyes slumberous and half lidded. He was barefoot, shirtless and his jeans were open and riding low on his hips. Just like the night they'd first met.

"What are you doing here?" Dean asked, the words a throaty rasp.

"I couldn't sleep," Scott answered. "You gonna invite me in?"

Dean stepped back. Scott walked into the living room, noting that he'd been right about the television being on. He heard the front door close and turned, opening his mouth

to speak. The words were stopped short when he found his arms full of hot, horny man, a pair of lips crushing his own.

His arousal was instant, advertised by a deep, heartfelt groan and the swelling of his cock. The parting of his lips was rewarded by the invasion of Dean's tongue, and he welcomed it, his own sliding over and greeting it like a long-lost friend. Dean's cock was hard against his, and Scott sent his hands down the back of Dean's loose jeans, fingers curling around his firm ass, squeezing hard.

A sound somewhere between a whimper and a growl filled his mouth, and Dean pushed against him, slamming him against a nearby wall. Anxious fingers worked his own jeans open, the sound of the zipper emphasizing their heavy pants and groans. Their mutual need was a runaway train, and Scott wasn't foolish enough to try and stop or derail it.

Before he knew it, Dean had both their cocks out and pressed together, a hand clasping them tightly as he humped his hips against Scott. Scott returned the favor, his own hand joining Dean's, his body shoving them together in a steady rhythm that moved their cocks through the tight tunnel formed by their hands.

Dean's mouth released his, wandering over his cheek and behind his ear. His tongue swirled over the tender spot, making Scott shudder and groan. Dean eased up to murmur in his ear.

"Missed you. Couldn't sleep. Oh, fuck! Feels so good! Need you so bad. Come for me."

Dean's thumb swept over and over the heads of their cocks, spreading the moisture that gathered there. Electric currents accompanied every stroke and worked their way up from the base of his spine to the top of Scott's skull. Then a flush of heat swept down his torso to his groin, drawing up his balls, and forcing a deep, needy groan from his lips.

"Give it to me, lover. Now," Dean pleaded. "Need it. Need you."

Dean's steamy, whispered words sent Scott over the edge. His cock throbbed and spewed, the semen anointing his hand and inundating the air with the raw and male scent. Dean cried out, and a second spurt of seed joined Scott's seconds before Dean collapsed against him. Scott took a shuddering breath and was surprised by a yawn. Dean's body shook against him. It took only a moment for him to realize that Dean was silently laughing.

"What?" he growled.

Dean looked up from where his head rested against Scott's shoulder. "You tired or just bored?"

"Bored? As if. I'm fucking exhausted, Dean. I'm not used to drag-assin' my butt out of bed at two o'clock in the morning."

"I know." Dean's eyes and smile conveying his love and sympathy. "But I'm sure glad you did. Stay with me?"

"Hell yes."

"Settle down, cowboy. C'mon. Let's get you cleaned up and tucked in."

Scott went willingly as Dean led him to the bedroom. He undressed completely, a satisfied rumble filling his chest when Dean came back from the bathroom with a hot, wet washcloth to wipe him clean. After tossing the cloth back through the open doorway into the sink, Dean gave him a quick kiss and pulled the covers down on the bed, inviting Scott in. With a sigh of relief, Scott slid between the sheets. Dean turned off the light and joined him, the two of them sprawling together, arms and legs finding comfortable positions after Dean dragged the covers over them.

“This is more like it,” Scott mumbled.

Dean’s husky agreement sent him to sleep with a smile on his face.

Scott extended a hand, blindly searching for Dean. He frowned, irritated, when he came up empty. Dean was gone from the bed. He inhaled deeply; the smell of fresh coffee and bacon had his nose twitching, the grumpiness draining away in favor of anticipation. Breakfast was ready. His stomach grumbled its impatience.

Flipping back the covers, Scott rolled out of bed and made for the bathroom. A quick use of the facilities, morning ablutions taken care of, he followed his nose to the kitchen, stopping just long enough to pull on his jeans. He found Dean standing in front of the stove, using a fork to transfer bacon from a pan to a paper towel-covered plate. Scott walked up behind him.

Resting his hands on Dean’s hips, he leaned in and kissed the back of his neck. “Morning. Sure smells good.”

“Me or the bacon?” Dean asked with a laugh.

“Both.”

“Good answer.”

They both chuckled and Scott stepped back to allow Dean to finish his task. The table was set and two empty cups waited. Scott picked up the mugs and wandered over to the coffee maker, filling them. Setting them back on the table, he took a quick sip from one. Dean drifted by and placed the plate of bacon on the table while Scott rummaged in the refrigerator for milk and orange juice. They met back at the table as Dean put down a dish of pancakes he’d taken out of the oven.

Dean’s brown eyes sparkled. “We make a good team.”

Scott unloaded the beverages and towed Dean into his arms. “That we do.”

Their lips met and melded, the fit and feel warm and right. Scott let his hands wander Dean’s back, finding the hem of his shirt and pushing under, wanting to caress bare skin. Dean’s moan broadcasted his approval.

After a few moments, Scott released him. “We all right?”

“We’re good.”

“Oh, more than good, I’m thinking.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on that score.”

They smiled at each other and sat down to dig in.

* * * * *

With one of his favorite tunes on the radio, Dean hummed along, relaxed and happy as he headed to Scott’s. It was Friday and a long weekend stretched before them. His rotation with Dr. Wayland was working perfectly, both of them pleased as punch to have a full weekend off every other week.

He and Scott had made plans to eat out, then take in a movie on Saturday night. But tonight ... tonight was going to include an easy warm-up meal from Martha’s, a nice long soak in the hot tub and a protracted and lusty fuck with his sexy cowboy. His cock lengthened just thinking about it. And he’d thought about it often during the day.

Dean groaned a little and adjusted himself in his jeans. Maybe the evening should start with a double jack-off or a nice blow job, just to take the edge off. He hummed with pleasure remembering the magic Scott’s mouth made.

Putting his foot to the gas pedal, he turned onto Scott’s road in record time and was surprised to see a sleek black limousine parked in front of the house. Driving up slowly, he saw the front door open. A man in a dark suit walked out, followed by Scott. Dean frowned. There was something about the man ... An uneasy lurch cramped the pit of his stomach. The man handed Scott an envelope, and Scott accepted it just as they both noticed his car approaching.

Like something out of a nightmare, the man turned, and Dean’s breath caught in his throat. It was Richard Rand, his father’s number-one aide. A flood of recollection hit hard and left him gasping as he was flung into the past.

He could clearly see Jay, the man he’d fallen in love with, sitting in a chair by his father’s desk, accepting a check. The memory of numb shock and misery haunted him as he recalled packing his bags. And to top it off, Richard Rand handing him an envelope as he walked out of his family’s home for the last time, disowned and discarded.

Richard Rand, his father’s errand boy.

“Oh, God, no. Scott.” Dean’s vision darkened and he took a deep, shuddering gulp. With shaking hands, he pulled the car into a skidding turn, and then sped away, leaving the sound of Scott’s shouts behind him.

“Dean! *Dean!*” Scott yelled, sprinting down the steps after Dean’s retreating car. Frustrated and feeling sick to his stomach, he cursed, wanting nothing more than to pound something to a pulp.

Earlier in the day, Tim had answered the call that had asked permission for Richard Rand to visit and had given it. Luckily for Tim, he'd already gone for the day. Scott would have been more than willing to rip him a new one at this point, although to be fair, Tim had probably thought the man wanted something to do with horses. His employee wasn't the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, but he was reliable and did good work.

When Richard Rand had showed up on his front porch, all smooth smiles and filled with political bullshit, Scott had inwardly cursed a blue streak. This wasn't the first time some politician's lackey had showed up wanting his money and support. The Whittaker family wasn't exactly poor and had had their fair share of influence. But the man's name was distantly familiar, and when he'd found out the man worked for Douglas Conlon and had done so for years, Scott had wanted nothing more than to hustle him out and see him gone. He knew Dean must know Rand, and God only knew what his lover would make of it if he saw the aide here.

"Excuse me. Was that Dean Conlon?"

Scott closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled deeply before opening his eyes, turning to face the man. "Yes, it was."

"I didn't realize you were acquainted, although I suppose it's understandable considering what you do, and he's the local veterinarian." Rand's voice was contemptuous.

"Mr. Rand, I don't like the tone of your voice. Up till now I've tried to be polite. I've explained to you that I have no interest whatsoever in supporting Senator Conlon's reelection campaign." Scott gave him an unadulterated, hostile glare. "Well, I'm through being polite. Had I ever been inclined to support Senator Conlon, which I can honestly say has never been the case, after meeting Dean, any such inclination would have died a swift and certain death. Dean's treatment at the hands of that man has been shameful, to say the least. Now get off of my property before I revert back to my ancestor, Sheriff Daniel Whittaker, and string you up from the nearest *fucking rafter!*" Scott roared into the stunned Richard Rand's face, causing him to stare for a split second before scrambling for his limousine.

Scott stomped back into the house.

* * * * *

In shock, Dean drove for a time, eyes wide and glued to the endless stretch of road that unwound in front of him. His gut twisted, clenched tight in the hollow that had become his insides. Part of him denied the reality of what he'd seen while another part screamed and writhed in unending agony. A long, shivery moan crawled from his throat.

The headlights from an oncoming car blazed a shaft of pain through his head making him blink. His gaze landed on the steady glow of neon lights. T. J.'s Roadhouse. Just what he needed.

Dean drove in, determined to forget his own name.

* * * * *

Scott drove around the back of Dean's office for the third time, hoping that Dean had come home and parked his car out of sight. No such luck. He cursed for what seemed like the millionth time. He'd torn through town, up and down every street and all over the fucking county, not so much as catching a glimpse of Dean. Worried sick but not able to think of anything else to do, he started the trip home. Before he got there, his cell phone rang.

Anxiously, he picked it up and answered. "Dean?"

"No, Scott. It's Cassie."

Disappointment settled in his gut like lead. "Hey, Cassie. What can I do for you?"

"Well, for starters you can get your ass over to T. J.'s Roadhouse. I don't know what's going on, but Dean's over here trying to drink the place dry."

Relief hit him so strong, Scott's hands shook. "Cassie. *You* are an angel. Don't let him go anywhere. I'm on my way."

* * * * *

Dean slugged back another shot and grimaced. "Fuckin' shit shucks," he grumbled, then giggled. "Shucks." He picked up his beer, letting the taste of it chase the tequila down his throat.

"Don't you think you've had enough?"

Bleary-eyed, he looked up to find a blond giant staring sternly down at him. He blinked a couple of times until his eyes focused somewhat. Scott. He scowled. "Baserd fucker. Sum bitch. Whyont you go take a flyin' fuck?"

"Cause I'd rather take you home." Scott sighed. "Come on, Dean. I've got no intention of airing our dirty laundry in public."

"Arright. Ouside. 'M gonna fuck you up."

"Uh huh."

Dean managed to rise from his chair, bumping against the table and sending it squealing a few inches across the floor. Swaying as he moved, he followed Scott through the door. When Scott stopped by his truck and turned around, Dean took an unsteady swing at him. Scott easily sidestepped the punch while Dean overbalanced and ended up face down in the dirt and gravel.

He lay there groaning. "Why'd you do it? Trushed you. Trushed you." Tears spilled from his eyes, mixing with the dirt that marred his cheek. More grit scraped his exposed skin.

Scott knelt at his side and turned him over, pulling him up and holding him close. “Ah, damn it, babe. I didn’t do anything. I didn’t ask that bastard to come around. If you’d just stayed and talked to me, you could have saved us both fightin’ through a wheelbarrow load of shit.”

“S’truth?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Dean.”

Dean moaned pitifully. Scott shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

Dean let Scott help him into the passenger seat of the truck and lolled there as the fight and tension drained out of him. Scott fastened Dean’s seatbelt before taking his place behind the steering wheel. Dean closed his eyes and woke some time later with a jerk, disoriented and nauseous, the motion of the truck making his head and stomach spin. Grabbing his stomach, he groaned.

Scott glanced over at him and muttered, “Oh, shit,” before abruptly pulling over. Dean was out of the truck before Scott had his own door open.

Dean landed on his hands and knees in medium-tall grass and puked until it felt like his stomach was going to come up with the next hard heave. More tears were forced from his eyes with each spasm and his nose was running, but finally the last of the liquor had cleared out, and he sat back on his haunches. A disembodied hand passed him some take-out napkins.

Snatching them, Dean wiped his face and blew his nose. He stood with the help of a steady hand at his elbow and spit into the grass, trying with little success to get rid of the sour taste from his mouth.

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.” Scott got back in the driver’s side. As soon as Dean eased himself into the truck with seatbelt on and the door shut, Scott put it in gear and returned to the road. Dean closed his eyes and prayed for the ride to be over soon. In less time than expected, they were pulling into Scott’s driveway and parking out front. Scott got out and came around, letting Dean lean on him as they walked up the porch steps. Once inside the house, Scott turned on the stairway lights, secured the front door and guided Dean upstairs, straight to the bathroom.

Scott looked at him expressionlessly and shook his head. “Jeez, you’re a mess. Strip,” he ordered, then left briefly.

Dean fumbled with his shirt, hands shaking. He glanced over and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He did a double-take. Dirt streaked his face and one cheek was scraped raw where he’d landed on the gravel. His hair was tangled, his eyes were bloodshot and his eyelids and lips were red and swollen.

Scott came back, lay some towels down and briskly went to work on Dean's clothes. "You stink. I may have to burn these." Scott's tone was cool.

Tears clogged Dean's throat, and he bit his lip, saying nothing. Scott stripped him down, then made short work of his own clothes, pushing Dean into the shower ahead of him. He turned on the water and cleaned them both with quick efficient movements, even washing his own and Dean's hair. Turning off the water, he toweled them both dry and led Dean to bed, making him sit before he returned to the bathroom and brought a glass of water, a bottle of aspirin and a tube of antiseptic gel.

He handed Dean a couple of pills and the water. "Take these." Dean quietly did as he was told and held his face up when Scott directed him to. Scott applied the gel to his cheek, gently smoothing it in.

"S'not too bad," Scott commented. "Lie down." He gathered up everything and made for the bathroom again.

Stretching out, Dean tried to relax. Scott's impersonal, yet competent nursing set his nerves on edge, and his head was already aching something fierce. This time, Scott came back with a damp washcloth and leaned over Dean, laying it across his eyes and forehead. Dean groaned and shivered. He felt the bed dip as Scott sat down.

"I'm only going to say this once, so listen close, Dean." Dean tensed but nodded. "You're the only person, besides family, I've ever said the words 'I love you' to. In my book that's a commitment. No lying, no cheating, no running away. We have problems? We face them and solve them together. It also means trust, Dean. I trust you with everything I am, and I expect the same from you."

Dean heard Scott take a deep breath. "I learned my lesson at the horse show when I got jealous over Suzanne flirting with you. You understood how I felt. You made me see that I didn't have any reason to doubt you. But this," Scott paused, and Dean twitched convulsively at the hurt in his lover's voice. "Baby, you thought I was throwing you over for money. I know you've had your share of problems. I understand and respect that you need time to work things out. But, Dean, if you can't give me anymore trust than you showed me today, we're gonna have a major issue on our hands."

Scott rose from the bed. Dean heard him step into the bathroom and re-emerge. "I'm going downstairs for a bit and throwing these clothes in the washer. Get some sleep."

From under the washcloth Dean saw the lights go out. Slow tears leaked from his eyes, soaking into the cloth.

A burning band of barbed wire was wrapped around his head and squeezing tight. Dean groaned softly, almost afraid to move. Warm arms hugged him close. He slowly came to the realization that his head was resting on Scott's chest, one leg between Scott's.

His lover's hands slid lightly over his back. "Feeling rough?"

“Yeah,” Dean managed to croak.

“Mmm, figured you would. Let me up, baby.”

Dean moved as slowly as possible, but his head and stomach still vigorously protested, drawing another pained groan from him. He was grateful for the way Scott eased out of bed as though trying not to jostle him. Watching through eyes opened to mere slits, Dean saw Scott drop a couple of large flat discs of bicarbonate into the glass of water that was waiting on the beside table. Scott had apparently anticipated Dean would need the remedy when morning rolled around.

“You’re gonna have to sit up and swallow this, babe.”

Eyes closing, Dean struggled to comply. Warm hands landed under his shoulders and helped. He opened his eyes when the glass touched his lips and gazed into blue eyes filled with loving concern. A tight band of tension released from around his heart and lungs, and he inhaled shakily, reaching for the liquid.

Scott’s hand brushed the hair back from his face as he drank the lemon-lime flavored fluid, and Dean’s free hand caught his, twining their fingers together. Glass empty, he removed it from his lips and turned his head, kissing Scott’s hand.

Scott smiled and took the glass. “That should help. You need to get some more sleep. Come on, babe, lie down for me.”

Dean complied. “You’re not mad at me anymore?”

“Was never mad at you, Dean. Scared for you, yes. And hurt that you didn’t trust me. But, no, not mad.”

“I’m sorry. I saw Rand, and I lost it.”

“I figured as much.” Scott stroked Dean’s cheek. “You remember what I said last night?”

Dean nodded carefully.

“We need to trust each other; it has to be mutual. A tall order, I know. But I also know we can do it. Are you with me?”

Dean nodded again.

Scott leaned down, kissing him gently. “Then that’s all that matters,” he murmured against Dean’s lips. “I love you. Sleep. I want you feeling better. If you’re up to it later, we can still do the movies and go out to eat. Or ... we can stay home, cook some steak on the grill, soak in the hot tub and afterward,” he nipped Dean’s earlobe, then soothed it with a soft lick, “You can fuck me through the mattress.”

A low rumbled vibrated Dean’s chest. “I vote for that.”

Scott chuckled. “I think we have a winner.”

* * * * *

Hot water bubbled briskly around Dean, foam popping against his chest and shoulders. He groaned, a long, sleepy, contented sound that was answered by a chuckle from the man next to him.

“Feels good, huh?” Scott asked softly, his hand squeezing Dean’s shoulder.

“Oh, yeah. Compared with how I felt this morning, this is heaven.”

“Mmm, I imagine so. Last time I went on a bender, I promised myself never again.”

“What set you off?”

“Life,” Scott answered shortly. “Being gay. Dealin’ with not giving Daddy grandkids. That kind of thing.”

Dean opened his eyes and looked at his lover. Scott’s head lay back against the rim of the tub as he studied the night sky. Light from inside the house reflected from brilliant blue eyes that looked black in the darkness. He leaned over and cupped Scott’s cheek, turning Scott’s face toward his own and kissing him. Scott’s moan radiated pleasure.

Dean pulled back a bit, his mouth moving close to Scott’s ear. “Arf, arf,” he breathed, then took a long lick over Scott’s cheek.

Scott chuckled. “What the fuck are you up to?”

“This little doggie wants fucked.”

“Oh, shit.” Scott groaned, his head dropping back against the tub.

“What’s the matter?”

“Zero to a hundred percent hard-on in one point five seconds. All that rushing blood made my head spin.”

Dean laughed and stood, pulling Scott up with him while admiring Scott’s erection. “Come on, you can lean on me till we get upstairs. Then you’re on your own.”

Scott scoffed. “Don’t need help; I’m fine now. I’ll follow you up. I wanna see that tail wag on the way upstairs,” he teased, giving Dean a leer.

“I think that can be arranged.”

Dean got out of the tub, Scott on his heels. They stopped just long enough to dry off, then headed into the house and upstairs. Dean obligingly put a little extra oomph into his walk. By the time they got upstairs, Scott’s comments had him flushed with embarrassment and shaking with laughter. Dean was no sooner in the room and near the bed when Scott tackled him, taking him down onto the mattress.

“That’s one fine wag you got there, babe.” Scott’s mouth moved over his shoulder and the back of his neck, nipping and sucking. “Up on your knees. I need a close up look at that tight little tail.”

Groaning, Dean got his legs under himself and pushed up. His groan became a hoarse shout when a warm wet tongue connected with his tight pucker.

“Mmm,” Scott growled. “Didn’t know a wiggle could taste so good.”

Not wasting anymore words, Scott got down to work. Dean clenched his fingers, fisting the sheet in his hands. He'd never been rimmed before and the sensations were driving him out of his mind. The wet, tactile heat layered over his skin by an agile, supple tongue had him writhing with need. Every stroke and probe of Scott's tongue sent tingling charges over his skin and nerve endings, down his spine and straight into his balls.

Nonstop panting groans forced their way out, and he spread his legs wider, pushing back, seeking the lush contact of his lover's caresses, begging for it. Two lube-slick fingers took the place of Scott's tongue and slid in deep, his tight hole so relaxed they entered without much effort. Dean arched hard, fucking himself on Scott's digits.

"I've never seen anything so fucking hot." Scott pulled his fingers out and added a third with the next thrust. "That's it, baby, ride my fingers." He found Dean's sensitive prostate and raked across it, making Dean jump and gasp.

"Fuck! Scott, please. Fuck me!"

"You need me, Dean? Need my cock?"

"Yes, fuck, yes!"

"Anything you want, baby."

Dean's entrance was so well lubed and well prepared, and Dean so greedy with lust, that Scott's cock glided in to the root. Dean's groan started deep and flowed up and out, ending as a keening wail. The long slide of Scott's cock seemed to propel the semen from Dean's balls, pushing the seed up the length of his cock to send it spewing, the aroma potently male, onto the sheet beneath him.

When he would have collapsed, Scott held him up, his hips slapping against Dean's ass, his cock pumping deep. Scott reached around and took hold of Dean's waning erection, letting the motion of their bodies push it through the circle of his clutching fingers. Once more, the passion took hold. Dean moaned, his body moving with Scott's, his cock growing rigid once again and his balls aching for relief.

"Gonna fly, Dean," Scott growled. "Gonna fill you with come. Want you to get off with me."

Scott's hand tightened on Dean's cock and jacked him fiercely. When his thumb swiped over the dripping head, Dean's response was immediate. Mindlessly, he cried out while his cock spewed another load. Scott's cry joined his, his lover's body jerking against him as he unloaded into the depths of Dean's body. Dean went boneless, Scott just managing to keep from flattening him by pulling him over as they collapsed to their sides.

They lay together, breathing hard, gradually recovering. In due course, Scott was the first to move. He crawled out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom returning with a towel. Unfolding it, he laid it over the wet spot. Dean snorted and laughed.

“What’s so funny? I don’t know about you but rolling in cold wet jizz is not my idea of fun,” Scott said with a scowl. His plaintive words made Dean howl until tears spilled down his face. At last, he calmed down and found Scott staring at him. “Are you through?”

Struggling to control his smile, Dean nodded. Scott got back under the covers and turned his back to Dean. Dean snuggled up to him.

“I’m sorry. For some reason, it just struck me as funny.” Dean nuzzled and kissed the back of his lover’s neck until Scott’s muscles loosened. “Thank you. That was very considerate.”

“Jackass,” Scott muttered fondly.

“Next time, hmm? Doggie style just plumb wore me out.”

Scott groaned. “Don’t quit your day job, Doc. Comedy’s not your thing.”

“Not gonna,” Dean slurred, his jaw cracking with a yawn.

Seconds later, they were both asleep.

* * * * *

“I’ve been thinking.”

Dean looked up from his toast and eggs and smirked. “Didn’t hurt yourself, did you?”

“Hardy har har. You’re a laugh riot, Dean. Hush up and listen. What I was thinking is ... you should move in here with me.” Scott paused nervously for a moment, then rushed on. “It’s only logical. You come over every night after work. You’re here on the weekends. You have to drag extra clothes and stuff over here all the time. If you lived here, your stuff would already be here.”

“Okay.”

“It would be safer, too, with both of us together. Matt hasn’t gotten anywhere with his investigation into who’s stalking you and I’ve been uneasy since we ran into Dave Feaster. I’m not saying he has anything to do with what’s been going on, but I wouldn’t put it past that prick to try something if he could catch you alone.”

“Okay.”

“And you know you own that little house of yours. You could rent it out so it doesn’t stand empty, or even expand your practice,” Scott continued.

“Okay.”

“It’s not too long a drive between here and there. And just because we’re together, I wouldn’t expect you to doctor my animals for free or anything. And you know I was thinking we should adopt that pup we rescued. He’d have lots of room out here to run around. ‘Course, we’d have to make sure he minds his manners around the horses.”

“*Scott.*”

“*What?*” Scott gritted out between clenched teeth, annoyed that Dean was interrupting the list of reasons he’d come up with to persuade him they should make things more permanent.

“I said okay.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

“Oh. Good.” Scott exhaled with relief and grinned. “What part of my argument convinced you?”

Dean smiled back at him. “The part you didn’t say out loud.”

Scott flushed but kept his gaze locked on Dean’s. The unspoken words of love shone in those eyes, the message loud and clear.

Chapter Eleven

Dean's assistant walked into his office to find him perusing the phone book. An open newspaper was lying nearby.

"Cassie, do you know anybody in these real estate offices? Any one of them have a better reputation than the other?"

Her mouth dropped open in clear shock. "Oh, no! Dean, are you selling? I thought the practice was doing good! We're always so busy. This is awful!"

"Whoa! Calm down, girl. I'm not selling the practice. Everything's fine."

Cassie dropped into the chair across from Dean. "Oh, man, don't *do* that! You scared me. I love this job, and I'd hate to lose it. And you. You're the best boss I've ever had."

"Thanks," Dean answered with a smile. "Don't think I haven't noticed you enjoy your work. It shows and I really do appreciate all your effort."

"Thanks, Dean. So what do you need a real estate agent for?"

"Well, I'm not really sure if I do or if I just need to put an ad in the newspaper. I'm going to rent out my house," Dean gave her a bashful grin. "I'm moving in with Scott."

Cassie squealed. "That's wonderful! I'm so happy for you guys. I told Scott ... um, that is ..."

Dean raised his brow. "Told Scott ... ?"

Cassie blushed, then gave him a defiant glare. "I told him he better be good to you or I'd hurt him."

Dean's lips twitched before he gave in and laughed.

"Hey! I was looking out for you."

"And I appreciate that, too. Now, tell me. Do you think I need an agent or should I buy an ad?"

“Maybe neither if the price is right.”

“What do you mean?”

“My boyfriend asked me to marry him,” She held out her left hand to show Dean her ring. “That’s what I came in here for, to tell you my news.”

“Congratulations! He’s getting himself a wonderful girl.”

“I like to think so.” Cassie grinned at Dean. “Anyway, Trey and I are going to need a place. We’ve already talked about renting a house. We wanted to start with something small at first. You know, get the feel of home ownership before we buy something.”

“That sounds like a good idea and you know, there’s two bedrooms. One could be converted into a nursery if you had a mind to.”

“Whoa, Doc. Don’t rush me.”

Dean grinned widely, then stood. “You want to go over and take a quick look? That way if you like it, you can have Trey come over and both of you can see it together.”

“That sounds great.”

They walked out of Dean’s office and headed for the back door.

“So when are you moving in with Scott?”

“I’m going to get started this weekend.”

As Dean and Cassie left the building, two pairs of eyes stared at each other. One set was filled with trepidation, the other with determination tinged by madness.

* * * * *

The next day, a package wrapped in black ribbon waited on the doorstep at Dean’s house. He discovered it, as well as a brown and wilted rose, when he went over to check his refrigerator for perishables. Since he was spending so much time at Scott’s, the food in his fridge wasn’t being consumed at the usual rate. Dean called Matt and, once more handling everything with care, he took the package and went to the sheriff’s office.

When the ribbon and wrapping were removed, the contents proved to be a book. “*The End of the Affair*,” Matt said.

“I know that book,” Dean told him. “It’s about a man who has an affair with a married woman during the bombing of London in 1940. He gets injured when a bomb drops; she thinks he’s dead and makes a promise to God to give him up if God will let her lover live. Well, the guy was only unconscious and wakes up, but true to her word, she breaks off the affair.”

“Hmm. I don’t think it’s the content we have to worry about but rather the title. *The End of the Affair*, the wilted rose. It looks like this person is sending you a not-so-nice message.”

Dean perked up. "Well, that's good, isn't it? Maybe this is their way of saying they're done."

"Maybe. I'd still keep my guard up. I take it Scott hasn't gotten any more nasty surprises?"

"No. Nothing since the snake, which was bad enough."

"True. What about that security system he's having put in?"

"The guy's coming next week. It was earliest he could manage it." Dean looked at his watch. "I've got to get back. Thanks, Matt. I appreciate your help."

Matt shook his head. "I just wish we could catch whoever this is."

"Hopefully we won't have to worry about it from now on."

Later that evening, Dean told Scott about the latest gift and his opinion that it signaled the last of the presents.

"I hope you're right, but I think Matt's advice is good. Let's not get too comfortable yet."

* * * * *

Several days later, Dean wiped the sweat from his brow. "God, I hate moving. It still amazes me how much stuff I own."

Scott walked by carrying another box of books. "I think half of it's books."

A grin wreathed Dean's face. Scott hadn't actually complained, but his subtle hints about all the books were there just the same. "That's more than possible. How are you doing, Sean? Holding up under the strain?"

Sean glanced up from filling another box with books and smiled. "No problem here."

"I appreciate you giving up your Saturday to help me."

"I'm glad to do it, Doc. Besides you *are* paying me."

"True," Dean admitted with a laugh.

Scott poked his head in the front door. "I'm gonna take a run over to the house. Tim and Steve will help me unload the boxes we've already got in the truck. Then I'm going to clear some space in the tool barn for the stuff you've got stored out back."

"Sounds good. We'll have more ready to go when you get back."

"I'm sure you will," Scott answered with a roll of his eyes. He sent Dean a grin before taking off.

* * * * *

After offloading Dean's stuff onto the porch and in the house, Scott gave Tim and Steve the okay to run into town for lunch, then headed across the driveway toward the stables. He

unlocked the small barn that stood sheltered behind the other buildings and hooked the open padlock on the hasp. Reaching for the light switch, one flip brought up a bright glare that illuminated every corner. The building, windowless and sturdy, held mowers, an assortment of tools, rakes, shovels and even his mother's old gardening tools.

One side had built-in shelves, which were home to neatly lined-up jar after jar of different sized nails, screws, nuts, bolts and anything else small enough to fit in them. Scott smiled at this testimony to his dad's neatness, and at the pegboard and workbench that held wrenches, screwdrivers and his dad's power tools.

As he moved deeper into the building, mentally rearranging things, the door closed with a solid thud. Thinking the wind had caused it to shut, Scott walked back to the door and gave it a shove. It didn't budge.

"What the hell?" he growled and pushed again. The solid door didn't give an inch. It was then he heard movement outside and the rattle of the padlock vibrating against the wood.

"Hey! Tim? Steve? Open up! You've locked me in here, you dumb ass!"

He waited for an answer, but there was none. Seconds later, he smelled gas and something burning. He stepped back as smoke began to waft under the door to unfurl in long curls that resembled grasping fingers aimed straight at him.

"Oh, shit," Scott whispered. Disbelief and a shot of pure adrenaline rushed through his veins.

* * * * *

Dean shifted another box near the door. He looked up to find Sean watching him. The look on his face sent a frisson of unease down Dean's spine. He frowned. "I, uh, think we should start on the kitchen stuff next."

"Okay," Sean said agreeably and followed him into the kitchen. "But before we get started, there's something I have to tell you."

Dean turned to face him. "What's that?" Sean's sudden intensity caused a knot of dread to form in Dean's stomach.

"Hi, Dean."

Dean glanced over to find Doreen standing in the kitchen doorway. "Doreen! Hi. Did you come to help?" Relief loosened his muscles, and he took a deep breath. "Sean and I were just going to start packing up the kitchen."

"Sure, Dean. I'll help. Anything for you."

Dean's gaze moved back and forth between Sean and Doreen. The siblings were staring at each other strangely. Dean shivered and found himself silently encouraging Scott to hurry his return.

* * * * *

Coughing, Scott wiped his watering eyes. He was lying flat on the concrete floor trying to stay under the smoke but the barn was filling up fast. The air having grown thick and close. He'd tried using the ax he'd found on the door but the door was thick, the structure well built. In addition, the smoke pouring in prevented him from being able to keep at it long enough to chop through.

Cursing the luck that had caused him to leave his cell phone in the truck, he desperately looked around, his gaze landing on the big riding mower. *This better fucking work, Whittaker, or you're a dead man.*

Scott levered himself off the floor and thanked God the key was in the mower. He pulled his tee-shirt off and tied it over his mouth and nose to help filter the smoke. Working quickly, he cleared a space the length of the building, then jumped into the mower's seat. He grinned triumphantly when a turn of the key brought the engine roaring to life. Scott took a tight grip on the wheel, backed it up as far as possible, put it in the highest forward gear and sent the mower hell bent for the door.

The impact was solid, a splintering, shrieking thud that sent wood and flaming embers shooting up and out. Scott barely managed to hold on, the crash nearly throwing him off. The mower careened madly through the wreckage and across the wide, open yard between the small tool barn and the stables. Scott braked, just missing a half grown oak.

Fire burned at the small of his back and he flung himself off the machine, rolling in the grass to put out whatever embers had lodged themselves in his clothes. At last, he was sure the flames were out and he lay there, sucking in pure, sweet air. Distantly, he heard shouts and the sounds of running footsteps.

"Boss! *Boss!* What the fuck? Scott, are you all right?" Steve loomed over him.

"Get the fire out," Scott croaked and struggled into a sitting position.

"Tim's gettin' the hose hooked up now. I'm calling the fire department."

Scott nodded and sat with his head down for a moment, breathing deeply before getting to his feet. He could hear Steve on his cell phone urging the fire department to hurry.

Tim rushed by with the hose on full force and started spraying at the blaze. "Fire department's on their way. Damn, that's a hell of a burn you got on your back. You need to go to the hospital, Scott. What the hell happened?"

Scott shook his head. "Somebody locked me in. Started the fire." Scott coughed, cleared his throat and spit. "What brought you guys back?"

"*Somebody locked you in?* Tim forgot his fucking wallet, so we turned around and came back. Good thing that turned out to be."

"Did you see anything when you came in?" Scott asked urgently. "Pass anybody on the road near here?"

Steve thought about it a second. "Didn't see who was driving, was too busy lookin' at the car, but we passed a damn nice red Chevelle. Whoever it was turned on the road from your driveway."

Scott froze. "Which way was it going?"

"North."

"Toward Dean's," Scott muttered, an idea taking shape as the pieces started falling into place. A chill of fear shot down his spine. He took off at a run, yelling back as he went. "Call the sheriff. Tell them to send somebody over to Dean's!"

"What the fuck is going *on*?" Steve yelled after him.

Scott glanced over his shoulder as he sprinted for his truck. "No time to explain. Just do it!"

A moment later, Scott's truck was peeling out down the driveway and sirens were approaching in the distance. He looked at his watch.

* * * * *

Dean continued packing. The tension in the room was thick. Sean and Doreen had continued to stare at each other for several moments before Sean broke contact and walked into the living room, returning with more boxes. The three of them silently began emptying drawers and cabinets.

When a truck that sounded like his lover's came to a screeching halt in front of the house, Dean was never so glad to hear anything in his life even if it did seem a bit overzealous.

"Dean!" Scott's demanding shout rang out from the front door.

"In the kitchen," Dean called back with a frown. Scott's voice seemed almost panicky.

His brows rose almost to his hairline when his lover strode into the room, blond hair wildly tangled and dirty, his face blackened with soot. Shirtless, his chest, too, was streaked with black as were his jeans. Scott's eyes met his for a second, relief shining clearly before being replaced by rage.

Dean watched with disbelieving eyes as Scott marched up to Sean and grabbed the front of the younger man's tee-shirt in his fist, hauling Sean up on his toes, half choking him.

He slammed Sean against the counter, next to Doreen. "You psycho son of bitch! You almost killed me!"

"Scott! What the hell? What are you talking about?" Dean hollered, aghast at Scott's appearance and his actions.

"This little bastard locked me in the tool barn and set fire to it. Steve and Tim saw his car at my place."

"That's impossible! Sean has been right here with me since you left."

“Then who, dammit?”

“That would be me, and you were supposed to stay put and die.” Doreen spoke the words calmly, almost as though she was explaining to a dim-witted Scott that his efforts to save himself were mistakes he’d made. Her hand came up out of an open drawer; light glittered off the knife she held.

“No!” Dean yelled and leaped to place himself between Doreen and Scott’s unprotected back as the knife sliced forward and down. Doreen stumbled back, eyes glittering with shock. Shaking her head she fell to her knees.

“No! No, no, this is all wrong! You’re not supposed to die. I love you, Dean! I love you.”

Dean stared wide-eyed at the knife that protruded from his chest. His legs buckled, but he was caught and held before he could hit the ground. Frantic dark-blue eyes stared into his.

Scott shouted orders. “Call nine-one-one, kid, and sit on your sister. Now!”

Dean sensed movement and saw Sean, portable phone in one hand, his other clamped on Doreen’s wrist. He was talking into the receiver, but Dean couldn’t hear the words.

“Dean. Look at me. Don’t you go anywhere. You hear me? Dean, do you hear me?”

He frowned and looked back into Scott’s eyes. Dean swallowed, tried to speak, but it was just too hard. He managed a small nod. Scott’s smile was magical. It sent a wave of happiness through him, the last thing he felt before descending into darkness.

Epilogue

“So, how’s Sean doing?”

A month had passed since Doreen’s madness had swept over them, and it was a beautiful summer day. The remains of their lunch sat on the little table by the honeysuckle vine, and Scott and Dean sat side by side on the porch swing. They’d moved to sit and rock and let their food digest.

“He’s doing good,” Dean replied. “Doreen may have been nuts, but she taught him a thing or two about dog grooming. I’m glad I could help him. It’s been tough on him having to keep her under control. That’s not something anyone should have to deal with, and he did try to warn me.”

Scott snorted, his arm momentarily tightening around Dean. “Yeah, too bad he didn’t try sooner.”

“Don’t be so tough on the kid. Doreen’s the only family he has. Sean told me his father walked out on their mother when he and Doreen were little. The woman apparently took to the bottle and the kids had to practically raise themselves.”

“That sucks. Don’t suppose the bastard ever took any notice of them after that?”

“No. They never heard from him again. What’s worse for Sean is that this isn’t the first time Doreen’s become crazy over someone, although she never took it this far before. Sean’s been trying to keep a lid on her obsessions. Starved for affection from her parents, she’s probably been desperately trying to find it elsewhere.”

“I can understand that, but she had a boyfriend. Why latch on to you, too?”

“Maybe he wasn’t enough. It’s probably like people who have gone a long time without enough to eat. Even after they get more than an adequate amount of food, they’re always hungry.”

“Mmm. I suppose. You know, Matt called this morning. He said they found a kind of shrine that Doreen had put together in her room. It was loaded with pictures of you, and little odds and ends like pens and memos you’d written.”

Dean shuddered. “God. I kept wondering where my pens were disappearing to. You think she took them just because I used them?”

“I’d say so.”

“As sorry as I feel for her, that really creeps me out.”

“Well, I’ve no doubt Doreen’s going to be spending her days in a mental institution somewhere when all this comes out in the trial.”

“I’m just glad it’s not being made public, for Sean’s sake.”

“Your old man would be damn grateful for the lack of this kind of publicity, too.”

“Screw him.”

Scott chuckled and changed the topic. “How’s the shoulder today?”

Dean rolled the joint in question. “Not bad. Hardly any twinge at all anymore. They did a good job patching me up,” Dean gave Scott a long slow kiss, his tongue licking and teasing. “The tool barn looks good. The new paint job made all the difference. You can’t see where the repairs and the original meet.”

Scott growled against Dean’s lips. “You want to talk about the tool barn or come upstairs? I’m feeling the need for a long, hard ride, Doc.”

“Mmm. I think I could go a mile or two, cowboy.”

Scott grinned and rose, pulling Dean with him. Just as they headed toward the front door, a car came into sight, the long, black limousine moving slowly up the driveway. The two of them looked at each other. Scott’s brow rose in question, and Dean shook his head. They walked to the top of the porch steps and waited.

A dark streak, barking furiously, came pelting from the stables. “Right on time,” Scott commented before setting two fingers between his lips and against his tongue, loosing a piercing whistle. The dog instantly changed direction, leaving the car in favor of running to his masters.

“Good dog!” Dean praised, sliding his fingers under the wiggling canine’s collar. “Come on, Dickens, into the house with you.”

The limo came to a halt and the driver stepped out. He opened one of the back doors, and a man slid out gracefully. Dean returned to Scott’s side, his indrawn breath catching Scott’s attention.

He drew himself up to his full height and waited. Just as in the television commercials and campaign posters, Douglas Conlon looked like an older version of his son. They shared the same thick brown hair, brown eyes and physique, and yet where Dean’s good looks

attracted, Douglas Conlon's repelled. There was an aura surrounding the man that breathed arrogance and intolerance. His eyes were cruel, vindictive and malicious.

He approached the steps, climbed two and glared at Scott. He totally ignored Dean. "Are you Scott Whittaker?"

Scott gave him a curt nod.

"I have something for you. It's yours in exchange for dumping the man at your side." The senator pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Scott.

Reluctantly, Scott reached out and accepted the paper, fighting the shudder that threatened. He grimaced inwardly; he could almost feel the cooties clinging to it. He glanced at the sheet; it was a check for a very large sum of money. He looked back down at Senator Conlon, seeing the spiteful triumph in the man's eyes.

Scott turned to Dean, who met his gaze, brown eyes warm and tranquil. Scott let a slow smile curve his lips. He handed the check to Dean. "It's a lot of money, babe. What do you think? Should I dump you or tear it up?"

Dean peered at the check, one brow raised. "That *is* a lot of money." He grinned at Scott and returned the check. "Tear it up," he ordered calmly.

Scott acted immediately. His gaze stayed with Dean as he made confetti of the check, all the while ignoring the sputtering of the man on the steps below. Letting the pieces fly away, he turned to the senator.

"Dean and I have decided to decline your offer. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're about to go upstairs and do all kinds of wicked things to each other."

The older man stumbled back, disgust and dismay on his face.

"Oh, by the way, we just made a huge contribution to your opponent in this year's election. We'll understand if you never want to see us again. Have a nice day."

Scott led Dean inside, beaming with satisfaction as the senator's limousine hightailed it down the driveway.

Dickens was released from confinement, and the front door closed behind them. Dean moved into Scott's arms, his chuckles warm and soft against Scott's ear. "You were amazing. Did you see the look on his face when you told him we gave money to Deiver's campaign? I love you, Scott."

"Well, of course you do," Scott answered with a teasing smile. "I love you, too. Thank you for trusting me."

Dean leaned back, his eyes shining. "You make it all so easy."

"Didn't start out that way."

"No, but I learned."

"Yeah, we both did. Come on upstairs and I'll teach you another thing or two."

"You've actually got something new to show me, cowboy?"

Scott let Dean go and headed for the stairs. "I sure do and I'll tell you what. Last one upstairs has to suck my cock."

Scott took off and left Dean, shaking with laughter, at the bottom of the steps. Still chuckling, Dean straightened and looked up. Scott leaned over the banister, grinning hugely.

"What would you have done if I'd won?" Dean called out.

"Guess I'd've been the one learnin' a new trick. Come on up, Doc. Your prize is waitin' on you."

"You're something else, Scott Whittaker."

"Yours."

"All mine," Dean agreed. He took the stairs two at a time.

 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. Ensnared 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.