

DARLING BRAT

Kate Steele

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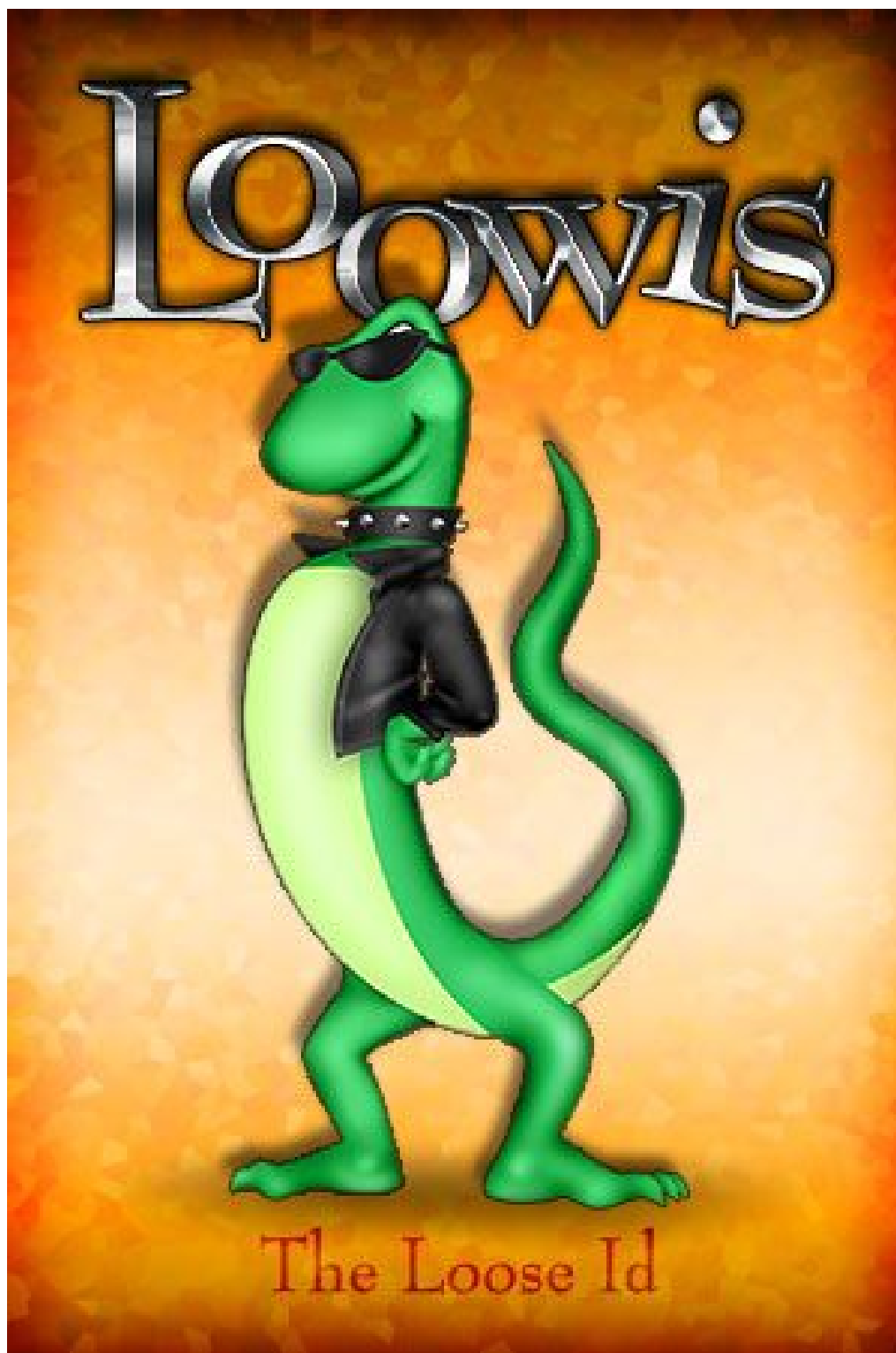
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Chapter One

Mark Bartel slid out of the taxi and waited while his suitcase and garment bag were liberated from the trunk. A quick look upward confirmed that the rain had stopped and the sun was in the process of banishing the clouds from a sky that had gone from gray to blue.

He paid the driver then gratefully pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and let himself into his condo. The place was just the way he'd left it a week ago, except for one glaring absence. His dog, Chip, was still at the Goddard's. Mark's English setter had joyfully taken on the role of playmate to the Goddard family's seven-month-old golden retriever pup. According to the latest report he'd received from Sandy Goddard, her biggest worry was keeping the two of them from wrecking the furniture as they raced around the house together.

As he made his way to the bedroom, a smile tugged at his lips. He was so grateful to his lover's sister for offering to keep his dog while he was away. Chip had only been boarded at a kennel once when Mark had had to go out of town on business, and that one time had been enough. His beloved pet had felt abandoned and refused to eat. By the time Mark had returned five days later, Chip was a pitiful picture of dejection and Mark had vowed never to let it happen again.

Setting his suitcase down beside his bed, he draped the garment bag across the mattress then started to strip. The change from business attire to leisure wear was something he'd been looking forward to since dressing early this morning. Not that his current attire was uncomfortable. Perhaps, he mused, it was just symbolic in nature, changing clothes to truly proclaim his coming home and the contentment that arrival brought. With that thought and others randomly filtering through his mind, he traded his suit for soft faded jeans and a casual, dark navy button-down shirt.

Leaving his discarded clothes on the quilt, in bare feet he padded out of the bedroom, through the living room, and into the kitchen. Wiggling his toes against the cool linoleum of the kitchen floor, he took a glass from one maple-fronted cupboard and poured himself some orange juice before picking up the phone. A touch to one button put the speed dial to work and he took a drink while the numbers clicked by.

Mark quickly swallowed then grinned when a deep, rich and slightly disgruntled voice answered on the second ring saying, "About time you called me, babe."

"You weren't getting impatient, were you? I told you what time my flight was getting in," he answered.

"It's been forty-five minutes since your plane landed."

"Well, jeez, Joe, you know it took time to get home from the airport."

"I said to call me when you got in."

"So I waited until I got home. The important thing is I called. Quit nitpicking over a technicality."

"Hey, in my line of work, technicalities matter."

Mark could hear the smile in Joe's voice. "Yeah, yeah. So are you coming over when you get through with work for the day?"

"I haven't touched you in a week. You really need to ask?"

“Just checking.” A quiver of anticipation shook his stomach at the huskily intoned promise of Joe’s words.

“We’re actually wrapping things up early today. I should be there in about an hour and a half.”

“Are you ‘working working’ or filming another show?” Mark knew his question would get a rise out of Joe. He was a very talented and capable carpenter who also worked for a production company that produced a popular woodworking show aired nationally on the public broadcasting network.

“I resent that. It’s all work, you know.”

“I know, I’m just kidding. Then I guess I won’t go pick up Chip.”

“No, don’t. He’s fine where he’s at for another day; besides, I’ve got something I want to show you.”

Mark chuckled. “I’ll just bet you do.”

“Smart-ass. I’m not talking about my cock, though you can count on seeing that, too. Believe it or not, I have something else in mind.”

“What?”

“I’m not telling. Just be ready to go when I get there.”

“Ready to *go*? We’re not staying in? But what about...?” Mark paused just short of blurting out what he really wanted to say.

“Sex?” Joe asked in a raspy purr.

His lover had no reticence in speaking his mind, and apparently no trouble reading Mark’s. He felt his cheeks heat. Even though he and Joe had been together for six months now, when it came to their shared intimacy, he still found himself getting embarrassed at odd times. Joe was definitely the dominant male in their relationship, even though Mark was finally cultivating the nerve to make his own demands.

“Well, *yeah*.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be taken care of before the night’s out. I’ve been dreaming of nothing but being buried in your hot little ass since the day you left. All I can think about is how damn good it feels when that tiny pink hole of yours is stretched tight around my cock.” Joe’s already deep voice sank an octave and took on a husky tone that made Mark’s stomach do a jittery dance. The feeling was far from unpleasant. “I’m going to fuck you until you’re filled with my cum, and then I’m going to keep on fucking you until we’re both totally and completely satisfied. And just so you know, I *don’t* plan on being satisfied anytime soon.”

Instantly aroused and just plain stunned, Mark’s mind went blank when the blood in his brain deserted in favor of heading for points just south of his belly button. For several heartbeats, silence reigned supreme.

“Mark? Babe, I know you’re there. I can hear you panting.”

“I’m not panting,” Mark lied while simultaneously trying to slow his racing breaths. “I’m just trying to unswallow my tongue.”

“Do a good job of it. I’ve got plans for that tongue later.”

“Are you sure you want to go out?” Mark heard the plaintive note in his question but refused to be embarrassed by it. It had been a long and difficult week. Joe’s teasing was just one more reason to make him want to forget everything in his lover’s arms.

“I’m sure. I promise I’ll make it up to you. There’s just something I want to show you and talk to you about. Please?”

Mark’s senses went on alert at the transformation of Joe’s attitude from teasing to serious. Whatever it was he wanted to share, it was serious. “All right. I’ll be ready when you get here.”

“Good. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

Mark hung up the phone and frowned. What in the world could Joe want to show him so badly that it made him willing to delay welcome home sex? Whatever it was, he hoped it

wouldn't take long; he needed Joe to reaffirm a truth for him. It was one that he and Joe had discussed before, one that simply asserted that while it was nice to have the support of friends and family, they didn't need anyone's approval to be together. Mark had never been more grateful for Joe's attitude on that subject. The visit he'd paid to his parents left him not only hurt and angered but had shaken him more than he thought possible. How was it they still had such power over him when he'd been so sure he'd left that abandoned, inner child behind?

Mark picked up his orange juice, and swallowed it down. He rinsed the glass, left it by the sink and grimly trudged back to the bedroom. He began dealing with his dirty clothes, laying his suits aside to be dry-cleaned. The garment bag was zipped up and stowed in the closet before he started in on his suitcase. Opening it, the first garment on top brought a frown to his face. It was a lightweight, cashmere V-neck sweater in a dark forest green. His mother had given it to him on that disappointing night. The night he'd finally come out to her and his father. While he replaced his toiletries in the bathroom, he replayed the results of his revelation to his parents.

It had all been quite civil, quite low-key, and utterly flat. If only they'd yelled or threatened, he might at least have felt that he'd made some impression on them, but the reaction he'd received was typical. His parents couldn't care less. They didn't know a thing about him, and they weren't interested enough to change that state of affairs. It disturbed him to know just how much pain that knowledge still brought.

"You'd think I'd be used to it by now," he softly muttered. Mark glanced at himself in the mirror and was startled by what he saw there. The man staring bleakly back at him had an expression of sadness on his face, and his hazel eyes had developed a shimmer of tears.

"Fuck. What did you expect? What did you really expect?" he asked himself. Dragging the fingers of one hand through his golden brown hair, he took a deep determined breath, cleared his head of thoughts of his parents and replaced them with his business dealings. Those at least had been handled without untoward incident.

He and his business partner and best friend, Charlotte Adams, were designing a building complex for a client located in Manhattan, and he'd gone to meet with their board of directors. Taking the plans he and Char had worked on, he attended several meetings and received approval for construction to begin. Char had been thrilled and the two of them were anticipating working with the head of the prestigious company that would handle the construction. This project was going to put a major notch on both his and Char's belts in the world of architectural design. That thought alone kept his mood from tuning completely sour.

With his suitcase unpacked and put away, Mark cleared his bed of laundry. He smoothed the quilt that covered it and thought of his grandparents. His grandmother had made the quilt for him. It wasn't fussy, but plain and masculine in solid colored squares that consisted of shades of brown, gold, and rust with deep red to accent.

Thinking of his grandparents lifted his sagging spirits. They lived in Arizona, and this coming summer, he and Joe were slated to spend a week with them. He couldn't wait. When he'd told them about Joe, they'd wanted all the details and even insisted on speaking with him. They'd enjoyed several lively conversations with all four of them talking at once via separate speakerphones. His grandparents had been warm and welcoming toward his beloved carpenter. If the opportunity arose, he wasn't sure his parents would even agree to meet Joe, not that he'd ever go out of his way to arrange it.

Checking the time on the clock that rested on his bedside stand, he figured he'd have time for a call to his grandparents before Joe arrived. With his gloom rapidly disappearing, he picked up the phone that sat next to the clock and again put speed dial to use. When a familiar voice answered, the last shreds of his sadness were swept away.

"Markie?"

"Hey, Grandma."

"How are you, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine," Mark answered, chuckling at how his grandmother had finally gotten used to caller id and called him "Markie." "How are you?"

"Just the same. How did your trip go?"

"The business part went real well, better even than I hoped. The client was very pleased with the designs. We'll be starting construction in a month or so."

"That's wonderful, dear. I'm so happy to hear that things went well. What? Oh. Hold on, Mark, your grandpa's here. We're going to put on the speaker."

"Okay." Mark heard a click and another familiar voice spoke up.

"Mark?"

"I'm here, Grandpa."

"How are you, son?"

Mark laughed. No one could lift his spirits the way these two managed to do. "I'm fine, and before you ask, the trip went great. Our designs were accepted and construction starts in about a month."

"Ah, so that's what your grandmother meant by wonderful."

"Yeah."

"We knew you'd do fine. You're a hard worker. You take after me."

"Yeah, I do." To his surprise, Mark heard his own voice take on a quiver. It wasn't a bad thing being compared to his grandfather; it was just the absence of his own father's approval that left him feeling a bit hollow.

"Mark, son, are you all right?"

"Yeah, really, I'm fine. I, uh, paid a visit to Mom and Dad."

"Oh. I take it they were their usual warm and loving selves."

"Charlie!"

“Don’t ‘Charlie’ me, Irene. I still don’t understand where we went wrong with that daughter of ours. She turned out to be one cold fish, and she married another one right out of the same school. The way they treat their own son is disgraceful.”

“I know that, dear, but Mark’s already well aware of it. He doesn’t need to hear it from you.”

“Wait a minute. Hold on, you two,” Mark interrupted. “Let’s not get into an argument, okay? I didn’t call to stir up bad feelings.”

“Of course you didn’t,” his grandmother assured him. “And you haven’t, has he, Charlie?”

“No, of course he hasn’t. I’m sorry, son. I get riled when I think of those two.”

“I know, Grandpa, and I appreciate it.”

“So how’s Joe? Have you seen him since you’ve been back?”

“He’s great, and no, I haven’t, but he’ll be here in about an hour.”

“That’s nice,” his grandmother commented. “Do you two have big plans for the evening?”

“Irene.”

“What?”

“The boy’s been out of town for a week. I, uh, don’t think we need to hear what kind of plans he and Joe have for tonight.”

There was a pregnant pause during which Mark’s eyes widened at his grandfather’s temerity. He waited breathlessly to see how his grandmother would react to her husband’s teasing.

“Charlie, act your age. Mark, are you and Joe planning a nice dinner out?”

Trying to ignore his grandfather's snicker, Mark struggled to keep the amusement out of his own voice. "At this point, I don't really know. When I talked to him earlier, he said he had something he wanted to show me."

A snort of laughter followed his innocent declaration, and Mark grinned.

"You old coot. I'm going to make you go outside."

At that point, Mark and his grandfather both lost it and started laughing.

After his conversation with his grandparents and with a few minutes left before Joe's expected arrival, he made a call to Joe's sister, Sandy, intending to make arrangements to pick up Chip. Instead he found himself agreeing to attend a play in which Lissa, the Goddard's youngest child, was appearing in two weeks' time.

"Oh, Mark, you're a sweetheart. Lissa will be so thrilled to have both you and Joe there. You know she's such a little ham. I don't know *who* she gets that from."

"Are you sure?" Mark asked with a chuckle. He stood in front of the kitchen sink gazing through the window that overlooked the backyard. Spring rains had transformed the lawn from dull sage to lush green. Under a benevolent sun, new leaves were replacing the yellow forsythia blooms on the bushes that marked the four corners of his fence line. "Her mother's quite the outgoing type, as I recall."

"Now don't tease me. You know I always get revenge."

"Ooo, I'm shaking in my shoes."

"That's quite a trick considering you're not wearing any," a familiar voice answered.

Startled, Mark spun around. The socks he'd donned earlier while talking to his grandparents slid effortlessly over the linoleum of the kitchen floor. Joe stood framed in the doorway, and it was a picture that took his breath away. His lover was over six feet tall with a tightly honed and broad-shouldered build. His long blond hair was pulled back into a thick tail, bringing into sharp focus the masculine symmetry of the bone structure that defined his

face. Sapphire blue eyes filled with seductive heat had zeroed in on Mark, and the suggestive smile that curved Joe's firm and well-defined lips made Mark's heartbeat quicken.

In a split second of startling clarity, Mark knew how a rabbit feels when suddenly confronted by the presence of a wolf. Instinctively, he froze and remained that way even as Joe closed the distance between them with a soft-footed and sexy saunter. When Joe stood before him, Mark was held enthralled by his gaze. One of Joe's large, warm hands reached out, his slightly callused fingers sliding between Mark's where they held the phone to his ear. Phone and hand were brought forward, allowing Joe's other hand to slide the phone from Mark's acquiescent fingers.

Joe brought the phone to his own ear. "He'll call you back."

Mark heard the beginning of a reply from Sandy before Joe disconnected the call. In one smooth, synchronized move, he set the phone aside on the kitchen counter and brought Mark's hand to his lips. The heat of his mouth pressing a kiss there seemed to sear the skin of Mark's palm. The damp slide of his tongue over that same sensitized patch of flesh caused a sharp shard of arousal to pierce a place hidden deep inside Mark's body. The heat in Joe's eyes flared, and Mark's lips parted to allow inside the harsh breath he drew into his lungs. Without a word, Joe bent to him. When their lips met, Mark's world became a tangled morass of sensations so pleasurable he closed his eyes and lost himself to them with a barely audible moan.

His previously frozen body melted against Joe's like a spring thaw. He wrapped himself around the man he'd so sorely missed, pushing close even as he was pulled tightly in. A strong hand settled at his waist and another slid down from the small of his back to cup and squeeze one cheek of his ass. Mark's arms slipped easily around Joe's firm torso, and he held on with growing urgency.

The fleeting image in his mind of predator and prey had been replaced by that of lover and beloved. No rabbit had ever been so willingly devoured. Mark freely offered himself as the main course in this painless and loving feast, and he devoted himself to sating not only

his partner's appetite but his own as well. His hunger for Joe had been a subtle and relentless tormentor for the past week. Finally being fed brought a relief so great he moaned aloud.

Joe's mouth took possession of Mark's without the slightest hesitation, his tongue boldly sweeping inside to tangle with Mark's. The sweet invasion brought with it a flavor so lushly delectable Mark actively sought it with his own tongue. The kiss was passionate, demanding, feral and just short of completely ferocious. He wanted it--no, craved it--to the point of being obsessed.

This addictive taste, this sure touch, this musky, male scent, and everything within the scope of his arms' reach was his by some miracle of fate and his beloved's forceful mandate. Being the object of this self-assured and decisive taking served only to boost Mark's need for the man who held him so close. It was unspoken proof of how much he was desired, and he responded by freely giving everything Joe claimed for his own.

The hand on his backside moved up, and it was only when Joe's hand connected with the bare skin of his back that he realized his shirt had been pushed up and out of the way. The same hand that so freely caressed him reversed direction, and fingertips burrowed under the waistband of his jeans. A fresh flood of desire washed over Mark when the cheek of his ass was again taken in Joe's seeking hand, but this time there was flesh against flesh.

Mark's cock, already fully erect, demanded attention. He groaned and tried to shift position, desperately wanting to rub against some part of Joe that would relieve the constant ache in his groin, but he was denied. Frustration tangled with passion, and he pulled his mouth from Joe's to protest but was beaten to the punch.

"You did miss me," Joe growled. The warmth of his breath whispered across Mark's sensitized lips, causing him to shiver in response.

"Of course I did," he answered. With the cessation of their kiss, his fevered need began to ebb from a boil to a rolling simmer. "Did you miss me?"

"Was there any doubt?"

“Not really.”

“I had visions of you throwing yourself into my arms, and I couldn’t wait to get here. I have to confess, when you stood there instead, looking like a doe-eyed innocent about to be ravished, it made me want you even more. That’s a look designed to make a man’s blood boil.”

Mark frowned. “It’s not like I practiced it or anything.”

“I know that,” Joe soothed. “For you, it’s completely natural, but others aren’t so honest.”

“Why? Have you seen a look like that before?”

“Something similar, but it was cultivated, a false front used to deliberately draw my notice.”

“And how often have you been the object of such attention?”

“A time or two.”

“Braggart.”

Joe laughed and kissed Mark’s temple. “You asked. Besides, you’re the only one I intend to ravish from here on in.” Joe eased his hand from beneath Mark’s jeans. “Get your shoes on and let’s go.”

“Do we have to right this minute? I mean, come on. I really, *really* missed you.”

“You think I haven’t missed you just as much?” Joe took Mark’s hand and brought it to his groin. Joe’s cock was a thick and rigid bar beneath the zipper of his jeans. “I’m hard enough to drill holes in a four-by-four, babe, but if we do this now, you know what’s going to happen. I won’t be able to stop, we’ll lose the daylight, and what I want to show you will have to wait until another day. This is important to me, to us, and I need this now more than sex. This has to do with the future, our future.”

Joe's serious declaration made Mark feel ashamed. He lowered his eyes and turned his head. "I'm sorry. It's just that, well, you know. When I want you, I can't think straight. I'll get my shoes." He started to walk away but was captured and pulled back into Joe's arms.

"No, baby, no. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have come on so strong. You've been gone a week, and I've gotten used to not sleeping alone. Now that I've got you back within arm's reach, it's close to impossible not to touch you." Joe bestowed a few fleeting and gentle kisses on Mark's lips. "Forgive me?"

Another soft kiss brushed against lips that had curved in a smile. "You know I do. Now let me go before I start bitching again," Mark warned.

Instead of releasing him, Joe held him close, his lips traveling to Mark's ear. "Tell you what." A long-fingered hand wormed its way between their bodies. Mark's insistent erection was taken in a firm grip and squeezed.

A rush of air whooshed from his lungs, carrying his guttural curse. "Fuck!"

"How about you give me a taste?"

Mark closed his eyes and let his hips pump with the slow stroking movement of Joe's hand. Soft lips and warm breath played over the taut muscle of his neck, making him shiver. Joe's mouth and wet, sinuous tongue were so tempting. How could he resist an offer that would put them to work on his cock? His head fell to the side to give Joe better access, and he softly moaned, freely expressing his pleasure. He could feel himself being lured into insensibility until a small voice in the back of his head whispered, *you're being selfish*. Mark tensed at the guilt that thought raised. It put a definite damper on his desire, and he silently yet roundly cursed his own conscience.

Reluctantly, he pushed against Joe. "No. Stop. Come on. We gotta go."

"Are you sure? I thought you couldn't think straight?"

"You're not as hard to resist as you think you are."

"Liar."

“Yeah, well, come on. Show me what you wanted to show me.” Mark looked up into Joe’s eyes and could see the grateful understanding that dawned in them. Joe knew he was delaying his own pleasure to give him what he wanted, and Mark bashfully ducked his head rather than acknowledge his own selflessness.

With an affectionate chuckle, Joe breathed the words, “sweet brat” in his ear and released him.

“Am not,” Mark denied before going into the small laundry room off the kitchen to retrieve his shoes from the mat by the back door. Returning to Joe, he sat in one of the four chairs that surrounded his small kitchen table to don them, then rose. “Okay, let’s go.”

He followed as Joe led the way out the front door and onto the driveway where his truck was parked. The black paint of Joe’s pickup gleamed as though freshly washed. There was a hint of breeze blowing, but the temperature, holding in the midsixties, felt warm after the long winter. Mark breathed in the fresh air and rounded the truck. Opening the passenger door, he slid in and settled himself, securely fastening his seatbelt.

Joe followed suit then started the truck and began the drive, but Mark could no longer restrain his curiosity. “So where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there. I don’t want to prejudice you. I want your honest opinion when you see it.”

“Okay,” Mark agreed with a sigh. “But it better be worth all the mystery.”

“Hopefully it will be. So how did the trip go? I know your clients were happy with your designs. Any last-minute surprises at your meeting this morning?”

Mark launched into a detailed description of his morning meeting with the clients concluding with the good news about the much-admired construction company that would be doing the actual building. He told Joe about having called Char and how excited she was over the news.

“Well, you guys deserve this break. I know you’ve both worked really hard on those designs. It’s great that all your effort’s paid off. And having Connor Construction doing the work is a real stroke of good fortune. They are one quality operation. Brad Connor knows what he’s doing, and he puts his all into making sure things go smoothly.”

“You know Brad Connor?”

“Oh, yeah. I actually went to school with him. We used to hang out together. He’s something else. When we were in college, Brad got very interested in studying security systems. I used to go with him when he’d practice.”

“Practice what?”

“Um...breaking and entering.”

“What?! Are you serious?” Mark turned in his seat to give him an incredulous look. Joe actually had the grace to look a little shamefaced.

“We didn’t steal anything. Brad just liked the challenge of defeating the security systems and locks. Well, you know, being young and stupid, I went along for the thrill of it.”

“Jeez. It’s a wonder you didn’t get caught. You guys could have landed in prison!”

“Nah. Brad was just that good. He never made a mistake. He could have been a first-class burglar, but his parents had money, so he didn’t need it.”

“What kind of places did you break into?”

“Private residences, businesses, secured doors around campus, motel rooms. Pretty much anything that had an interesting lock or security system attached. Although he never tried anything really major. He was dying to try a bank vault, but I sort of talked him out of that one.”

“That’s nuts,” Mark declared with a shake of his head. “Do you guys still keep in touch?”

"I see him occasionally. We get together for a drink or a meal now and then. I've even worked with him from time to time, but we don't do any lock picking nowadays, so you don't need to worry about that."

"Thank God for small favors."

"So what about your parents? Did you see them again before you left?"

"Yeah, briefly." Mark admitted, but remained silent. He could feel the weight of Joe's quick gaze as he took his eyes from the road for a moment to look at him.

"You told them about us, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I had a feeling you might. I take it didn't go well?"

"It didn't go anywhere."

"What do mean?"

"My dad acted like I hadn't said a word. He just looked at his watch, said he had some work to do, and went off to hide in his study."

"And your mother?"

"She had the nerve to tell me it was just a phase I was going through! Do you *believe* that? I'm twenty-five years old and she tells me it's a phase. I told her I wasn't some adolescent in an all-boys boarding school who was experimenting with his buddies because there weren't any girls around. I told her I was old enough to know my own mind and my own body and that I knew what I wanted. She told me I was being melodramatic then offered to introduce me to a 'nice girl.'" The frustration and anger he'd managed to push aside began to stir in Mark's gut. "*God*, they never listen, they never pay attention, and they *never see me*. I may as well not exist as far as they're concerned."

"Hey, hey, calm down." Joe reached over and ran a soothing hand over Mark's thigh. "I don't want to hear this 'not existing' crap from you. They may not care about who you are, but there are plenty of people who do; you know that. I know this hurts and it's a hard thing

to deal with, but let it go. If they're happy having a son who's a total stranger to them, then it's their loss. Don't make yourself miserable over something you have no control over."

With his own hand, Mark covered Joe's where it rested on his thigh. "I know you're right, and most of the time, I don't let it get to me. I guess it's just freshly butting up against the barrier that's always been there between us that has me riled up. I can't help wondering sometimes what there is about me that's so inadequate they couldn't bring themselves to love me."

"Fuck that! Don't do this, Mark. Don't try to find some fault in yourself to explain your parent's stupidity. I'm not saying that you don't have cause to indulge in a little self-pity, but I honestly believe you're too smart to wallow in it for long. There are too many good things in your life that need your attention. You shouldn't waste time thinking about the things you can't change."

Joe's vehement declaration brought an unexpected grin to Mark's lips. The gloom that had settled over him dissolved. "So I should concentrate on the good things in my life, huh? Like you?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. I consider that a good thing," Joe said with a self-satisfied smirk. "And you can trust me when I say there's nothing inadequate about you, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Do you believe me?"

"Some. Maybe you could convince me later?"

"I will, with pleasure. Yours and mine."

Mark felt his heart swell with love. The words that he'd been wanting to say for weeks were on the tip of his tongue, and he decided to take the plunge. "Joe, I lo --"

"Shit!"

Joe jerked the wheel. Mark's body lurched to the side, his heart jumping into his throat. He righted himself and at the same time caught a fleeting glimpse of the rabbit that had dashed out into the road in front of them. Scrunching his eyes shut, he waited for the thump that would declare Joe's maneuver a failure. When it didn't come, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Missed him. Stupid little bastard," Joe growled.

Mark blinked his eyes open and started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Anyone who didn't know you would think you were disappointed you didn't hit him."

"At least you know better than that. I hate it when something runs out in front of me when I'm driving. You know the first day I had my license, I hit a cat." Mark could hear the regret in Joe's voice. "My parents ordered pizza to celebrate and let me drive into town on my own to pick it up. This black cat ran out in front of the car on the return trip. I never had a chance to even hit the brakes. All I saw was a black streak, then heard a thump and saw the body in the rearview mirror. I'd never been so horrified in my entire life. When I got home, I acted like nothing happened and ate pizza and pretended to enjoy our little impromptu family party. When it was over, I went to the bathroom, threw up, and sat there on the floor crying over the toilet. I'll never forget that."

Touched by his story, Mark sent him a sympathetic and loving look. "Sometimes you really surprise me. You look like such a tough guy."

"Do I?"

"Yeah. I mean visually you're tall and muscular, you're the kind of guy anyone would think twice about tangling with. And I've seen you on the job. You take charge and people look up to you. You always project such confidence and strength. I don't think anyone would

expect you to be the kind of guy who cares about whether or not he runs over a rabbit, but you're secretly a softy at heart. I've really loved finding that out about you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

It was Mark this time who reached over to lay a comforting hand on Joe's thigh. They drove along for a little while in silence, until Joe broke it by saying, "This is it."

He slowed the truck in front of a corner lot of undeveloped land and turned in on a faint track that led back into a small forest of widely spaced trees. While there seemed to be no structures on the land, it still had not been left to go completely wild. The grass between the trees had been mowed, and brush had been kept to a minimum, leaving the spaces between the trees open and accessible. Joe drove in several hundred yards and parked in a place that was sheltered and invisible from the road.

He grinned at Mark and said, "Come on," then got out of the truck.

Mark followed to join Joe in front of the truck. "What is this?"

"It's ten acres of land that I bought a couple of years ago. What do you think?"

"It's beautiful. How come it's not all overgrown?"

"It was part of a parcel that an elderly couple owned for years. The husband spent a good part of every growing season keeping it mowed and cleared of brush while letting the trees develop naturally. His wife told me that they'd talked about building a new house in here but they'd never gotten to it. When the husband passed away, she decided to sell the land rather than let it go to seed. I've been keeping it cleared like the previous owner did. I bought it with the idea of building my own place here. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Joe paced a few feet away then returned. Mark was surprised to see that his confident carpenter actually seemed to be nervous.

“We’ve never really talked about living together, but I want that. I know you’d be uncomfortable being in the house I shared with Drew.” Mark opened his mouth to protest but was silenced with a raised brow. “You don’t have to try to deny it. You’re edgy every time you come over. I understand, and I don’t blame you for feeling that way. And your place, well...”

“It’s too small for you.”

“Yeah. It’s nice, but I’d feel cramped living there full-time. But here, we could build a home that would suit both of us. I love you, Mark. I want us to be together in a place we can call ours. You could design it specifically for our needs and to our specifications, and I could oversee the construction. What do you think?”

At that moment the only thing Mark could focus on was the three words he’d never heard Joe say. “You love me?”

Joe smiled, his admission simple and honest. “Yeah. I do.”

“Stupid rabbit.”

“*What?*”

“I was about to tell you the same thing when the rabbit ran out in the road. Because of him, you beat me to the punch.”

“So, you love me, too?”

“Yeah.”

“Say it.”

Mark closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Joe’s neck. “I love you.”

“Of course you do,” Joe agreed and lowered his mouth to Mark’s.

The kiss they exchanged was long and sweetly tender with just enough heat to make his breath hitch. Joe moved from Mark’s lips to his jaw and placed slow, sensual kisses one

after another along that firm line until he reached the tender spot just below Mark's ear. His tongue laved and teased that soft, slight hollow before leaving a gentle kiss behind in passing.

His mouth moved to hover over Mark's ear. "And the rest of it? Will you build a house with me? Live with me?"

"Yes," Mark agreed.

Joe was smiling when he leaned back. "I can't tell you how relieved I am."

"Did you think I might say no?"

"I was hoping not, but there was always the small possibility that you would. I mean seriously, neither one of us has so much as muttered the L word until today. While I knew I loved you, and I felt you loved me, until now, I didn't need concrete proof. I mean, if you didn't love me, you probably wouldn't want to go to the extreme of building a house so we could live together. When you did say you love me, I was pretty sure you'd say yes." Once again, Mark started laughing, and Joe grinned back at him. "Are you as confused by that speech as I am?"

"It's pretty convoluted, but I think I understand."

"Good." Joe took his hand. "Come on. I want to show you the spot I've picked for the house." Pulling Mark along with him, Joe looked back for a moment. "Now, it's not carved in stone. I've actually got a topographical map that shows where every tree is located on the property. I want us to go over it together so you can voice your opinion on the location, too, but I think this place is pretty ideal."

While the ground was fairly dry, there were spots where it squished as a result of the spring rains still soaking into the ground. Mark glanced down at his white athletic shoes. The thick edging of the soles were dark with damp earth and bits of vegetation. He ruefully acknowledged the fact that he'd be scrubbing muck off his shoes when they got back to his place, but he cheerfully dismissed it and strode on. It wasn't a hardship to follow Joe's

sculpted back and watch the hypnotic movement of two taut ass cheeks under tight denim. The difficulty was pulling his gaze from them when they stopped walking.

Joe had led them to a spot where the trees thinned. The reason for that became immediately apparent: three towering oaks presided over this area of the property. Their mighty branches, spreading wide, would shade much of the space around them, making it hard for other trees to get a foothold without benefit of the sun and soil nutrients the oaks reserved for themselves.

Joe stopped at the outskirts of this natural clearing. “Here. Isn’t it great? We’d have to remove some of those smaller trees around the perimeter to widen this area and make room, but not too many. Those oaks would provide great shade for the west and south sides of the house. It’s far enough back from the road that we’d have privacy, and you wouldn’t have to worry about Chip getting hit by a car as soon as he stepped out the front door. What do you think?”

Mark walked forward and let his wondering gaze take in the entire area. It truly was ideal. He could already picture how it would look with a house of the right design situated here. It would need to be a somewhat rustic design with natural material such as stone for the outside. *Something that would blend and harmonize with this unspoiled environment*, he mused.

He felt the heat and weight of Joe’s body press against his back. Strong arms encircled him, and a husky voice whispered in his ear. “So, what do you think?” he asked again.

Mark shivered. “It’s perfect. Truly perfect.”

Wet warmth traced the whorls of his ear. “I knew you’d like it,” Joe crooned, then nibbled the flesh he’d just licked.

“Oh, God,” Mark groaned, instinctively tensing. “You know that drives me crazy.”

“I know. I’m counting on it. Let’s do it. Right here. Right now.”

“Are you nuts? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the ground’s not exactly dry,” Mark pointed out, despite the fact that his stomach did an almost gleeful flip and his groin throbbed in favor of Joe’s suggestion. He wiggled free of Joe’s arms and turned to face him. His lover looked perfectly serious.

“I didn’t intend to lay you out on the ground. More like pin you up against one of these trees.” Joe wiggled his eyebrows. “It won’t be the first time we’ve had sex standing up.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“No. My pants will get dirty.”

“How?”

“When you” -- Mark could feel the flush spreading over his cheeks -- “pull my pants down, they’ll brush against my shoes and the ground.”

“What an image that invokes. You know, when you get all flustered like that” -- Joe started to advance toward him, and Mark began backing away -- “it makes me so damn hot to have you. Come here, pretty baby, I’ll make sure your clothes stay clean.”

“No, goddamn it. Stop fucking around.”

Joe merely shook his head and kept following Mark as he retreated. His gaze was pure predator. “Tell you what. If you can make it to the truck before I catch you, we’ll wait until we get back to your place. If not...you’re going to be hugging a tree while I have my wicked way with you.”

“You bastard. That’s not funny.”

“Who’s laughing? Better run, gorgeous, ’cause here I come.”

“Shit!”

Mark twisted as Joe made a grab for him. Turning on the balls of his feet, he sprinted off in the direction of the truck. A spike of adrenalin set his heart to pounding. Conflicting emotions raced through his system: exhilaration, annoyance, and even a tinge of panic.

Hearing the pound of footsteps behind him, he put on a burst of speed and raced away from them. He grinned after a quick glance back showed that he was actually managing to widen the distance between them. Apparently being five feet nine with a sligher, sleeker athletic build was going to pay off. Mark felt like crowing.

With satisfaction and looming triumph singing in his veins, Mark ran on, even managing to laugh out loud when the truck came in sight. He was going to win! He knew it and he ran on, heedless of anything but his goal. Unfortunately, a patch of muddy ground had other plans for him. As soon as his leading foot hit the spot that was covered by a swath of dead leaves, Mark slid. Scrambling to regain his footing, he lost it all together and ended by performing a modified belly flop that sent him skidding across the ground like a kid on a water slide.

Gasping to regain the breath that was knocked out of him, he felt a cold and wet sensation against his skin. Water was soaking into his shirt and pants, but there was nothing he could do but lie there and try to recover. With his cheek pressed to the ground, the smell of earth and decomposed leaves swept into his nostrils. It was in this position that Joe caught up to him.

"Mark! Baby, are you all right?" Joe squatted down by his left shoulder. With his eyes closed, Mark could distinctly hear the sound of Joe's harsh breaths. "I saw you fall and my heart about stopped. Mark. Say something. Are you okay?"

Mark opened his eyes and wheezed, "Don't know yet."

"Shit. Let me help you up."

"No" -- *wheeze* -- "don't touch" -- *wheeze* -- "give me minute."

"Do you hurt anywhere? Can you move your arms and legs? Do you think something's broken?"

Sucking in air, Mark vocally swung at Joe. "Would you shut up? I just got the wind knocked out of me. Let me breathe a minute."

“All right. *Jeez*, I can’t help being worried.”

“I get that.” Mark brought his arms down from where they were sprawled above his head. Bracing his hands on the ground, he lifted his torso, pushing himself up to sit back on his heels. Resting his hands on his muddy thighs, he held that position for a few moments and took some deep breaths. Without looking at Joe, he said, “Now you can help me up.”

Joe immediately wrapped an arm around Mark’s waist and helped him to his feet. “Think you can walk?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Like I said, I just had the wind knocked out of me.”

“Come on. Let’s get to the truck and you can sit and rest some more.”

Mark didn’t object and let Joe help him slowly walk the rest of the way to the pickup. Taking his arm from around Mark, Joe let the tailgate down on the bed of the truck. With a sigh, Mark gratefully sat down.

“Man, you really took a header. You sure you’re okay?”

Mark lifted his gaze to Joe’s. Eyes filled with worry stared back at him. “I’m all right. Nothing broken. Except my pride.”

Joe’s reached out a hand to Mark’s face and tenderly brushed his fingers across the mud on his cheek and chin. “This is my fault. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Mark took a mournful look down the length of his body. From neck to ankles he was soaked and muddy. “And I was worried about getting my pants dirty.” His words were met with a snicker, and he looked up to see Joe grinning. “You think this is funny?” he asked and just that suddenly his attitude went from forgiving to simmering irritation.

“No!” Joe vehemently denied while obviously try to wipe the smile from his face. He wasn’t completely successful, and Mark’s wrath spiked. “Well. You have to admit, it is *kind* of funny.”

“Yeah, ha-ha.” Mark jumped off the tailgate. “You bastard, take me home.”

“Mark, come on. Don’t get mad.”

Ignoring Joe’s plea, Mark rounded the back of the truck and headed toward the passenger door. Opening it, he was about to climb in but stopped. Glancing from his clothes to the seats and back again, he hesitated. Despite being angry, he didn’t want to mess up the interior of Joe’s truck. Without making eye contact with his remorseful lover, he asked, “Have you got anything to cover the seat?”

“Hold on a sec. There’s a plastic tarp back here somewhere.” Joe moved in behind him, rummaged around behind the seat for a moment, then came up with a neatly folded square of blue plastic. Unfolding it a bit, he covered the seat and back. “Here, I’ll hold the back up while you slide in, although you know, there maybe be a better solution.”

“What’s that?”

“You could take your clothes off.” Joe’s grin was back.

“And what do I do when I get home?”

“Um, run inside really fast?”

His lips thinning with aggravation at having to be so close to the man who was laughing at him, Mark said nothing and deliberately avoided contact while levering himself into the truck.

“Are you really mad?” Joe asked, leaning in a bit to peer at his face.

Keeping his eyes averted, Mark sarcastically asked, “Now what makes you think that?”

Joe stayed silent for a moment; then, with a murmured, “Shit,” he withdrew and closed the passenger door.

Grimly and without thinking, Mark pulled the seat belt across his body and fastened it. Realizing that he’d just dragged Joe’s seat belt through the mud on his shirt, he spat, “Damn it!”

“What now?” Joe growled as he climbed in behind the steering wheel.

“I just got mud on your seat belt,” Mark grouched. He muttered a grudging, “Sorry.”

“I don’t care about the fucking seat belt. I care more about you being pissed at me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you’ll get over it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Not a goddamned thing. Can we go now?”

“Sure. Why not?” Joe ground out.

Chapter Two

Joe started the truck, turned it around, and headed out the way he came. The ride to Mark's condo was made in silence, and Mark was glad when it was finally over. During the time it took to get there, he'd had time to start feeling foolish and petty over having gotten angry. Though he tried to dismiss it, every time he looked at the crap smeared over his clothes, his annoyance was buoyed, and he couldn't let it go. That in itself made him mad, but by now the anger was aimed more at himself than Joe.

As soon as the truck came to a halt on the street in front of his home, he hastily unfastened the seat belt, opened the door, and prepared to bail. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he told Joe. Under the circumstances, he didn't think he'd be able to apologize before then. It would take him that long to work up his courage.

"I'm not going anywhere," Joe declared. He shut the motor off and, following Mark's lead, climbed out of the truck.

Grinding his teeth together, Mark waited for Joe to join him on the sidewalk. "I don't think this is a good idea right now."

"I'm not leaving." Joe's determination was more than apparent. "We're going to talk about this like two adults; that is, if you can grow up and stop acting like a brat."

Stung by the sharp reprimand, Mark silently fumed and turned his back on his stern and stubborn boyfriend. Fishing his keys out of his pocket, he marched to his front door. Unlocking it, he stepped inside. There in the entryway, he toed off his shoes to keep from dragging mud across the carpet. Barely acknowledging Joe, he headed for his bedroom. "I'm taking a shower. Do what you want."

Once in the master bathroom, as carefully as he could, Mark peeled off his muddy clothes, leaving them in a tight ball near the hamper. No way was he putting them in with the rest of his things. He was already thinking about how he'd have to rinse them off somehow before he could throw them in the washer.

Grabbing a roll of paper towels from under the sink, he dampened one and, cursing under his breath, wiped up the bits of dirt that had flaked off onto the floor. Disposing of the paper towel in the trash, he opened the sliding door to the shower stall, turned on the water, adjusted the temperature, and stepped in. It was only then, with the warm water flowing over his skin and steam billowing around him, that he let himself think of Joe's harsh admonishment.

The words echoed in his head as he shampooed and rinsed his hair. It was all he could think of as he washed himself from head to toe, and he alternated from being hurt to furious and back again. It was an exercise in futility that left him feeling completely ill at ease. He knew he was being an ass, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

It wasn't that big a deal, although, he reasoned, Joe more or less forced me to run. But then again, did he really? I could have just said no and refused to play the game. He would have accepted that. He'd never have tried to force me to do something I didn't want to do. That thought aggravated Mark to no end. This is all my fault. If I'd just stuck to my guns and not been such a wimp about it, none of this would have happened. If only he hadn't laughed. But then was that really so bad? If he'd been the one to fall down, as soon as I was sure he was all right, I probably would have laughed, too. Shit! I'm the one who ended up eating dirt, and yet, I'm the one who has to apologize. Shit, shit, shit!

Feeling like a sulky child who knew he was wrong, Mark stepped out of the shower and dried himself. All the while, he tried to still the apprehension that came with knowing he had to face Joe and offer an apology. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he reached for a second one, and while rubbing it over his hair, he opened the bathroom door and went into the bedroom to dress. The sight that greeted him made him stop in his tracks.

The quilt on his bed had been folded back, exposing pristine white sheets, and Joe was lounging in the middle of the mattress with his back propped against the headboard. Clad only in his jeans with the button at the waist undone and the zipper partially open, Mark could see the faint line of hair disappearing below.

His sexy carpenter had also removed the tie from his hair. Thick blond strands lay draped over his bare, broad, and muscular shoulders. Just as he'd done the first time he'd seen Joe's hair free of its bonds, he couldn't help but envision him as a bold Viking who'd come to conquer and pillage.

Joe smiled, just a faint curve of the lips, but a smile all the same and one that set Mark's heart pounding faster. "You told me to do what I want."

"I didn't expect to find you... What are you doing?"

Joe raised his hand and crooked his finger at Mark to beckon him forward. "Come here." Feeling his chest go tight, Mark hesitated only a second before approaching the bed. It no longer seemed to matter that they'd been fighting. All that was really important now was that Joe wanted him close. "Climb up here," Joe ordered softly and patted his lap.

Mark's stomach did a jittery roll. Joe's confidence always made him seem so mature and in command. Sometimes, Mark still felt like an unsure adolescent in the face of it, but those feelings just made him more willing to place himself in Joe's capable hands. The mature man in him jeered at what was deemed weakness, but the shy, uncertain youth within found comfort and security in Joe's sometimes authoritative control. Draping the towel around his

neck, he placed his hands on the bed, then his knees, and crawled across the smooth sheets to where Joe waited for him.

“Straddle me,” Joe softly instructed.

Mark promptly obeyed. The towel around his waist rose as his legs spread. When he seated himself on Joe’s thighs, his bare ass made contact with the fabric of Joe’s jeans. Wiggling a bit to get comfortable turned out to be a mistake. The unexpected caress of the slightly rough cloth against his unprotected and sensitive balls had him gritting his teeth to hold back the undignified whimper in his throat. His cock twitched and began to fill. Hoping Joe didn’t notice how easily he’d become aroused, Mark waited breathlessly for what might come next.

A knowing smile brought a faint flush of heat to Mark’s cheeks, but Joe said nothing about the obvious erection forming beneath Mark’s towel. Instead, he reached for the towel around Mark’s neck. “Your hair’s still dripping. Bend down a bit, and I’ll dry it for you.”

Mark tipped his head forward and closed his eyes. Joe laid the towel over his hair and started rubbing and squeezing the short strands with the soft terry cloth. With each passing moment, Mark relaxed under Joe’s gentle hands. There was nothing, *nothing* so wonderful as being cared for by the man he loved. His earlier trepidation vanished.

“I take it you’re not mad at me anymore?” Joe softly inquired.

“No. I was actually madder at myself than you anyway. You were right. I was acting like a brat. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I’m partially to blame, but I just wanted us to have some fun together. You’re such a serious little thing sometimes.”

“Joe.”

“Oh, I know.” Joe brought the towel away from Mark’s hair and met his reproachful look. Running his fingers through Mark’s hair, he gently combed it, then dropped his hands onto his shoulders. “Physical stature aside, out in the world you’re a grown man with a job

and responsibilities. I respect that and I respect you. I'm not trying to diminish you in any way, even though you are five inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter than me," he added with a wink before again turning serious. "But here, sometimes, when it's just you and me, can't I treat you like my sweet, adorable, little brat?"

Mark rolled his eyes. "Jeez, I suppose."

"Is it really that awful?"

"No." He pulled his gaze from Joe's and bashfully lowered his head.

Joe slipped his hand under Mark's chin and raised it back up. "Look at me." When Mark did as he asked, Joe smiled. "You like it, don't you?"

"I guess. Some," Mark admitted, trying to hide the nervous smile that tugged at his lips. He fidgeted a bit under Joe's knowing look. "But don't get carried away. I'm a grown man."

"Word of honor," Joe agreed. "But don't you agree that if you sometimes feel the need to be coddled, and I feel the need to coddle you, we should just go with it? I think it's a lucky coincidence that we mesh in that way. And you have my solemn vow I won't go overboard. You even have my permission to slug me if I ask you to call me Daddy." Joe gave him a grin, and the mischievous sparkle in his eyes had Mark freely smiling in return. "Oh, and one more thing, you know you're fifty percent of this relationship, don't you? You have every right to say no to anything I suggest. Your opinion carries just as much weight as mine when it comes to making decisions that affect the two of us. You understand that, right?"

"I know. I may have trouble exercising my rights, but I know I have them."

"You just need to learn to be a little more demanding. I'll help you practice if you like," Joe offered in a slightly seductive manner.

Mark frowned slightly and made a brief moue with his lips. "Gee, thanks."

Ignoring his sarcasm, Joe leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. "You're welcome. Now get dressed and we'll go out and eat. I'm starving."

“*Huh?*” At this sudden turnabout in the conversation, Mark was absolutely incredulous...until Joe again winked.

“Just kidding. I’m hungry, but it’s not food I want.” Joe’s hands came up to cup the sides of Mark’s head. With slight pressure, he urged Mark to lean down and kiss him.

Mark closed his eyes, his lips parting to receive the dominating tongue that slid between his parted lips. With a breathy moan, he accepted the bold caresses that smoothly tormented the soft inner recesses of his mouth. The warm, wet coupling of their mouths enshrouded Mark’s mind in a fog of growing desire.

He wrapped his arms around Joe’s neck, accepting all the pleasure his lover so confidently offered. The hands that cradled his head moved down to lie against his back, rubbing up and down in a mesmerizing rhythm. Eventually, Joe’s tongue retreated, but his lips hovered near to kiss the corner of Mark’s mouth, his chin, his throat. Mark drew his arms back and let his hands rest on Joe’s shoulders. His fingers unconsciously kneaded the firm flesh and muscle there in automatic reaction to Joe’s touch.

In a low voice that resonated against Mark’s nerve endings, Joe began to murmur against his skin. “So sweet, like freshly harvested honey. How did I get so lucky?” His tongue slid over Mark’s throat. “You taste so good.”

Mark’s insides quaked at Joe’s words, and his inhibitions collapsed. He raised his head, lifting his chin to give Joe room to work. The touch of his lips was heaven, the slide of his tongue sinful, and the slight pinch of his teeth pure decadence.

Joe sucked at the vulnerable curve of his neck and shoulder, and Mark could feel the slight sting as blood rose to the surface. He was being branded, and not a word of objection rose to his lips. Instead, he moaned with pleasure, anchored in place, joined to the man who held him by flesh and blood and a hint of pain that made him quiver.

One of Joe’s hands moved from his back to his chest. Warm and slightly rough skin glided over his pectoral muscles. His nipples hardened, and nimble fingertips grasped one

small pebble to gently roll it. Mark groaned at the swell of feeling that shot straight to his groin. Joe's teeth eased their hold on Mark's skin, his mouth moving down to replace his fingers at that stiff little mound. Hot breath wafted over it seconds before the taut nub was licked, teased, and sucked.

"Joe," Mark breathed, the word a near protest as he squirmed a bit, tempted to pull away from a sensation that was almost too good to be borne.

"Shh, be good for me," Joe admonished softly. "You have the most beautiful body. Such smooth skin, nice tight muscles, and these perky little nipples." Joe's mouth moved and he laved his tongue over the tiny nub and then blew a short breath of air across it. The cold chill it caused gave him goose bumps, and Mark shivered to feel his nipple pinch tight. The small, stinging twinge made him gasp. "I love the way it gets hard and stands up like it's just begging to be touched." Joe growled and took it in his mouth.

Unable to help himself, Mark's hips began to move with the rhythm of the sucking pulls at his nipple. His cock was fully erect, so hard it ached, and the brush of cloth against it from the towel he still wore was driving him insane. As though his thoughts had transmitted themselves, Mark felt the towel lifted at the back. Joe's hand glided under to cup the curve of his ass. His other hand slid in through the gap at the front of the towel, and his fingers wrapped around Mark's cock.

"I knew I'd find something else hard under here," Joe teased.

"*Oh, God.* Finally. Don't stop." Mark reached down, intending to pull the towel free.

"No, don't."

Mark halted his movement and returned his hand to Joe's shoulder.

"Leave it. It's sexy, kind of dirty, too. See?" Joe moved his hand beneath the towel, jacking Mark's cock with a slow up and down slide of the fingers he had wrapped around it. "If someone was watching us, all they'd be able to make out is the movement under the towel. They couldn't actually see what was happening, but they'd know. They'd picture in

their mind what I'm doing to you and get hotter than hell." Joe nuzzled his mouth against Mark's throat and dragged his tongue over the hollow at its base. The added caress sent Mark's need ratcheting higher. Convulsively, he sought to push himself deeper into Joe's encompassing grip.

"A little imagination can be a wonderful thing, don't you think?" Joe softly inquired as his fingers gave Mark's cock a squeeze firm enough to draw a groan from him. "But we don't need to imagine it, do we? You feel my hand here. And here..." Joe moved his other hand to the crevice between Mark's buttocks. His fingertips smoothed over the delicate soft skin of Mark's anus. "You feel this, too, don't you, my fingers playing over this tight little hole?"

"Yesss."

"You want me to fuck you? Want me to slide my cock deep inside?"

"God, yes."

"First, you're going to come for me. Right here in my hand," Joe insisted. He emphasized his demand by again tightening his fingers on Mark's cock in a way that sent a jolt of lust straight to Mark's balls.

Mark couldn't stop the groan that crawled from the depths of his chest. "Whatever you want, just don't stop."

Joe's sensual monologue, along with the movement of his hands, was stealing the last bit of Mark's coherence. Teasing brushes against his entrance had that sensitized hole alternately tightening then relaxing, and the constant working of his muscles made the firm touches to his cock that much more devastating.

Joe wasn't stroking him so much as doing a squeezing rub that culminated with his thumb skating over the head of Mark's cock. Precum leaked from the tip and was spread over it, making the crown that much more sensitive.

Mark tightened his thighs against Joe, his hips rocking, his body swaying in rhythm to Joe's movements. Sweet, near-agonizing pressure was building, and he held on to it, refusing

to let go, rebuffing the beckoning climax. He wanted more, more touch, more of this fevered rush, and more of his partner's enticements. He was determined to take them until his resistance failed.

"I imagined you doing this while you were away," Joe confessed in a husky whisper. "Did you masturbate? Did you think of me when you played with your own cock? Was I sucking you? Was I licking all the sweet cream from the tip and stroking and squeezing you until you gave me every last drop you had? You know I love your taste. I want you to come so I can eat it all up. I want to devour you."

Joe's last words, delivered in a low sensual growl, threw Mark over the edge. The sensations that had been building in his groin exploded. Mark's back arched, causing his ass to push harder into Joe's hand. In response, Joe's grip tightened. His middle finger penetrated Mark's anus and slid in to the knuckle. That unexpected and stunning invasion matched the first thick spurt of semen that raced from his straining shaft, making the sensation so sharp Mark could swear some vital part of his body was being turned inside out. He shoved himself hard into the hand that held him and let out a modified wail as his insides quivered from coming.

Joe firmly yet gently milked him, encouraging every jerk of his hips and every subsequent spurt of semen that accompanied it. He crooned low voiced, rumbling encouragements into Mark's ear. "That's it, baby. So good, so good. Give it all up."

"*Mmm, Joe,*" Mark groaned. The quivering, inner contractions that gripped his insides slowly lessened and ceased.

Arms sliding from Joe's shoulders, he brought them down and looped them around Joe's torso. He collapsed against his lover, his body going boneless as the tension drained away and the pleasure slowly dissipated. With his eyes closed, he could hear the strong thud of Joe's heart. The beat had quickened from its usual pace, not enough to match the wild pulse of his own heart, but enough to know that Joe wasn't unaffected by what had just

passed between them. That knowledge brought a feeling of satisfaction, and he kissed the warm skin that rested beneath his cheek before snuggling in to rest a bit.

There was more to come, of that he was well aware, and a tingle of anticipation swept over his skin. The beat of Joe's heart would soon race with his own, and the thought of what they would do to make that happen made him aware of a heaviness growing beneath his belly. A measured pulse began to beat at the base of his cock and, unable to stop himself, he shifted his hips a bit, encouraging the familiar ache that signaled the beginnings of second erection.

"I've got you, pretty baby. My sweet, beautiful brat," Joe whispered, tightening the arm that cradled Mark's shoulder and back.

A lazy, satisfied smile curved Mark's lips. Lying against Joe's shoulder, he sought to calm his racing breaths and still for a moment his slowly stirring arousal. He wanted to enjoy the fleeting serenity of his climax, despite the fact that his body was already preparing for a second round. "Am I still a brat? I thought I was being good."

"You're always my brat, baby," Joe softly informed him. He brought his hand out from under Mark's towel. "But just to reassure you, you were being very good. See what you gave me?" Joe held cum-smeared fingers out for Mark's inspection before bringing them to his lips to lick them clean.

Half embarrassed, Mark watched anyway, completely fascinated to the point that he almost begged for a taste. The myriad facets of sex never failed to enthrall him. Had this been another place or time, the idea of one man feasting on another man's cum could actually gross him out. But here, now, held by the man he loved, basking in the afterglow of orgasm, he watched Joe with perfect aplomb and found it an act so sensual it reignited his desire. The way his tongue erotically moved over his fingers, lapping the pearly cream. It wasn't often Mark was able to express himself so easily, but sometimes words pushed at him, things that cried out to be said, and he wanted so much to let this man know how he felt. Enough to risk feeling foolish.

He lifted his head from Joe's shoulder and reached out to cup his chin, turning Joe's gaze in his direction. "Did I ever tell you how sexy you are? It's not just your body or your hair or your face, though that's all part of it. But it's mostly just you. The way you move, the things you say, and the way you make me feel like there's no one else in the whole world but me. I don't know how you can be so completely and openly generous. I wish I could be like you. You don't hide anything. And the way you're sitting there licking my cum like it's the best treat you've ever had, do you know how that makes me feel?"

"Tell me."

"Like I want to cry, but I'm too damned horny for tears."

Joe softly laughed. "That may be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. I'm glad you're not like me." Joe swept damp fingertips over Mark's cheek. "I love your shy reticence. When you say something like this, I know it's not just talk. It's because you mean it. It comes from your heart. And as for being generous, well, that's really just an extension of selfishness on my part. I want you. I want the pleasure we have together. I can't share it with you if I don't do my part, so I take you along with me."

"I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad to be taken," Mark answered with a grin.

"Speaking of being taken, are you ready? My cock fucking hurts, and I feel like I've been waiting for you forever."

Joe squirmed a bit, and Mark guiltily started. "Oh, man, talk about selfish. I'm so sorry. Here, let me help with that." Mark reached out and carefully eased the zipper of Joe's jeans down the rest of the way.

With a bit of maneuvering on both their parts, Joe's cock found freedom, and he sighed in relief. "That's better."

"It certainly is," Mark agreed. Wanting nothing between his skin and Joe's, he loosened the towel he still wore and tossed it over the edge of the bed.

He let his gaze slowly consume the delectable vision before him. Joe was a big man, and his cock was perfectly proportioned to the rest of his body. Arrow straight, it was thick and solid. Gnarled veins wrapped its length, their color the lightest tinge of blue against the creamy ivory of tautly stretched skin. The crown was full and plump with a healthy, rosy flush. Clear fluid peeked from the small slit at the top, and as Mark watched, it overflowed to trickle in a slow shimmering path that was so tempting he had to have it.

Scooting back a bit, he leaned down and swept his tongue over the glistening trail of fluid. Joe's subtle yet sweet and earthy flavor gently infused into his mouth. The taste of it spoke to Mark of shared intimacy. The scent of it wafted to his nostrils, and the aroma woke an invisible imprint on his psyche. Its presence meant desire, pleasure, and sexual fulfillment. Acting on the signals his unconscious mind conveyed, Mark's heart began to speed its tempo. His blood pumped faster and raced to his groin, preparing to fulfill his body's growing need. His cock began to fill, and he moaned as his erection returned with a speed that was nearly painful.

Latching onto Joe's cock, he sucked it in, winding his tongue over and around the sleek, warm column of flesh. Automatically, he bobbed his head, lips tightening as he moved up and down the satiny skin now wet with his saliva. His fingers wrapped around the base, and he moved them in concert with his mouth, stimulating that part of Joe's cock that was just too much for his mouth to handle. The thigh muscles under his other hand had gone tight, and Joe's hips gave a short convulsive lift with every downward slide of Mark's mouth.

Mark lost track of time and place. His awareness became centered on the pleasurable slide of Joe's cock against his tongue and lips. It stimulated his senses and fulfilled some primitive need to fill his mouth with something, to suck, to lick, to taste, and to swallow. He was torn between wanting the spurts of bittersweet seed he knew his actions would bring or releasing the cock in his mouth that it might fill him and quell the throbbing ache. Joe decided for him.

Joe's hand landed lightly on his head. His long fingers twined through the strands of Mark's hair, and he gently pulled. "Let go, babe," he cautioned. "You're going to make me come. I don't want that. Not in your mouth. Not this time. I want your hot little ass."

Mark actually felt a growl rising to his throat. Some primal part of himself was fighting the loss of his prize. Joe's fingers tightened and pulled until his scalp stung and Mark reluctantly released him to rub his own head. "Ow. That hurt."

"It's your fault. I told you to let go. Sometimes you're worse than a baby with a pacifier."

"I'm not feeling very pacified!"

"Well, come here and you will be," Joe shot back at him. The grin on his face made Mark smile at the ridiculousness of his declaration.

"You drive me crazy," Mark said by way of explaining his behavior.

"You're making me feel more than a little nuts myself. I swear I'm not letting you leave town again. Masturbation aside, lack of sex makes you grumpy."

"Does not."

"Then how do you explain this? No, never mind. The last thing I want right now is some kind of debate. Since you're being all bratty again, how about you redeem yourself by getting the lube for me."

"Yeah, yeah," Mark groused, an action that earned him a smack on his bare butt when he rose to his knees. "Hey!"

Joe gave him an evil grin. "Nobody likes a smart-ass."

"Plenty of people like *you*," Mark pouted, rubbing his abused cheek.

"Now, now. You want me to kiss it and make it better?"

"Tempting as that offer is, there's something else I'd rather you do to my ass."

"What's that?"

Joe's question, voiced in a raspy rumble, sent prickles of heat skittering across Mark's skin. Unable to meet his sultry gaze, Mark placed his hands on Joe's shoulders, leaned in, nuzzled his cheek against Joe's, and whispered in his ear, "Fuck it." Just saying the words made his stomach quiver.

Warm, steady hands cupped the globes of his ass and firmly massaged. "Get the lube," Joe growled.

Now eager to obey, Mark stretched his upper body across the bed and opened the drawer in the bedside table. His hard cock rubbed against Joe's thigh, and it was all he could do not to groan out loud. Grabbing the plastic bottle of clear liquid, he straightened to kneel astride Joe and found himself pulled against his lover's chest. On his knees he was a head or more taller than Joe. His chest was easily within the reach of Joe's mouth, and Joe once more took the opportunity to play with Mark's nipples.

Mark closed his eyes and relaxed in Joe's arms. The bottle of lube was taken from him. He could feel movement behind his back from the arms that encircled him, but he ignored it in favor of paying closer attention to the hot, wet tongue that whipped over the hard nub of his nipple. Chills chased themselves up and down his spine, and his breaths began to come hard and fast. His cock was pressed against Joe's abs, and the firm muscles massaged him in a way that had Mark moaning. When a slippery finger insinuated itself between the cheeks of his ass and unceremoniously slid in to the hilt, he couldn't hold back the soft warbling wail that burst from his parted lips.

"That's it," Joe crooned, his breath warm against Mark's chest. "Let me hear how much you love it."

"*Unnnh*. God, Joe, so good." Though he was sometimes embarrassed by the sounds he made during sex, Mark couldn't hold them back. Joe certainly didn't seem to mind them and was constantly reassuring him how sexy they were and how much they excited him.

He couldn't stop them now as Joe used an easy, measured pace to finger fuck him. A single digit became two then three. Mark thrust his hips back and forth, alternately rubbing his cock against Joe's body, then retreating in favor of helping to push Joe's fingers deep. He rode the fine edge of impending orgasm, but the current stimulation wasn't enough to push him over. Growing desperate, he couldn't stop himself from pleading for what he wanted.

"Joe, please."

"What, baby?"

"I need you."

"I need you, too."

"Then do it!"

"Do what? Tell me what you want me to do," Joe seductively whispered.

"Fuck me."

"I am. With my fingers. You want something else?"

"Don't tease me, damn it! I want your cock. Give it to me!"

"That's my little brat," Joe praised. "Demand what you want."

With that he pulled his fingers free. Urging Mark to lower himself, Joe held his cock steady. The moist head made contact with Mark's anus and nuzzled in. Mark felt his muscles stretch. A quick, mild flash of discomfort accompanied the penetration but was replaced by the long satisfying glide of Joe's cock into his snug sheath. His nerve endings celebrated the exquisite friction by tightly gripping the welcomed invader.

"Ease up, baby," Joe grunted. His hands, cupped around Mark's buttocks, kneaded the rounded spheres. "Relax a little."

Dropping his forehead to Joe's shoulder, Mark struggled to do as he asked. He consciously let go of the tension in his back and legs, letting himself truly rest against Joe's body and in his hands. His deep, rhythmic breaths matched the slight circular undulation of his hips and he moved in concert with Joe's massage until it felt as though he was being

stirred inside. Slightly changing the angle, Mark pressed down, grinding himself against Joe before lifting up a bit.

“That’s it, babe. Just like that,” Joe groaned.

“Like this?” Mark questioned and repeated the move on a somewhat grander scale.

“Mmm, yeah.”

Mark smiled at the husky rumble that vibrated against his neck. He lifted his head from Joe’s shoulder and continued to post slowly up and down the sleek column that so deliciously filled him, but his self-satisfaction disappeared with the growing passion his actions wrought.

His movements came faster and more forceful. His conscious thoughts and desires coalesced, metamorphosing to become something purely physical. Every passing second increased the frenzied need, the carnal heat, and the raw grunts and moans that were the consequence of making love. These were enhanced by the slightly acrid taste of salty sweat gleaned by wet tongues from flesh damp with exertion and the warm, fragrant musk of male bodies engaged in sex. All of this and more was brought about by the simple act of Joe’s cock penetrating the most sensitive, darkly intimate, and welcoming part of Mark’s body again and again and again.

Mark cried out his bliss and his overwhelming craving for more. “Harder, fuck me *harder!*”

Wordlessly answering him, Joe wrapped his arms around Mark. Holding him tucked against his body, he bucked and rolled. Still joined, they ended with Mark flat on his back beneath Joe. His lover brought his knees up and lifted his torso until he knelt between Mark’s thighs. One of Mark’s widespread legs was lifted to Joe’s shoulder, the other draped over his arm. “You want harder? How about this?” Joe thrust his hips forward with a power that brought their bodies together with an audible thump.

Mark threw his head back, a throaty cry torn from his throat. His hands fisted in the sheets, and his hips rose to receive the gratifying blows of Joe’s body against his own. No

longer an individual ruled by shy uncertainty, Mark became a being of sensuality governed by a pure, brutal, and ruthless desire for sexual fulfillment. He not only willingly accepted but fought for every millimeter of thick, hot cock that reamed his welcoming passage, straining to arch his body into Joe's every hard, uncompromising thrust.

He had barely enough coherence left to acknowledge the change in position when Joe lowered his left leg from his shoulder and encouraged it to wrap around his waist. His lover bent to him. Mark's hazel eyes, nearly blinded by pleasure, met Joe's own. They glittered with intense hunger. To see such unrestrained and primitive emotion directed at him evoked a full-body shiver, and he willingly complied with Joe's every desire.

One arm braced to hold him just above Mark's chest, Joe kept his other arm beneath Mark's right leg, spreading him wide. Mark's arms came up to embrace the man who fucked him so fiercely. He eagerly accepted every hard pump of Joe's hips. Each long, deep thrust forced the thick shaft that stretched him to glide over and over his nerve-rich prostate, and he gasped with each mind-blowing touch.

Electric tingles began at the base of Mark's spine. They sparked and rushed forth in a crackling wave of power that bowed his spine and ripped a wail from between his parted lips. The climax was a fiery detonation so harsh and unrelenting it was hard to believe it would leave behind no physical damage. His body jerked, and creamy seed burst from his cock, drenching his belly and Joe's. A wash of wet warmth inundated his passage as they came together, the convulsive jerks of Joe's hips bringing forth the evidence of his own orgasm.

Joe shuddered and muffled a guttural groan against Mark's throat. He could feel the tension leave Joe's body and anticipated the warm and heavy weight that was lowered to rest against him. He hugged Joe tight despite the fact that his lungs labored to find enough air to fill them. Apparently becoming cognizant of Mark's difficulty, Joe rolled until they lay side by side, facing each other. With the exit of Joe's cock from his ass, Mark could feel the tickling slide of wet warmth leaking from his hole. He wiggled a bit and smiled.

“What’s funny?” Joe asked in a lush rasp that caused a reminiscent quiver in Mark’s belly.

“Nothing. I’m happy, and I feel good.”

Joe gathered him close and brushed a kiss against his forehead. “I like seeing you happy. So much better than pissed.”

Tightening his arms around Joe, Mark softly apologized, his voice muffled against Joe’s sweaty chest. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay...brat.”

Accepting without comment Joe’s backhanded endearment, Mark let himself remain wrapped in his arms. Completely and peacefully content, he thought about the events of the day. They were going to build a house. They were going to live together and take their relationship to a whole new level of commitment. The ramifications of that sank in, and Mark decided it was time to do something he’d heretofore avoided. It was time to stop hiding. He’d finally had the courage to come out to his parents. His best friend knew he was gay. He’d already met and been accepted by a good portion of Joe’s family, and his beloved grandparents had wholeheartedly welcomed Joe. There was only one venue left to tackle.

“Joe?”

“Mmm?”

“Think you might be free for lunch tomorrow?”

“Sure. Where do you want to meet?”

“Would you mind coming to pick me up at the office?” Mark held his breath, waiting for Joe’s answer. Joe opened his eyes and directed a solemn gaze at Mark. Mark lifted his chin and met his eyes without hesitation.

“Are you serious?” Joe asked.

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t.”

“You know I won’t hide our relationship. I won’t pretend to be your buddy or your brother.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“You’re ready to let your work colleagues know that your lover is a man?”

“Yes.”

Joe slowly nodded his head. “Okay then, what time shall I pick you up?”

Mark grinned. “Twelve thirty?”

“I’ll be there.”

Mark lifted his arms and wound them around Joe’s neck. “I really, really do love you.”

“Well, that’s *really* fortunate, ’cause I love you, too,” Joe murmured against his lips. “Hey. Where’s your office?”

“Ask Dana. She’s our receptionist. By the time you make it there, everyone in the building will be notified.”

Joe laughed. “Now that’s efficiency.” He sobered and rubbed his nose against Mark’s. “You’ve made me very happy, you know that don’t you?”

“I should have done this sooner. I’m sorry.”

“Do *not* apologize. You waited until you were ready. I was fine with that.”

“You have the patience of a saint.”

“Oh, baby, don’t try to pin that on me. You just wait until we’re living together. You might change your mind about that statement. There’s no portion of my life that deserves sainthood.”

“I demand the right to reserve judgment,” Mark loftily declared.

“And I reserve the right to kiss you senseless,” Joe countered and proceeded to do just that.

* * * * *

Monday morning was hectic, just as Mark imagined it would be. At the partners meeting, he relayed the results of his trip to Manhattan and ended with, "The final decision handed down by their board of directors was unanimous. The plans for the complex Char and I designed were approved." A hardy round of applause greeted Mark's words.

"This is wonderful. You all know what this means, don't you?" Ron Wilson asked. Ron was an outgoing man of forty-two and eldest of the architectural co-op that consisted of six full-time architects, including Mark and Char. "Our reputations are going receive a real boost. Even though Char and Mark did all the work and thank you very much," there was a round of laughter at that, "this is going to reflect favorably on all of us."

"Not to mention the business as a whole will profit. When word gets out, we'll be turning clients away," added Evan Davis. He pushed his glasses up, brown eyes shining with excitement behind the clear lenses.

Darryl Green, their newest partner, leaned forward in his seat. "Man, I am so glad you guys let me join this firm. I sure won't say no to the extra money."

It was a well-known fact among his partners that Darryl, a recent divorcé, was supporting an ailing father. Rather than place him in a nursing facility, Darryl cared for the man himself with the help of aides who stayed with him while Darryl was in the office. Ron reached out and gave his shoulder a sympathetic squeeze, and Mark smiled at the understanding expressed in that kind gesture. Darryl, a quiet man of thirty-six with a sort of perpetual lost puppy look, was a talented designer and well liked by everyone in the office.

Even Mark's office nemesis, Derek Swenson, seemed pleased, not that Mark cared. Doing something that benefited Derek was the last thing he wanted to do, but he wouldn't let that dim the pleasure he took in his and Char's accomplishment.

Meeting essentially over, everyone rose from their chairs. Mark accepted handshakes from Ron, Evan, and Darryl. While he wished he could have avoided it, he even allowed Derek his turn, though Derek deliberately drew out the contact.

“You did a brilliant job, Mark. I’m sure we’ll never be able to express just how grateful we are.” Derek put his arm around Mark’s shoulders and gave him a squeeze that brought their bodies together at shoulder, hip, and thigh. Lowering his voice he added, “Although, I’d certainly like to try.”

Mark suppressed the willies caused by Derek’s innuendo. Looking desperately for a polite and plausible excuse to put distance between them, he sought and found Char with his gaze and silently implored her for help. Mark had previously confided in her about Derek’s tendency to get overly friendly with him, and Char, seeing his dilemma, seamlessly came to his rescue. Interposing herself between them, she allowed Mark his escape.

Derek had made Mark clearly and keenly aware of his interest, and it wasn’t something Mark welcomed. Just the opposite. It made him extremely uncomfortable. Mark felt there was something cold and ruthless in Derek. He was an excellent architect with a sterling reputation and sound work ethic. They’d never had a complaint from any client with whom he’d worked, but still, Mark had the impression that Derek was rather disdainful of his fellow man, as though he considered himself above those around him.

He sometimes wondered if his imagination was working overtime, as no one else seemed to notice, or at least no one mentioned any such thing to him. But he honestly didn’t think so. Char disliked Derek, but then he supposed part of that might have been for his benefit. Char was a true friend, and she didn’t like the fact that Derek was using their business association to press his attentions on Mark.

Using the opportunity Char gave him, Mark retreated to his office to catch up on the work that had been delayed while he was away. There were a couple of smaller projects in various stages of completion that he was also working on, and these were the ones that garnered his immediate attention.

The morning moved on a pace, turning into early afternoon before Mark had time to acknowledge its passing. On the phone with a client, he paced to one corner of his office and, leaning against the bookshelf there, absently stared out the window at the passing traffic. At

this point, their conversation had turned to mostly small inane details, and Mark confidently answered each question that the client placed before him. He ended the call, leaving his client happily satisfied.

Mark turned from the window, intending to return the phone to its base only to discover Derek seated on the corner of his desk with a steady gaze fixed on him. Though his expression was bland, there was something in his eyes that made Mark tense. "It always amazes me to hear you speak to a client. You sound so sure of yourself."

"I have every faith in my work," Mark countered. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Oh, Mark," Derek intoned with false disappointment. "You know what I want, but as I was saying, your assurance in your work is in such direct contrast with your personal self-confidence. I find it a fascinating contrast. I watch you in the meetings and with clients and you're all buttoned down and in command. Then I picture you on your knees, naked and whimpering for me, and the difference is so exciting, so incredibly arousing."

"Stop it," Mark ordered, and while his voice held steady, something inside cringed and quivered. This bold and unexpected verbal attack had him nearly in shock.

Derek rose from the desk and approached him. "What I could do with such a submissive personality as yours. You wouldn't recognize yourself, but I guarantee you'd love it. I'd treat you like the sweet, subservient little puppy you are, and you'd beg me for more. All you have to do is come to me. I'll take care of the rest."

Mark's face flushed with anger, but he stood frozen in place. The look in Derek's pale blue eyes was enough to send a jolt of fear straight to his gut. He firmly squelched it and straightened his shoulders. "Understand this. I wouldn't come to you if my life depended on it. I don't need you. I don't like you. I have someone in my life, and you couldn't fill his shoes on your best day."

Derek's eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth to reply, but a deep voice at Mark's office door prevented him from speaking. "Sorry, am I interrupting? Mark? Baby, it's twelve thirty. Time for lunch."

Mark felt all the tension drain out of his body, and he nearly sagged with relief when Joe sauntered into his office. His carpenter was dressed casually in a blue chambray shirt, jeans, and heavy work boots. His long hair was tied back in his customary tail, and his deep blue eyes sparkled.

Mark sidestepped Derek, dropped the phone on his desk, and went to meet him. Joe bent to him, and without a second thought, Mark accepted the simple kiss Joe bestowed. Normally, he might have been embarrassed, but he wanted Joe's kiss. It was a palpable barrier between himself and Derek, something he very badly needed at this moment. With his previous agitation rapidly calming, he turned to face Derek.

"Joe, I'd like you to meet Derek Swenson. He's one of the architects who work here." Mark deliberately avoided calling Derek a colleague and made it perfectly clear just who Joe was. "Derek, this is my lover, Joe Moning."

The two men silently sized each other up before hands were offered and briefly shaken. Polite but unenthusiastic greetings were exchanged.

"So, Mr. Moning, what is it you do for a living?"

"I'm a carpenter by trade."

"I see." Derek's tone was disparaging, his gaze disdainful as he took in Joe's attire. "This is the first I've heard of our Mark having a boyfriend. I wonder why it is he's kept you a secret until now."

Derek's words were calculated to be insulting, implying that Mark was ashamed of Joe. Mark bristled and opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by Joe himself.

"I'm going to guess it's because Mark likes to keep his personal business just that... personal. Of course, the fact that we've recently decided to make our relationship permanent relieves any restraints he might have felt about revealing the fact that we're together."

"Umm, I suppose that could be the reason."

"I'm actually very glad I'll be getting to know his business associates," Joe continued, cutting off anything further Derek might have added. "I've heard quite a bit about the people he works with, including you, Mr. Swenson. Just so you know. I take a dim view of anyone trying to poach on my territory. I rarely lose my temper, but anything that's a problem for Mark will be a problem for me. I happen to be very good at solving problems, but occasionally a few things get broken in the process."

Mark could feel his own eyes going round with disbelief at Joe's frank speech, but rather than be upset about it, he found himself struggling to keep a smile from appearing on his face.

Derek's expression remained impassive. "You certainly have a way of making a point, Mr. Moning. I'll definitely keep that in mind. If you'll excuse me?"

He swept out of the office at a dignified pace, leaving Mark to stare at the calm countenance of his lover. "I can't believe you just said what you said," Mark told him.

"Well, I'm not one damn bit sorry, so if you're going to get angry about it, you might as well do it and get it over with," Joe warned him. "I heard part of what that fucker said to you, and he's goddamned lucky I didn't knock his teeth down his throat right here and now. The only thing that kept me from blowing my top was hearing you stand up to him. I was so proud of you."

"I did all right, didn't I? And I'm not mad at you. I'm glad you were here." Mark wrapped his arms around Joe's neck and rewarded him with a scorching kiss. After a long time, during which he started to feel distinctly light in the head and heavy in the groin, he

disengaged their mouths. “Will you always have my back?” he asked, looking up into Joe’s now heavy-lidded eyes.

“Always,” came Joe’s huskily voiced reply. “I promise.”

Mark was just about to engage in another kiss when Char came knocking at his door. “Mark? How about lu... Joe! I didn’t know you were here. Man, looks like I got here just in time. I’ll forgo lunch in favor of watching a little guy-on-guy action, if you two are willing.” Char flipped her shoulder-length brunette hair back, crossed her arms, and expectantly widened her mascaraed lashes. Her green eyes sparkled and a smile curved her mauve tinted lips.

Mark grimaced and sent his best friend a mock frown. “Ha-ha. No way. You’re going to have to find some other way to get your thrills.”

“Well, shucks. So what are you guys doing? You going to lunch?”

“We are,” Joe answered. “You want to come with?”

“No, I don’t want interrupt things between you two.”

“You’re not interrupting. Come on and we’ll share our news with you,” Mark tempted.

“Ooo, news, I love news,” Char exclaimed, rubbing her hands together. “Speaking of news, I wonder what’s up with Derek. I saw him right before I came to your office. He looked pissed as hell. I wonder who shit in his cornflakes? You two wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Mark intercepted Joe’s glance. “What makes you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because it’s Joe’s first visit here and the guy who’s been hitting on you came from the direction of your office with the most sour expression I’ve ever seen on that normally sanctimonious face of his. Could it be he’s just learned there’s competition for the lovely Mark here and that he’s hopelessly outclassed?”

“Hey, watch that ‘lovely Mark’ crap,” the man in question grouched.

“But, honey, you are lovely. I’ll bet Joe agrees with me.”

“Actually, I think he’s more adorable than lovely.”

“Mmm, you may be right,” Char agreed, critically studying Mark. “He’s very cute and definitely sweet. You just want to cuddle him, don’t you?”

“I do. Most definitely,” Joe solemnly agreed.

Seeing the outraged look on Mark’s face, Joe and Char both burst out laughing.

A grudging smile curved Mark’s lips. “You guys are lucky I like you. Buy me lunch, and I’ll forgive this lack of office decorum.”

“Well, la-di-da,” Char declared. “Come on then.”

She walked out, heels confidently clicking, leaving the two men to follow. Before Mark could do just that, Joe held him back.

“I’ve got something even better to give to earn your forgiveness.” He leaned down and nuzzled Mark’s ear. “But you’ll have to wait till later.”

“I’ll take it,” Mark brazenly declared. He grabbed Joe’s hand. “Now, come on, before Char comes back expecting a show.” With a smile on his face, Mark led a joyfully chuckling Joe out of his office and down the hall.

 THE END 

Kate Steele

By day, mild-mannered Kate Steele lives the quiet life in rural Indiana with her family in a century-old farm house. Ensconced in front of her trusty computer, she bravely fights off the attention of two annoying, yet sweet, lovebirds and two dogs who always seem to have to go outside. Transformed at night into a wild and fearless creature, Kate visits alien worlds, fights insatiable bloodlust, howls at the moon, and always brings home the most utterly gorgeous alpha male to indulge in wild sexual fantasies. Ah, the good life.

Visit Kate on the Web at www.katesteele.com.