

### SOME PLACE ONLY WE KNOW

...Domenic's hands slipped around Adam's waist from behind, pulling him against his hard body. Adam's first reaction was simply to freeze. Instead, he closed his eyes and kept perfectly still, almost afraid to breathe. Domenic, however, did nothing more than just hold him and, after a moment or two, Adam started to relax.

How long they stood there like that, Adam didn't know. He felt warm and secure, content to spend forever inside a magical moment that had never before existed beyond the bounds of his imagination. When he finally opened his eyes, the room was in virtual darkness. All he could hear was the soft tenor of Domenic's breathing. All he could feel or think about was the heat of Domenic's body. And all he could see beyond the cottage was a world full of whirling, white snowflakes.

He wanted so much to say or do something to let Domenic know this was what he wanted, that this was what he'd been waiting a lifetime to experience, but he remained where he was, silent and unmoving, reluctant to do anything for fear of breaking the spell. But then Domenic took the initiative, turning him around until they were face to face, and he felt the soft touch of the other man's lips against his.

He could smell Domenic's own special scent—a mixture of toothpaste, coffee, the fabric softener from his clothing, male sweat and sex. Scents that managed to combine and blot out the unused, musty aroma of the abandoned cottage and its decrepit furnishings; scents that transported him to another world while indelibly imprinting themselves in the furthermost corners of his mind. This was who he was. And this was the first step on a journey he'd been so afraid of taking until now...

#### ALSO BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Amorous Intentions **Bad Boy Blues** Blame It On Fate The Butterfly Girl Ciao, Ciao, Bambina Double Delicious Fast Forward The Gallery On Main Street Inseparable Just One Look A Moment of Madness Oh, George Proud Mary Sabotage Satisfaction Guaranteed Something To Talk About Strangers In The Night This Time For Keeps Time Shift

# SOME PLACE ONLY WE KNOW

### BY

### CHRISTIANE FRANCE

### AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC http://www.AmberQuill.com

#### SOME PLACE ONLY WE KNOW AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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For Roy and The Boys.

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After leaving the hospice, bookstore owner Adam Carstairs dropped the bag of books he was carrying into the trunk of his Honda, and glanced up at the grey sky above. The hospice was located at the foot of the Niagara Escarpment, and most Sundays, weather permitting, once he finished his volunteer duties, he'd climb up the tree-covered slope to the trail that ran along the ridge, all the way from Niagara Falls in the south to Tobermory in the north.

Monday through Saturday he was indoors, operating the bookstore he'd inherited from his father, which left Sunday as the only day he had to enjoy the great outdoors and get a little fresh air and exercise. He'd leave his car in the hospice parking lot and spend the afternoon either walking through the woods and along the trails, or risking life and limb doing some amateur-level rock climbing. If he felt extra energetic, he'd forget about the rocks and spend the afternoon hiking on the Bruce Trail. Hiking was something he really enjoyed, and he promised himself that, come spring, he'd look into joining an organized hikers' club.

On the hospice side of the escarpment, the rocks didn't amount to much more than a gradual elevation in the terrain. Short of tripping and spraining an ankle, which he could do just about anywhere, or doing something stupid like not paying attention, he was in no danger. Unlike the steep bluffs that made up sections on the other side of the ridge, the gentle upward slope didn't call for special climbing gear like pitons or studded boots.

But today, the sky was filled with dark clouds and the temperature was unusually frigid for late October, barely above the freezing mark. According to the forecast he'd watched on TV while having his breakfast, the weatherman was calling for rain later, possibly turning to sleet or light snow flurries. However, rather than miss out on the weekly hike up to the ridge, he decided to take a chance and go anyway. If he took the direct route straight to the top instead of messing around on the rocks, he could easily make it up and back down long before the rain started. If he miscalculated and the weather closed in early, there were a couple of spots where he could shelter temporarily until it cleared.

After checking to make sure he'd locked all the car doors

as well as the trunk, he shoved the keys in his pocket and headed for the path that would take him up to the top of the Escarpment.

He'd started volunteering at the hospice several months ago, right after a friend who worked there happened to mention that a surprising number of the patients never received as much as one single visitor. And, with volunteers always in short supply, many of the "forgotten" were forced to spend whatever time they had left to them alone and friendless. As one person, Adam knew there wasn't much he could do to redress the situation, but one visitor was better than none, and after checking with the hospice administrator, he'd started spending his Sunday mornings there.

The first hour or so of the visit he spent with patients who were feeling lonely and needed someone to talk with, and the rest of the time reading aloud—everything from the latest sports' scores to the yearnings of frustrated romance heroines to those of the patients who, for whatever reason, were no longer able to perform this simple act for themselves.

Adam knew the patients had come to look forward to his visits, and with no close family of his own and his best friend living and working on the other side of the world, it had turned what had become an otherwise boring day into one he now looked forward to.

When the lunch trolleys arrived, it was time for Adam to say goodbye to his "clients" as he called them, and drop into the hospice cafeteria for a coffee and something to eat. If the weather was bad, he stayed and did a little extra visiting with his "clients." If it was good, he spent the afternoon on the Escarpment.

It would be fantastic if there were someone I could invite to share my Sunday walks, but there isn't and wishing won't change the situation.

He smiled and shook his head. Unless he pretended he was still six years old and conjured up one of his erstwhile invisible friends.

Partway up the hill, Adam paused when he saw someone he recognized from the hospice, sitting on a tree stump about fifty yards or so in from the path. From the way the man was sitting—elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, Adam couldn't tell if the guy was crying or just deep in thought.

He'd first met Domenic Morton a few weeks ago in the hospice cafeteria. The place had been unusually crowded that Sunday, and Domenic had asked if he could share Adam's table. The moment Adam had looked up in response to the request and made eye contact with the speaker, he'd felt a strange squeezing sensation around the area of his groin. A sensation he'd experienced a time or two before with a few other men, and the exact same one he was experiencing right now.

There was something about Domenic that excited Adam in a way he didn't want to think about. Something that pushed buttons he'd barely been aware he even had until that chance meeting in the cafeteria had left him feeling as if he was caught halfway between something and nothing.

Like himself, he'd guessed Domenic was somewhere in his

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late twenties, but Domenic had the kind of polished good looks Adam would have expected to find on the cover of a magazine, rather than sitting across from him at a table in a hospice cafeteria. Tall, slim, with dark glasses propped atop attractively tousled mid-brown hair, hazel eyes, wide mouth, long, tapering fingers, and expensively dressed in designer casuals, Domenic looked every inch the part of a super model. Adam had also thought there was something a bit familiar about the man, but at the time he'd had no idea what it was or why—unless he'd seen him before in the hospice and it hadn't registered.

He and Domenic hadn't talked much that first time. They'd introduced themselves. Domenic had said he was there to visit his older brother who'd been injured in a traffic accident and was still in a coma, and Adam had replied by saying he was a weekend volunteer.

Since then, though, they had talked on several occasions. Adam knew Domenic was waiting for his brother to regain consciousness and that it was expected to happen any day now. He also knew Domenic's father and brother were lawyers, and Domenic was a writer, currently living in Los Angeles. The moment Domenic had mentioned being a writer, the pieces had clicked into place and Adam had remembered a book in the bestseller section of his store. The book was being touted as a hot bestseller from new writer, D.M. Dawson, and Domenic's face was on the back cover.

He waited, thinking the other man might sense the fact he was no longer alone, but when that didn't happen, he decided to make his presence known. "Hey, Domenic."

There was no response and, after waiting about half a minute, he tried again. "Hello! Domenic. You okay?"

Finally, the other man dropped his hands, stood, and looked over in Adam's direction. "Hey. What are you doing out here?"

"Getting my weekly dose of fresh air and exercise. You?"

Abandoning the tree stump, Dom walked over and joined Adam on the path. "Freezing my ass off by the feel of things. Or rather lack of feelings in that particular quarter." He gave a dry laugh, zipped his jacket, and shivered for emphasis. "To tell the truth, I came up here to be alone for a while, so I could think."

"Sounds serious."

"It is." It was too cold to stand around and, as Adam continued along the path, Domenic fell into step beside him.

"Want to talk about it?

"It's my brother. My parents told me Roger was taken off life support because he no longer needed it. And that he'd been transferred to the hospice because it's the absolute best place for him to be until the swelling in his brain goes down and he regains consciousness. Apparently that can take a while."

"And?" Adam had a nasty feeling where the conversation was going. Since volunteering at the hospital, he'd heard the same thing a number of times before about other patients. Except for a few, very rare cases, the hospice was usually the end of the road for most of them, especially those in Roger Morton's condition.

"Not going to happen. What they told me was all one big, fucking, fat lie." He paused and kicked viciously at a stone, lying at the side of the path. "I talked to one of the doctors today. Asked him if he had any idea how much longer it would take for the swelling to go down and for Roger wake up. Know what he said?"

Not his exact words, but Adam could make a rough guess. "What did he say?"

"He looked at me like I was an idiot and then, in that pompous, know-it-all tone some of them like to use, he said something along the lines of..." Domenic hesitated, his voice cracking as he forced himself to continue, "'I know nothing of any swelling, Mr. Morton. What I do know is your brother's chances of 'waking up,' as you call it, are, barring a miracle, somewhere between slim and non-existent. In my opinion, it's just a matter of time. That's why he was brought here. I thought you understood that.""

"I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, me, too. I just don't understand why my parents lied to me. How could they? Rog's my big brother. I've looked up to him, adored him, and envied him his smarts my whole life."

Adam could see the still-wet tear tracks on Domenic's face, and he badly wanted to give the man a hug in the hope it might help a little. However, he didn't know him anywhere near well enough for something that intimate, and even if he did... He sucked in a breath and kept his hands in his pockets.

"I don't know your parents. But have you considered it's maybe more a case of them refusing to give up hope rather than out and out lying to you?

"You think?"

"As I said, I don't know your parents. But I think you'll find self-deception's pretty normal for anyone in these circumstances. The 'as long as we don't put the bad stuff into words it can't happen' solution."

"But it is going to happen. Why don't they just face facts?"

"Maybe they're still at the point where the thought of allowing themselves to give up is even more painful than accepting the inevitable. And also because miracles do sometimes happen."

"Miracles?" The word came out like a sneer of disgust. "You mean the next thing they'll be telling me is to write a letter to Santa Claus, saying all I want for Christmas is for my big brother to get better. And if I'm a real good little boy, there's a chance my wish will be granted. I'm thirty-two, Adam, and they're both treating me as if I were still a baby."

It had started to rain a little, and Adam pulled up the hood of his jacket. "To them, you probably still are."

"I guess. They're good people, but sometimes..." Domenic made a helpless gesture with his hands. "I just wish they'd talk to me. Treat me as an adult instead of a child. If I try to talk to them, they just give me a load of modern medical miracle stories, and 'there, there, Roger's still a young man so we have to look on the bright side crap.' And, before I get a chance to say anything, the pair of them either clam up or change the subject and the conversation about Roger is done."

As the only child of over-protective parents, Adam understood where the other man was coming from. He'd always been wrapped in cotton and shielded from anything unpleasant, and when both his parents died within a few days of one another following a freak accident in a shopping center parking lot, he'd been devastated. At the time, he'd just turned twenty-one, yet he'd felt like he imagined a day-old kitten would feel if left on the street to fend for itself. He'd praved miracles. convinced himself his parents for were indestructible, and clung to every bromide available rather than face cold, hard facts.

*Yeah, man.* He knew what it was it was like to hang onto the flimsiest of threads and watch his whole world disappear before his eyes. He'd been there. He'd stared into that big black void for months before he'd even begun to get his head in gear and make any effort to get over the shock.

"Maybe you should ask one of your friends to talk to them and explain how you feel. Someone who is close enough to know what's going on, but isn't as emotionally involved as you are."

Domenic sighed. "Might be a good idea if I had anyone like that I could ask, but I'm embarrassed to admit I don't. My own fault, I know. Close friends require a lot of TLC, and I'm afraid I'm not the socializing type."

"The solitary life of a writer?"

"Something like that, I guess." Domenic's mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. "According to my mom, I've always been too self-absorbed, living life with my head in the clouds. Sometimes, I think she harbors a secret wish I'd been more like Roger was when he was growing up. I know that's how Dad would like me to be. He's said so enough times."

"What did your brother get up to?"

"Oh, you know, all the usual shit that's supposed to make a boy into a man. Throwing wild parties at the house when our parents were away on vacation, smoking pot, drinking too much and totaling Dad's car, then getting the neighbor's daughter pregnant."

"And did it make a man of him?"

"In Dad's eyes, I guess it did. Roger passed all his exams, top of the class, and he graduated law school with honors. Roger's a clever defense lawyer and definitely the man to call if you ever get charged with anything nasty. Seems to get everyone off, no matter what they've done. Very smart guy, my brother. Unfortunately, his drinking too much never stopped. That's why he's here now. From what the police told my parents, he'd spent the evening in a downtown bar, where he got completely hammered, and then he decided Main Street was a racetrack and tried to outrun some kids in a souped-up wreck."

"And what about you?"

"Me? I just muddled through, average all the way. Dad had high hopes of making me into a member of his hotshot legal team. I'd always wanted to write, but I knew better than to say anything. So, I stuck it out for a little over a year, and then I kinda faked a nervous breakdown, said I couldn't take it any more and quit."

"You actually faked a nervous breakdown?"

Domenic grinned. "I didn't act crazy and start throwing things. Nothing dramatic like that or I might have found myself confined to a rubber room or zipped into a straitjacket. I just went super quiet and locked myself in my room."

"Why didn't you just tell him the law wasn't your thing?"

"You don't know my dad. In the first place, you don't tell him anything. He had our lives all mapped out from the day each of us was born. We weren't asked what we'd like to do. It was a given we'd go to law school, join Morton and Associates, become members at the golf and country club, get married and have two point whatever kids."

"So how did you manage to escape?"

"I told him the stress was killing me and asked my doctor to back me up, which he did. All the back-stabbing and clientstealing may be worth it for the over-achievers who're looking to make partner, but it wasn't what I wanted out of life."

"How did your father take it?"

Domenic chuckled. "Not well. Told me to stop acting like a girl and get married. He said that once I had a wife and family to support I'd think differently. So, I told him I had no interest in getting married. Not then, and maybe not ever. That really pissed him off, big time. He called me names, told me to get out of his house and never come back."

"And?"

"We're polite to one another, but that's about it. I think we'd both like to make up and start over, and maybe we will one day. Fortunately, my grandmother left me some money so I was able to find my own place and cover expenses until my writing started to pay off."

Adam paused to take a breath. He was in good shape from the weekend walks, but the uphill climb wasn't quite as easy as it appeared. "Is your brother married?"

"Was." Domenic shrugged and kicked at a pile of loose stones. "He did the honorable thing and married the girl he got pregnant, but she lost the baby. Soon after that, they parted by mutual consent and later divorced. But then I don't think love, marriage, kids, and settling down ever figured in Rog's personal agenda. He works hard, but he plays hard, too. And by that, I mean he really likes playing the field. He once told me that when it comes to sex, no matter how weird or bizarre it sounds, he never misses an opportunity, that he likes to try everything at least once."

"Maybe he's gay."

Domenic looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't think so. But that's what Dad figures I am."

"Are you?" The words came out before Adam could stop them. Blood rushed to his face, and he wanted to die from embarrassment. "I'm sorry. Forget I said that."

Domenic smiled and touched Adam lightly on the arm—a touch that traveled all the way to parts of his body Adam refused to think about. "It's okay, man. You're not the first person to ask me that question. And the answer is yes. I don't brag about it or flaunt it. Meaning, I don't go to gay clubs or hang around anywhere looking for action." "You have a regular partner?"

"No. Just when I feel the need. I keep it as quiet and as simple as possible—partly because I like my privacy. Partly because I don't think I could deal with my parents finding out. But mostly because none of the relationships showed any indication of developing into anything permanent."

"Did you want any of them to?"

"One or two of them had possibilities." Domenic chuckled. "But I kept seeing this horrified look on Dad's face, and I guess I just chickened out when it came to second dates or any kind of commitment. How about you?"

"Me?" For a few seconds, Adam felt outraged. He wasn't gay. He'd known a couple of gay guys in school. And while he'd been curious, he'd never allowed his curiosity free rein. True, he occasionally experienced a sexual reaction to another man, but it didn't mean anything. It wasn't as if he'd ever followed up on the urge. Of course, he wondered from time to time. It was normal to wonder about oneself. Especially as he'd never gone through the "girl crazy stage," as his parents had called it. He liked and respected women, and he enjoyed talking with them. It was just that he'd never met one who'd turned him on. *And if that meant*... "You think I'm gay?"

Domenic snagged his gaze and held on tight. And in that moment, Adam knew Domenic wanted him. And to his surprise, he realized he wanted Domenic, too. He could see the desire in Domenic's eyes, and he could feel his own response as his cock began to thicken and grow. He wanted to hold Domenic in his arms, he wanted to feel his heat...he wanted to know...to find out and experience...he wanted it all.

Dominic sighed and lifted his shoulders in an offhand shrug. "I don't know. You tell me."

Adam's heart began to pound. If there was ever a time when it felt as if his back was against the wall, this was it. He'd spent years wondering and trying to figure out who and what he was and, at the same time, maintain a delicate, middle-of-the road position. He'd always suspected he might be gay, but as a teenager, he'd been too scared to experiment. As he'd gotten older, if there had been an opportunity to find out, he was sure he would have taken it. But there hadn't been. And since then he'd lacked the guts or the courage or whatever it took to push the envelope and settle the matter one way or the other once and for all.

Instead, he'd just kept to himself and done his best to pretend the problem didn't exist. Except it did. He'd had the wet dreams, the embarrassing sessions behind a locked bathroom door, and a long-held wish to share at least some part of his life with another human being. And now here he was, faced with a true life-defining moment, and he didn't have a clue what to do or what to say.

By sheer force of will, he managed to break Domenic's gaze and look away. Well, now he knew. At least, he thought he did. But what if he thought wrong?

"Well?"

"I'm not sure. And that's the truth. If you feel that makes me a coward, then you're probably right."

In an effort to control his emotions and not give in to the

urge to bang his head against the nearest tree, Adam turned his back on Domenic and continued along the path. A moment or two later, Domenic caught up with him, but, to Adam's relief, the other man didn't touch him or attempt to pursue the subject. By the time they reached the top of the escarpment, Adam had himself under control and his heart was back to its normal, regular beat. However, the weather wasn't so cooperative. What had started as fine rain at the bottom of the slope had now turned into big, fat, fluffy snowflakes.

"Nothing like the taste of a fresh snowflake," Domenic said, tipping his head back and catching one on his tongue, then another, and another. "I loved doing this when I was a kid. Guess I still do."

There was something so innocent yet so erotic about what Domenic was doing it caught Adam completely unaware. The sight of the pink tongue snaking out from the wet, mobile mouth fascinated him, and again he felt the same squeezing sensation in his groin. It was both strange and exciting, and before he could rein in his thoughts, he was imagining Domenic's lips and tongue touching him and seducing him. He knew exactly how it would feel. It would be hot, wet, and slick. It would invade his mouth, tasting and teasing, until it took over his mind and his body, and all he would be able to think of was—

"Hey! Did you hear what I said?"

"Sorry. I was thinking. I usually put on my hiking boots, but today I forgot and now my feet are soaking wet."

"Mine are, too. But not to worry, we'll survive. Anyway,

never mind our feet. We need to start looking for a place where we can shelter for a bit. Take a look behind you." Domenic pointed down the already snow-covered slope. "I can't believe it's happened this fast."

Adam took a quick glance at the path they'd just climbed and swallowed a tiny flicker of panic. He couldn't believe it either. One minute bare ground and now what looked like a couple of inches of the white stuff. "The forecaster said rain later, and maybe sleet or a few flurries. There was no mention of this."

Not surprising he hadn't noticed, though. Between the topic of their conversation and the cover of the trees, the last thing Adam had been thinking about was the weather. But here, on top of the ridge, the air was thick with snowflakes, the wind was picking up, visibility was down to a few feet, and the pathway had already disappeared. He'd heard of people being caught in sudden snowstorms on mountains. *But this isn't a mountain.* This side of the escarpment barely qualified as a hill. Even so, he needed to keep a clear head. "At least it's still daylight. If we're lucky, it'll turn back to rain and wash it away. In any event, it won't last long."

"And if it does?"

Then I'm afraid we'll be stuck here for the duration," Adam said, keeping his voice calm despite his inner feelings of panic. Although he couldn't decide if it was due to being stuck up here because of the weather, or the thought of being alone with Domenic. "But we'll be fine. When I first started coming up here, I found an abandoned cottage. It's small, not much more than a two-room shack, and, from the look of things, it hasn't been lived in for years. There are still a few bits of furniture, so we won't have to sit on the floor. And at least we'll be able to keep reasonably warm and dry until the storm moves on. Just give me a couple of seconds to get my bearings..."

With most of the leaves gone from the trees, the cottage was easier for Adam to find than he'd expected. Apart from a small drift of snow that had found its way in under the illfitting door, there was nothing to indicate anyone had been here since his last visit back in the summer. The cottage wouldn't win any prizes as a desirable residence, but on the plus side, the roof didn't leak and the windows were all intact. With a supply of food and water, a person could hide away up here for days, or even weeks.

"Who owns this place?" Domenic asked.

"No idea. When I first found it, I asked one of my neighbors—he's in his eighties, so I figured if anyone knew anything about it he would. He said it's been here for as long as he can remember. It was built way back in the days when they didn't have the same kind of rules and regulations we do now. And the reason the city hasn't torn it down is because he said, until quite recently, some crazy old man used to live here."

'What did he mean by recently?"

"He didn't say. But just from the look of the place, it couldn't have been that recent."

"Did he know what happened to him?"

"He said no one does. Seems the guy just up and disappeared. One day he was seen walking along the road, heading toward town, and that was it. He just vanished. Still, I guess someone must own the place and pay the taxes or the city would have taken it over."

"And done what with it?" Domenic asked, glancing around the main room and then peeking into the drawers of a beatenup old desk. "Anyway, I think you'll find this is city-owned land, meaning the house was built illegally, and therefore there are no taxes. It's not like anyone is living here, so I doubt the city considers it a problem."

Adam sighed. "Probably hoping it'll eventually disintegrate and save them the costs of demolition."

"Maybe they've left it here as a shelter for hikers. Otherwise, the place is worthless. It's in the middle of nowhere. No proper access. No utilities. And if there was once a yard, it's long since reverted back to nature." Domenic closed the last drawer and rested his hip against a corner of the desk. "I thought perhaps there might be something with a name or a date on it."

Adam shook his head. "I had the same idea when I originally stumbled on the place, but there was nothing of a personal nature. Not even a book or a magazine. All I found, apart from what you can see, were a few dishes, some glasses, a few odd pieces of cutlery, and these." As he spoke, Adam opened one of the cupboards, took out two rolled up army blankets and dropped them on the sofa. "I don't know if they belong to the man who once lived here, or if they were left

behind by a hiker. I'd say probably the latter because they're reasonably clean. If you get cold, you can wrap yourself up in one."

"That the other room?" Domenic crossed the room and stuck his head around a partly open door. "Guess this was the old man's bedroom," he said. "Nothing here now, though, other than an old mattress." After closing the door, he wandered over to the window and looked outside. "The snow isn't letting up. If anything, I think it's getting worse." He began searching through his pockets. "Damn!"

"You lost something?" Adam asked.

"My cell. I must've left the damn thing in the car."

Adam took his own phone from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Here. You can use mine."

Domenic made as if it to take it, then he shook his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I was going to call my parents. Tell them I'm okay, and not to worry if I don't get back home in time for dinner. But it's better I don't talk to them right now. I'm still too angry."

"Want me to call them for you?"

"Nah." The smile he gave Adam was halfway between bravado and heartbreak, and again Adam wanted to throw caution to the wind and give him a hug. "Let 'em worry about me for a change. Anyway, freak storms like this don't usually last too long. It'll likely blow itself out before dark. What about you? Anyone you need to call?"

"No. I live by myself, so it's not a problem." Adam checked his watch, surprised to find it was almost four-thirty.

At this time of year and with the storm showing no sign of abating, he realized it would be completely dark by five or shortly thereafter. Like himself, Domenic was wearing unsuitable footwear for hiking—leather-soled dress shoes rather than hiking boots or running shoes, which meant they were stuck here until morning. Even if it did stop snowing, there wasn't a chance in hell of them finding their way to the bottom of the hill in the dark—at least not without slipping and sliding all over the place, getting lost and probably doing themselves serious injury.

Adam went over to the makeshift metal sink, turned on the tap and was rewarded with a steady stream of water. Last time he was here, he'd filled a glass and checked it for clarity and taste. He'd suffered no ill effects, so he was prepared to risk it a second time. "Want a glass of water?"

Domenic shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. "I'd rather have something warm, like a coffee or hot chocolate."

Adam tossed him one of the blankets, and turned back to pick up the other for himself. "If I we had some logs and a lighter, I'd cross my fingers the chimney is in working condition and start a fire. But we don't, so we'll have to make do with these."

"How about a little body heat instead?"

Domenic's hands slipped around Adam's waist from behind, pulling him against his hard body. Adam's first reaction was simply to freeze. Instead, he closed his eyes and kept perfectly still, almost afraid to breathe. Domenic, however, did nothing more than just hold him and, after a moment or two, Adam started to relax.

How long they stood there like that, Adam didn't know. He felt warm and secure, content to spend forever inside a magical moment that had never before existed beyond the bounds of his imagination. When he finally opened his eyes, the room was in virtual darkness. All he could hear was the soft tenor of Domenic's breathing. All he could feel or think about was the heat of Domenic's body. And all he could see beyond the cottage was a world full of whirling, white snowflakes.

He wanted so much to say or do something to let Domenic know this was what he wanted, that this was what he'd been waiting a lifetime to experience, but he remained where he was, silent and unmoving, reluctant to do anything for fear of breaking the spell. But then Domenic took the initiative, turning him around until they were face to face, and he felt the soft touch of the other man's lips against his.

He could smell Domenic's own special scent—a mixture of toothpaste, coffee, the fabric softener from his clothing, male sweat and sex. Scents that managed to combine and blot out the unused, musty aroma of the abandoned cottage and its decrepit furnishings; scents that transported him to another world while indelibly imprinting themselves in the furthermost corners of his mind. This was who he was. And this was the first step on a journey he'd been so afraid of taking until now.

The tip of Domenic's tongue found its way between Adam's slightly parted lips, and he welcomed the intrusion,

opening his mouth to experience what he'd only read and dreamed about in the privacy of his room. Adam knew this first kiss was supposed to be something special, and it was all that and more. He'd been aware of Domenic from the first time they'd met, except what he'd felt back then wasn't even lukewarm to what he was feeling now. From the instant Domenic touched him and his whisker-rough cheek brushed against the sensitive skin of his neck, those initial feelings had intensified tenfold, rushing through his body like a fast-acting drug. Now, as their tongues tangled and the evidence of Domenic's arousal pressed hard against his own, Adam's body was on fire with needs that turned his blood to flames and his thoughts to a raging inferno of questions only Domenic could answer.

Domenic opened Adam's jacket, unbuttoned the waistband of his jeans, and slid down the zipper as far as it would go. Adam held his breath. Tugging both Adam's jeans and underpants down to his knees, Domenic wrapped a hand around Adam's cock and began to tease the tip with the pad of his thumb.

Then, before Adam could even guess what the other man had in mind, Domenic knelt on the filthy floor, slipped a condom over Adam's dick and took him into his mouth. Adam had never experienced anything quite so exquisite in his whole life. Just the thought of Domenic's soft, velvety mouth sucking him like this made him want to orgasm. To actually have it happen and luxuriate in the feeling firsthand was like a tiny slice of heaven. Determined to hold onto the moment for as long as possible, Adam closed his eyes, sucked in a deep breath and threaded his fingers through Domenic's hair.

But then Domenic used his free hand to caress Adam's balls. And for Adam it was game over. He exploded in a way that had never happened before. It was stronger and lasted longer than any time he'd resorted to DIY. He felt drained, and positive that if he tried to walk, his legs would let him down and he'd fall flat on his face.

Domenic stood and wrapped his arms around him. "You okay? You're shaking."

"Right now, I feel shaky. I'll be okay in a minute. Umm...what about you? I realize I'm the only one who got anything out of that, and...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We'll get to me later. You sure you're okay?"

"Positive." The only thing Adam wasn't sure about was if what had just happened between them was real, or if Domenic had been amusing himself at his expense. If he could see Domenic's face and read his expression it might help. Since he couldn't, he tried to downplay his insecurities with a laugh. "Is this where I'm supposed to say, shut up and kiss me?"

"That depends. You could also tell me to back off because I had no right to do what I just did. That you're not interested, and I should get the hell away from you and leave you alone."

"It's a bit late for me to start protesting, don't you think?"

"Do you want to?"

"No. It was just..."

"A bit traumatic? Hey, I know the first time can be like that. At least it was for me."

"Why did you do it?"

"Why did I seduce you?" Domenic smiled. "Because I had a feeling you were just sitting there in no man's land, not sure which way to jump. I wanted you and I had an idea the feeling was mutual. However, I knew there was no way you'd make the first move, so I decided to give you a push." He hesitated and rubbed Adam's back. "Not mad at me, are you?"

"Of course not. If anything, I'm grateful."

"I'm glad." Domenic snuggled him close again, and Adam's spirits soared. "The first time I asked if we could share a table in the hospice cafeteria...I don't know. Maybe it was something about your looks—the green eyes and black hair are very eye-catching, or the way you carry yourself, or the way you were sitting there all alone, totally lost in the book you were reading. Whatever it was, it snagged my attention and reeled me in. I had a feeling we might be kindred spirits, but I wasn't sure and it's not something I could just come out and ask."

"You had no trouble asking me earlier."

"I'm ashamed to admit the question just popped out. I had no business to start pressuring you and demanding answers."

"It's okay. I'm glad you did because it made me think instead of pretending the problem didn't exist."

Domenic's hands slipped down Adam's back and began squeezing his ass cheeks. "What problem's that?"

"The one that no longer exists."

It was completely dark now, both inside the cottage and outside on the escarpment. All Adam's previous visits up here had been made in daylight, and now he felt disoriented and unsure. It made no difference that the room was small and poorly furnished, he still couldn't recall the exact location of anything. He wasn't even sure if the sofa was to his right or his left. Behind him or somewhere in front. "Do you remember where I put the blankets?"

"I think they're on that ratty old sofa."

"Now, if I could just find where that is..."

After a couple of seconds fumbling around, they found the sofa and covered themselves with the blankets.

"This is the perfect hideaway," Domenic observed, arranging his body behind Adam so they were tucked together like a pair of spoons. "I love it! Some place only we know about. And if we'd thought to bring a few sandwiches and a couple of beers, we could say fuck the world and stay here for days."

"Maybe you could, but tomorrow's Monday, and I have to go to work."

"Right. I seem to recall you telling me you own a bookstore you inherited from your parents. Would you want to work there if they were still alive?"

Adam sucked in a breath as Domenic's ice-cold fingers found their way beneath the hem of his shirt and began to stroke his warm flesh.

"Absolutely. Carstairs' Rare Books is practically an institution in Lakeside. It's been in my family since forever."

"Sounds like my family's law firm. The only difference being that you're content to follow in Daddy's footsteps, whereas I'm not."

"My parents weren't control freaks. I think they were happy I wanted to continue the family tradition, but if I'd decided to do something else, they'd have supported my decision. No question." Adam hesitated. He had a feeling he knew what was at the forefront of Domenic's mind, and he wished there was something he could do to help. "If your brother doesn't make it, do you think your father will expect you to come back home and take his place?"

"There's no if about Roger dying, it's just a matter of when. And I don't know for sure how my Dad will react once it becomes fact. I don't want to think about it either. Can we talk about something else, please?"

"Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know. What about life, love, and the pursuit of happiness?"

Domenic's fingers had ceased stroking and started to explore a little. He pressed a finger against Adam's butthole, and Adam's muscles tensed. He'd read the books and seen the movies, but absolutely nothing made up for inexperience. And while he had a pretty good idea what was going to happen next, he still wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"Relax, why don't you? I know this all new to you, but I'm hoping you're going to let yourself go and enjoy it."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Do you want one?"

"Not really."

"In that case, just forget about being nervous and hold on

tight. I'm going to take you to the moon, my man," Domenic whispered against Adam's ear. Suddenly, he pushed back the blankets and got off the sofa. "At least, that was the plan. But there's no room on this thing to go anywhere. I'm going to check out that mattress in the other room."

"How are you going to do that? It's too damn dark to see a thing. Anyway, what if it's full of mice?"

"All I care is that it's dry. If it is, we'll give it a shake and with any luck whatever's living in there will take off."

"What about fleas?"

"Fleas? Where's your sense of adventure?"

Adam laughed. "Non-existent when it comes to anything creepy-crawly. But I'm hoping this sudden drop in the temperature will have killed off any bugs." He loved the feelings of warmth and closeness that had developed so quickly between himself and Domenic. Mostly he loved being with someone who was on the same wavelength, someone he could talk to and share his time with. Although, after what Domenic had said about keeping his sex life to one-nighters, Adam knew there was a good chance this was a one-time thing. Something Domenic needed to keep his mind off his brother for a few hours and nothing more. But right now, Adam didn't care. He'd waited a lifetime for this moment, and he intended to enjoy it for as long as it lasted.

After a few bangs, a lot of rude words, and a couple of other loud noises as Domenic bumped into walls and the connecting door between the two rooms, he finally found his way back to Adam and the sofa. "Mattress feels dry. And apart from smelling a bit musty, it seems to be just fine."

"Nothing in it that shouldn't be there?"

"I hope not. That's what all the noise was about. I picked up the corner and dropped it down a couple of times just to make sure they got the message. You coming?"

A few minutes later, Adam and Domenic were again snuggled together under the blankets, but the mattress afforded them considerably more room than they'd had on the sofa.

"All comfy and cozy?" Domenic asked as his cool fingers opened Adam's pants, which he'd pulled back up earlier, and began to caress his dick.

Adam's muscles tensed, and Dominic hesitated. "If you're going along with this just for me, please don't. It's bad enough being treated like a child by my parents. Don't you start, too. You want me to stop, just say so."

"No!" Adam reached up and stroked Domenic's face. "It's just that..."

"You're nervous?"

"I guess. First time jitters might be a better description. I've been sitting on the fence for so long, afraid to take a step in either direction."

"Have you ever been with a woman?"

"Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"I drank too much at my high school prom, and some of my friends got one of the girls to take me to her hotel room and seduce me." "And did she?"

Adam's face burned at the awful memory. "No. That's when I woke up, thank God! She'd taken off her clothes, and she was lying on top of me. Her bush was in my face and she was trying to suck me off. I remember all I could smell was her pussy and this strong perfume. I swear she'd marinated herself in the stuff."

"And?"

"I pushed her off and got the hell out of there."

"And signed up for monkhood the next morning?"

"Just about. It wasn't a traumatic experience, if that's what you're thinking. Just really awful."

"Did you like the girl?"

"No. If I had it would have been different."

"Quite sure about that?"

"Positive. If she'd turned me on, I guess we'd have fucked one another senseless. But she didn't." Adam gave an embarrassed chuckle. "The one who turned me on was her boyfriend—Lakeside High's football hero and all around stud."

Domenic resumed stroking Adam's cock. "And?"

"Nothing. I'd never been interested in girls and sex the way my friends were. My mom thought I was a late bloomer. I didn't know what I was. Except that whenever I imagined myself having sex, it was never with a woman."

"And no guy has ever made a pass at you?"

"Not until today. If they had...I really wanted someone to. Just so I could know for sure. But...it never happened. And I never had the nerve to take the first step myself."

Taking Adam's hand in his, Domenic pressed it against his own turgid cock. "I want you, Adam. But I only have one condom left, so take off your pants, then turn over and position yourself on your knees."

"If you're worried about...you know, I've never been with anyone before, so there's no risk."

"Maybe not. But I have. My last test was clear, but I don't ever take chances."

While Adam was positioning himself as Domenic asked, he heard the faint tearing of the foil package...and then he waited what seemed like a lifetime until he felt Domenic's cool hands squeeze his balls.

"Just relax and go with the flow," Domenic instructed as he moved in behind him and began to slide a hand up and down Adam's shaft. "This is the first time for you, so we'll need a little lubrication to make things easier."

Excitement was making Adam's heart beat faster, and his dick ached with the need to explode. But he didn't want anything to happen too soon. He wanted to stretch out the moment and enjoy it for as long as he could. "How about some spit? I have a mouthful."

Domenic covered Adam's mouth with his hand. "Let me have it."

Adam kept perfectly still, denying himself the urge to buck against Domenic's hand as the cold spit was applied against his butthole and Domenic's finger began to slide in and out. As his sphincter relaxed, Domenic added a second finger, then a third, and Adam could hardly wait for the main event.

A moment later, his wish was granted. Domenic removed his fingers, parted Adam's ass cheeks, but then Adam spoiled everything by tensing up as the head of Domenic's cock tried to push inside.

"Relax," Domenic instructed. "If you don't, either this won't happen, or I'll get carried away and hurt you. Now...deep breaths, okay?"

Again, Adam did as instructed, and as his muscles gave up the fight, he experienced the long-awaited and delicious sensation as Domenic's arms enfolded his body and his shaft penetrated his body.

Adam was aware of a little pain as Domenic began to move in and out. But there was pleasure in the pain, the kind that built his excitement and made his heart beat even faster. As Domenic grasped his penis and began to slide a hand up and down it in sync with his strokes, the effort of denying himself the orgasm he badly wanted and needed occupied his entire being. But then the pain and the pleasure united and combined in a maelstrom of unaccustomed feelings and sensations that grew and grew until Adam felt the world shatter like a glass bottle thrown against a wall, and the pair of them collapsed in a shuddering, sweaty heap.

He vaguely recalled Domenic maneuvering him back into his pants, and tucking the blankets around him. And he remembered Domenic kissing him on the lips and whispering, "Sweet dreams." \* \* \*

When Adam awoke, he discovered it was morning and Domenic was no longer with him on their makeshift bed.

Pushing back the blankets, he struggled to sit up. "Domenic? Where are you?"

He waited. But there was no answer, and nothing to hear except for the wind outside, sighing in the branches of the trees.

Convinced his feelings for Domenic Morton had gotten out of hand and he'd dreamed everything else, he got off the mattress and went into the other room. As expected, this room was empty, too...but then he saw a piece of paper on the otherwise empty desk, anchored with a glass partly filled with water.

Hurrying over, he snatched up the paper.

I couldn't sleep, so I borrowed your cell and called my mom (she's a real worrier), just to let her know I was okay. Anyway, seems my brother's condition has worsened, so I have to go. I'll call you. Dom.

Adam's eyes burned with tears as he crumpled up the message and threw it against the wall. "Oh, right. Sure you'll call. Like when, huh? Right after hell freezes over, or will it be shortly thereafter?"

He wished it had been all a dream. Waking up after a

dream was always a bit disappointing. But waking up to find you'd been used and discarded hurt like hell. *And to use that shit about his dying brother!* That was beyond sick. Domenic Morton deserved to burn in hell.

He looked out the window. The snow had stopped some time during the night, and the temperature must have warmed up because most of it had melted away.

He turned on the tap full blast and sluiced some of the icy water on his face.

How could he have been so fucking stupid? Or was it just incredibly naïve and super easy? Of course, admitting he was still a virgin had been a real bad move on his part. An open invitation for what had happened after that.

Okay, so he was no longer a virgin. After all these years of wondering he now knew exactly where he stood and what he wanted. But allowing himself to get sucked in like that had been a high price to pay. So what if Domenic had given him a couple of chances to push him away? He'd first made damn sure to get him so fucking hot and bothered it wasn't likely to happen.

*Oh, yes, Dominic Morton was as slick as they came.* He'd known exactly what he wanted and zoomed straight in like a vulture.

Tears cascaded down Adam's face, but he made no effort to stop them. Instead, he kicked the old desk a few times until he made a gaping hole in one side and his emotions settled down. Once he felt more in control, he washed the glass and put it away, then he folded the blankets and returned them to the cupboard.

A combination of hurt and anger flooded his mind as he zipped up his jacket and left the cottage and, for one fleeting moment, he wished he had the wherewithal to burn the place down. Fire was supposed to be cathartic. It would remove any and all reminders of his gullibility and Domenic's powers of seduction. But Adam knew even destroying the whole freaking escarpment, reducing it to nothing more than a pile of rocks and a few acres of earth wouldn't accomplish that. It would do nothing, except ruin the landscape and serve as an even bigger reminder the not knowing had been a whole lot better than the knowing.

#### At least it hadn't hurt.

When Adam got back to where he'd left his car in the hospice parking lot, he was tempted to check with the nurse on duty and find out the situation regarding Roger Morton. But pride prevented him from doing anything except unlocking his vehicle and getting in. If what Domenic had said was true, why hadn't he just woken him up and told him? It would have been kinder and more believable than writing him that pathetic note.

Probably because writing a note was a whole lot easier than doing it in person, Adam told himself brutally. A case of take what you want and slip away fast, like a thief in the night, before anyone can stop you or ask questions.

By the time he'd swung by his house, showered, and changed into working clothes, Adam was over an hour late in arriving at the bookstore. If it had been a Friday, his part-time helper would have been there to open up. As it was, he doubted many people were out looking for reading material or hunting for rare books on a Monday morning. If they were, they hadn't considered it important enough to wait around.

As Monday turned into Tuesday and then Wednesday into Thursday, there was no word from Domenic. But Adam hadn't expected any. He just continued to maintain his fury at his own stupidity in allowing himself to be swept off his feet. There had been a couple of weak moments when he'd tried telling himself there was a chance Domenic had been telling the truth. In fact, he even went as far as to pick up the phone on at least a dozen occasions with the intention of calling the hospice and checking on Roger Morton. But each time he found the courage, he never managed to dial more than the first few numbers before he chickened out and broke the connection. It was bad enough knowing he was a fool. He didn't need the actual proof.

By the time Saturday night came around, Adam was giving serious thought to giving his weekly visit to the hospice a miss. He didn't want to risk running into Domenic and hearing about how it had all been a false alarm, or how his brother had made an unexpected and miraculous turnaround. He wanted nothing to do with Domenic, period.

Of course, if he didn't go in, his "clients" would be disappointed, and they had so little to look forward to, Adam couldn't bring himself to stick them with his problems. Anyway it wasn't really a problem at all. His "clients" were all either elderly or permanently incapacitated, but in semistable condition, and therefore in a different part of the building from where any unconscious patients were kept. All he had to do was go in at his usual time, do his thing, and leave right after instead of going to the cafeteria. That way his chances of running into Domenic were minimal.

By the time the lunch trolleys arrived, everything had gone exactly the way Adam had hoped. In fact, he was sure he was home free, until he went out to the parking lot and noticed Domenic's car parked a couple of slots over from his vehicle with Domenic sitting in the driver's seat.

He considered going back into the building or waiting out of sight until Domenic gave up and took off. But to hell with him, Adam decided, feeling all the hurt and pain he'd suffered when he'd awakened alone in the cottage come back to clog his throat and tighten his chest. It was bad enough Domenic had taken advantage of his inexperience and left him feeling like the worst kind of fool.

He didn't need the sonofabitch to start manufacturing guilty feelings or twist the knife with feeble apologies. Such as how he'd wanted there to be more, but since he lived on the west coast and Adam on the east it just wouldn't work out. And how he hoped Adam understood, breaking it off quick like that before it had a chance to develop into something more was really best in the long run.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the band played on.

Before he could change his mind, Adam made straight for his car. As he opened the door, from the corner of his eyes, he was aware of Domenic getting out of his vehicle and trying to snag his attention. And he heard him yell, "Hey, Adam. Stop! I need to talk to you."

Adam's first thought was to gun the motor and exit the lot like a rocket leaving the Cape—except he was supposed to be a responsible adult, much too old for that kind of temper tantrum. He also thought about going over and telling Domenic face-to-face to fuck off and leave him alone, that he'd done enough damage. But in Adam's view, there was nothing that made a guy feel worse than screwing up and not being allowed to explain. Keeping his eyes focused on the way ahead and acting as if Domenic were invisible, he drove off as calmly and sedately as he imagined an octogenarian would in an ancient Rolls.

A quick glance in the rearview mirror showed Domenic giving vent to his frustration by kicking his tires and hitting the roof of his car with his fists, and Adam felt a small surge of satisfaction. He was grateful to Domenic for giving him the push he'd needed to make up his mind to who he was and what he wanted out of life. Still, gratitude had its limits. Given a choice, he hoped it was the last he would ever see of the man.

\* \* \*

Late Monday afternoon, Adam was alone in the bookstore, opening a new shipment in the back room, when he heard the bell signal the arrival of a customer. Leaving what he was doing, he hurried into the main part of the store, hesitating when he saw what he was pretty sure was the back of Domenic Morton, standing by the cash register.

Domenic hadn't seen him and, while Adam's first impulse was to keep it that way, he'd never been one for playing silly games. Advancing into the store, he kept his gaze averted and said quietly, "Please leave."

Domenic turned around, fast. "No. Adam, no! Please, let me explain. That's why I'm here. Why—"

"I don't have to do anything." Adam opened the door and gestured for Domenic to go. "I don't want to hear your excuses, reasons, or whatever else it is you're planning on saying. Just get out of here and leave me alone."

"Come on, Adam. Give me a break. You don't understand."

Something about the note of desperation in Domenic's voice made Adam look at him. Red-eyed and unshaven, smelling of stale sweat and with his normally well-groomed brown hair standing up in greasy spikes, Domenic gave the impression of having been on a major binge. Whether booze or drugs, Adam neither knew nor cared, but the guy looked as if he hadn't showered or slept in days. Whatever his problem, Adam wanted no part of it. "I suggest you go home and sleep it off," he said, pointing to the street.

Domenic didn't move and, for one awful second, Adam though he was about to burst into tears. But then he straightened, gave himself a shake and spoke in a voice so low Adam barely caught the actual words. "I just wanted to tell you that my brother died."

As the tears began streaming down Domenic's face and he

made to leave, Adam grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the store. He then shut and locked the door, flipped the sign to "closed," and urged Domenic into the back room.

Wrapping his arms around Domenic, Adam held him, rocking him and rubbing his back until the worst of the storm passed. After a couple of minutes, Domenic had recovered sufficiently to pull free of Adam's embrace and begin searching his pockets for something to dry his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, in between blowing his nose and scrubbing his face with a handful of crumpled tissues. "Give me a minute, and I'll go. I know I should've called you. I can just imagine what you must've been thinking. But I lost the piece of paper with your cell number. And I don't know where you live. I thought about calling you here. But my parents needed me. And I'm sorry. I really, truly am."

Adam removed a pile of books from the nearest chair and pushed Domenic into it. "When did this happen?"

"Like I said in the note, I called my mom to let her know I was okay. She told me they'd received an urgent call from the hospice a few minutes earlier, saying Roger's condition had worsened. He'd been transferred back to Lakeside General, and we should come right away. It was just starting to get light, and you looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake you up. For all I knew, it was a false alarm, so I wrote the note and left right away.

"Anyway, long story short. Sometime during the early hours of Monday morning, Roger had a seizure the doctors suspected might be due to some kind of pressure on his brain, so they shipped him back to General for tests. Apparently, the tests showed a build-up of fluid somewhere in his body. I don't remember exactly where or what they thought caused it, and anyway it doesn't matter now. Before they had a chance to do anything, he had a second, much larger seizure and checked out."

"I'm so sorry," Adam said, feeling like a thoughtless pig. Domenic had told him it was just a matter of time with his brother. And as a hospice volunteer, he knew how fast these things could change—sometimes in literally the blink of an eye. The very least he should have done was given Domenic the benefit of any doubt and checked with the hospice. "Your parents must be devastated."

"It's been one helluva week for all of us, and the funeral on Saturday was the worst part of all," Domenic admitted. "Totally heartbreaking, to tell the truth. My mother was determined to put on a brave face even if it killed her, while my dad spent most of the day walking around with his eyes glazed over and acting like a zombie. Of course, all Roger's friends and fellow lawyers were there, too, and all of them much too young to be saying goodbye to a friend. But let's face it, at only thirty-five, Rog was far too damn young to die."

"Want to go out and get a drink?" Adam asked.

"Yeah. I could certainly use one, but..." Domenic rubbed a hand over his chin and looked down at his crumpled shirt and pants. "I haven't slept in what feels like days. I've just been driving around in my mom's car, thinking. I can't very well go anywhere looking like this."

Adam pointed to a closed door in the corner of the room. "The washroom is through there. You'll find plenty of hot water and soap, and also an electric razor. Help yourself. And I have some promotional T-shirts here." Adam took a box from a nearby shelf, opened it and handed it to Domenic. "Take this in with you. They're not the fanciest or the most fashionable, but at least they're new and there's bound to be one that'll fit you."

When Domenic came back out of the washroom, he looked a whole lot better than when he'd gone in. His eyes were still a little red, but he'd shaved, combed his hair, and exchanged his shirt for a purple T-shirt with a yellow dragon cavorting across the front. "Pretty sexy, huh?" he murmured, glancing down at his chest.

"If you're into dragons. When did you last eat?"

Domenic shrugged. "I'm not sure. I don't remember."

Adam locked the bookstore and led the way to a small restaurant in the next block. "What do you want to drink?" he asked Domenic.

"Scotch, no ice."

"Make that two scotches, one with ice and one without," he instructed the waiter. "And bring us a couple of mediumrare steaks as well."

"I'm not really hungry," Domenic protested.

"You can't drink on an empty stomach. Just eat what you can."

When the drinks arrived, instead of Domenic tossing his

straight down the way Adam had more or less expected, he took one small sip and set the glass on the table.

"So...when are you planning to return to L.A.?" Adam asked.

Domenic picked up his glass, stared at the contents for a moment, and put it down again. "My parents don't want me to go back. They want me to stay here."

"What do you want?"

"I want us all to be happy. That's why I've been driving around for hours. I've been trying to figure out how I can make it happen."

"And did you come up with an answer?"

"Nope." Domenic shot Adam a wry grin and quickly downed half his scotch. "They have no idea I'm gay. If I come home, they're bound to find out real fast. Lakeside is a small town. Someone will see something, and before I know it, my dad will go nuts and tell me never to darken his door again, or whatever it is the uptight and the upright tell their kids these days. And that would break my mom's heart."

"You're not a kid, you're an adult. Tell them yourself."

Domenic's eyes flew wide open. "You're joking. Right?"

"Better they hear it from you than from anyone else."

"True. But..." Domenic tossed back the rest of his drink. "And even better if I go back to L.A. and let them continue living their lives in blissful ignorance. Anyway, that's not all they want."

"Your dad wants you back in the firm?"

"Give the man first prize." Domenic sighed and signaled

the waiter for a refill. "According to him, instead of taking advantage of my expensive education, I'm wasting it by spending my time writing trash."

"Your book is a bestseller. Your parents should be proud of you and your accomplishments."

"I think both of them are. Dad was just sounding off in the hope I'd give up and get with his program."

"If you did come back, where would you live?"

"Some place only you and I knew about. Otherwise, my mom would always be coming over, bringing me casseroles and making sure I've changed the sheets and my underwear."

The food arrived and so did Domenic's fresh drink, and for the next little while they both concentrated on eating what Adam decided was the best steak he'd had since the last time he was here.

Finally, Domenic broke the silence as he pushed his empty plate to one side, and said, "What are we having for dessert?"

Adam smiled and picked up the dessert menu. "I thought you weren't hungry."

"I'm not. At least not too much after eating that great big steak—which was excellent by the way. Do they have black forest cake on that menu?"

"No. Pecan pie, carrot cake, or lemon sherbet."

"Nothing chocolate?"

"Sorry."

"In that case, I'll pass."

While they were eating, Adam had been doing his best not to think about Domenic's family problems. Or about the time they'd spent together in the old cottage below the ridge. The first was none of his business, and the second had been just one of those things that wasn't likely to happen again and the sooner he forgot about it the better.

Except he couldn't look at Domenic without remembering, and the remembering was making him hard. He could still feel the touch of Domenic's cool fingers against his hot flesh. And he could still remember every last tiny detail of their loving from the moment he felt Domenic's cock nudging against his butt to the final glorious orgasm. He stared down into the remnants of his scotch and concentrated on what was left of the last lone ice cube. Even in the unlikely event Domenic decided to stay, it didn't mean he'd want to pick up where they left off. Especially not if he was worried about his father finding out.

A hand gripped his knee and he looked up, fast.

"What are you thinking about?"

Adam shrugged and pushed his glass away. "Just this and that."

"Like the time we spent together at the cottage, for example?"

Adam felt the blood rush to his face. "Why would you think that?"

The pressure of Domenic's grip on his knee increased. "Because, despite everything that's happened, I can't stop thinking about it. I loved my brother, no question. And I'll miss him like crazy. But even at the funeral, when the pastor was doling out the usual platitudes, and that stock line, something about in the midst of life death can pop out of nowhere, etcetera, all I could think of was you and me and the musty smell of the mattress and those old army blankets, and how it felt when..."

Domenic smiled and rubbed his hand along Adam's inner thigh, an inch or two above his knee. "They say it's normal for a death to make the bereaved feel horny—a reaffirmation of the life force or some such crap. It certainly worked in my case."

Adam held his breath, wishing Domenic would stop what he was doing. If he didn't...

"Did the first time feel good?" Domenic asked.

Domenic's hazel eyes were now almost black. They were also hot and filled with need, and for a brief moment, Adam almost forgot they were in a public place. But as the waiter came over with a coffee pot in his hand, he pushed Domenic's hand away. "You know damn well how it felt. You were there. Remember?"

"Yeah. And the next time will be even better. Guaranteed."

"Coffee or dessert for anyone?" The waiter inquired.

"Just the bill," Domenic replied, taking his wallet from his back pocket and tossing a credit card on the table.

"I'll give him my share in cash," Adam said, reaching in his own pocket.

"That's okay. You get it next time."

Adam felt a rush of feelings he couldn't quite define. Relief? Excitement? "Next time?"

Domenic rested his arms on the edge of the table and

leaned in close. "For various reasons, all of which you can figure out for yourself, I didn't think we would get any farther than sharing a table in the hospice cafeteria. But now that we have..."

"What?"

"I don't want to let you go. I've never slept with anyone I wasn't attracted to, but this is different than those other times. I can't explain it. It's more than sexual attraction. It's..."

Adam's curiosity was ready to burst and he wished Domenic would stop beating around the bush and just spit out whatever it was he was trying to say. "It's what?"

"Laugh at me if you want, but something happened between us long before we actually spoke to one another and shared a table in the cafeteria. Call it chemistry, call it love or lust, or just plain need. All I know is that I saw you, and I wanted you. Simple as that."

Adam knew what it was like to have feelings for a total stranger. They came out of nowhere and then just...just disappeared. But love at first sight? It sounded like something from one of the romances he read to his "clients." "Where did this happen? In the hospice?"

"It was the first time I went there to see Roger. I couldn't find his room because I'd taken a wrong turn. I heard someone reading aloud to a patient, and I stopped outside the room and listened for a moment. You were reading a romance to a teenage girl who was obviously in bad shape. She was so pale and so thin, you could almost see right through her. You didn't know I was there, and neither did she because her eyes were closed and she was smiling. There was something so beautiful about the moment. The warmth and closeness between the two of you, the soft tone of your voice and the contented smile on her face...it was as if you were the hero of the story and you'd come galloping to save her from all the bad stuff. I thought perhaps you were her brother or a member of her family.

"Anyway, I was curious, so I asked one of the nurses who you were. She told me you were a volunteer and that you visited with patients who had no one who cared about them. I started to think about the kind of people who would leave a young girl like that to die alone—she couldn't have been more than fifteen, sixteen max. And then I wondered what kind of person it took to do what you were doing to make sure the alone part didn't happen to people like her. I mean the patients are all dying. You don't know from one week to the next who'll be there and who won't. I imagine the not knowing must be beyond hard."

Adam shrugged, feeling more than a little embarrassed. The truth was he knew what it was like firsthand to have no one close enough to really care, and he died a little inside each and every time he lost one of his "clients." But if a couple of hours of his time brought them some enjoyment and helped to ease their pain, then that was what he would continue to do. "It's not something I allow myself to think about too much. If I did, it would defeat my purpose. I'd get too emotionally involved and I'd have to stop visiting. They tell me their first name and whether they want to talk or have me read them a story or the newspaper, and I take it from there." "Do you know what's wrong with them?"

"I know the ones I visit are all terminal cases who don't have a lot of time left. That's all I need or want to know. And don't make me out to be some kind of saint because I'm not."

Just then the waiter returned with Domenic's credit card and the bill. As Domenic added a tip and signed on the dotted line, Adam pushed back his chair. "Ready to go?"

Outside the restaurant, Adam hesitated. "Where did you leave your car?"

"The multi-level parking across from your store. You?"

"I have a spot in the alley behind the store. I assume you're staying with your parents?"

"Yes. But I'm going to find a hotel for tonight. I need some space and a rest from Mom's constant worrying about me, and Dad's non-stop attempts to turn me into a clone of my brother. I'm not a baby, I'm not Roger, and they need to accept that."

"Why don't you come and stay at my place?" Adam offered, and then wondered if it had been the wrong thing to say. The way Domenic talked, it sounded as if he wanted more, but maybe that's all it had been, just talk. Adam knew he needed to accept what had happened between them at the cottage would never be more than a one-time thing and all Domenic's love-at-first-sight stuff was just a way of pretending it had meant something. "You'd be more than welcome."

Domenic ran his fingers through his hair and frowned. "You sure?"

"Quite sure. You can even have your own room if you want."

"I don't need that much space." Domenic grinned and punched Adam lightly on the arm. "All I want is some distance from my parents."

A tiny spark of hope flickered deep inside Adam, but he stomped it out right away. "You know Applewood Drive?"

"When I was a kid, my grandparents lived on Applewood. The third house on the left when you turn off Main."

"Mine is at the other end. Last one on the right."

\* \* \*

Adam just had time to get out of his vehicle before Domenic pulled into the driveway behind him.

"Wow! It's so big," Domenic observed. "You live here alone?"

Adam shrugged. His home looked a lot like the picture of a Scottish baronial hall he'd seen in an old book, and according to his dad, that's what their ancestor had intended. "Dad's great-grandfather built it when Lakeside barely qualified as a village, and it's been in the family ever since. I know it's too big for one person. After my parents died, I thought about buying a condo and living the life. But it's my home, I love it, and I'm not planning to move anytime soon."

"How many bedrooms?"

"Six."

"You keep some of them closed off?"

Adam shook his head. "And live in one room with my

memories like a latter-day Miss Haversham? No way. I have a housekeeper who comes in for a few hours every day, Monday through Friday. She keeps the place clean and tidy, and leaves me something to warm up for my dinner when I get home from work."

"Very nice," Domenic murmured as he followed Adam into the house.

"What do you have? A house or an apartment?" Adam wondered aloud.

"I'm currently renting an apartment at the beach. But the lease is up at the end of the year, and I just signed a new twobook contract with a nice fat advance, so I've been looking around for something to buy."

"Did you find anything?"

"I'd just started looking when Roger had his accident."

"And?" Adam flicked on the lights and led the way into the large kitchen-cum-family room at the back of the house that contained a mixture of styles. An old-fashioned Welsh dresser complete with china plates dominated one wall, banquette seating and a small, round dining table filled the window nook, the floor was covered in expensive Italian tile, and the appliances were all brushed steel. Yet somehow it all worked together and made the room feel comfortable and welcoming.

"I thought I had my life all figured out. But then you and I got together in the cottage and what happened between us changed everything. And now, with Roger gone and Dad wanting me back in the family firm...I don't know. I know

some people can balance a writing career with a day job, but I don't see myself doing it."

Domenic sighed and sat on the banquette. "It would be different if I enjoyed the law, but I don't. I don't want to defend criminals, incorporate companies, draw wills or contracts, wind up estates, or any of the other fun stuff lawyers do. It's too dry and exacting. So fucking precise and so not me. It screws with my creativity."

Adam laughed. "So what does that make you, a rebel?"

Domenic got off the banquette and wrapped his arms around Adam. "Who knows? Something between a rebel and a whacko, I guess. Why does life have to be so friggin' difficult?"

Adam returned Domenic's hug, loving the moment of closeness. *If Domenic decided to stay in Lakeside*— He cut himself off mid-thought. "I have a nasty feeling we do that to ourselves. Instead of being open and honest and saying I want this and don't want that, we give in to other people's selfish demands by tiptoeing around with all this maybe and perhaps shit."

"So you think I should tell my old man to stuff it?"

"No." Adam broke the embrace and stepped back. "I can't make that kind of decision for you. You have to figure out for yourself where you want to live, who you want to live with, and how you want to spend your life."

"But my parents—"

"They can't do it for you either. Anyway, chances are you'll outlive them by a good few years," Adam interrupted.

"I'm going upstairs to take a shower and change my clothes. Make yourself at home. There're beer and soft drinks in the fridge if you're thirsty. I won't be long."

\* \* \*

Adam had just turned the spray to low and was about to shut it off and step out of the shower when he heard the faint squeak of the glass shower door being opened. The next thing he knew, Domenic's arms wrapped around him from behind, and he felt Domenic's lips nuzzling his neck.

"I truly do love you, man. You make me feel so good, so grounded. I actually feel like my own person when I'm around you. A man capable of making his own decisions."

"And sticking with them?" Adam asked.

"You betcha." Domenic's tongue invaded the outer rim of Adam's ear, sending a shiver of need arcing down his body and coming to rest in his dick. "I know exactly what I want. And I know it won't be easy. But you're at the top of the list. And right now, I want to fuck you, baby. I want to celebrate our Nirvana by feeling my hard cock sliding in and out of your tight ass until we've either had enough, or we pass out. Sound like a plan, yes?"

Adam was already melting inside at the thought of what Domenic was suggesting because this truly was the moment of rebirth for them both. For him, it was finding the courage to accept and embrace his sexuality. For Domenic, it was finding the courage to take control of his life.

Domenic reached around Adam and turned off the shower.

Then he picked up a bottle of shower gel and slathered some on his already condom-covered shaft and also down Adam's crack.

Adam ran a tentative finger down Domenic's engorged penis. "You weren't even a little bit concerned I might say no?"

Domenic laughed and rubbed the tip of his forefinger over Adam's lips. "If you did, I'd have been forced to use my boyish charm to change your mind."

"It probably wouldn't have been difficult."

"That's what I figured." Domenic slipped an arm around Adam's waist and pulled him in close. Adam closed his eyes as he felt Domenic's mouth brush against his own.

"Open your mouth," Domenic whispered.

Adam did as he asked, relishing the slippery slide of Domenic's tongue against his own. He loved the way their tongues intertwined, teasing and exploring in a complicated tango all their own. And he loved the roughness of Dominic's face against his skin. It was a turn-on all by itself. As Domenic's hands caressed his shoulders and back, then slipped lower to squeeze and cup his butt cheeks, Adam mimicked every move, every action. He knew he had a lot to learn, and he was relying on Domenic to teach him.

As Domenic turned him around, Adam braced his body by placing his hands flat against the shower walls.

"Quick study. Hmm?" Domenic muttered.

Adam closed his eyes tight and held his breath, his excitement barely in check as Domenic spread Adam's ass

wide and pressed the head of his cock against Adam's hole. Adam wondered what it would feel like to do this to Domenic. In fact, he could hardly wait for the chance to try it out.

"Do I get a turn at this?" he asked, his breath coming out in a rush as Domenic pushed all the way in.

Domenic grasped Adam's rod and began to slide his fingers up and down it in time to his thrusts. "Sure, if we have any energy left." He began to lick and bite Adam's shoulders and neck. "This, my man, is your first lesson in Getting Some 101. So you'd better pay attention."

Adam chuckled and wiggled his butt against Domenic's groin. "If I'd known it felt this good, I'd have done something about it long before now."

"Done what? Checked out the gay bars?"

"I don't think we have any here in Lakeside."

Domenic began to pump harder and faster, and Adam was having trouble keeping his balance.

"Probably not. But there's always Hamilton or Toronto. Still..." Domenic slowed his thrusts and resumed his investigation of Adam's ear. "I'm glad you didn't go looking."

"Yeah. Me, too." Adam sucked in a breath. He was so close to coming, just one more thrust, one more pass of Domenic's fingers up and down his cock. He felt like a rubber band pulling tighter and tighter, until suddenly he knew he was coming and no power on earth could stop it.

As he collapsed on the shower floor, and Domenic dropped down beside him, still holding him, still kissing and loving him, Adam knew it had been worth the wait. \* \* \*

The next morning, in the middle of breakfast, Domenic said, "What time do you open the bookstore?"

"Ten or a couple of minutes after. But I'm usually there by nine-thirty, just to make sure everything's set for the day. Why?"

"I need you to come with me somewhere, first. It won't take long."

Adam hesitated, certain he knew where Domenic wanted him to go, but uncertain whether or not it was a good idea. "Your parents' house?"

"Yup. I called and checked, and they're both there."

"Isn't this something you should be doing alone?"

"No." Domenic reached across the table and grasped Adam's hand. "I was awake half the night thinking about what you said. Apart from that one act of rebellion when I quit Morton and Associates and moved out west, I've allowed other people to arrange my life and tell me what I want and how I want to do it. Hell, this latest contract I signed with my publisher was all their people and my agent. I wasn't given a chance to even open my mouth. They practically picked my characters' names for me."

"And?" Adam asked, positive Domenic had come to more decisions than just the one to take back his life.

"You said I needed to figure out for myself where I want to live, with whom, and what I want to do with my life. You were right, so I found a piece of paper and a pen in the kitchen, and here's what I came up with." He handed Adam a sheet from the magnetized "Things To Buy" pad on the side of refrigerator.

Adam looked down at the handwritten words.

Where: Anywhere in the world, provided it's with Adam. With: Adam. My Life: Sharing it with Adam, and continuing to write.

Adam's eyes went a little blurry and the words danced all over the paper, but somehow he managed to get his emotions under control. "Is this a proposal?"

"It's what I want, and I hope it's what you want as well. But I'm not trying to rush you into any kind of commitment or even a temporary decision. We can get to all that later. This visit to my parents is..." Domenic sighed, chewing his bottom lip as he searched for the right words. "I'm not scared to go by myself, if that's what you're thinking. And I don't need the moral support of another body to tell them I'm gay. My sexuality is none of their business. I just need to go over there, pick up my stuff, and make it clear I'm an adult who needs to run his own life without any outside interference. Having you with me will show them I'm serious."

"Do you think they'll try to fight you?"

"At a guess, Mom will cry, and Dad will either voice his disappointment, or stomp off in huff. It won't go well, but I already know that. They may even disown me. If that's what they decide to do, then that's their choice. I love them both, but..." Adam pushed back his chair. "Okay, let's go. Your car or mine?"

"It's actually my mom's car. But it's only a couple of blocks over. We can walk."

\* \* \*

Adam figured Domenic's mother must have been watching for them because she opened the front door and stepped outside before they were halfway up the walk. However, she seemed to be a lot more relaxed than he'd expected.

"Hi, dear." She smiled and offered her cheek for her son's kiss. "Come on in. I just made a fresh pot of coffee."

When they reached the kitchen, they found Domenic's father sitting at the table, reading the morning paper.

As the three of them entered the room, Morton Senior looked up. "Morning, son. Your mother tells me you spent last night with a friend."

To Adam's ears, the comment didn't sound even slightly judgmental; even so, Domenic shuffled his feet. "Sorry, I know I should've called, but... Anyway, I'd like you to meet my friend, Adam Carstairs. Adam volunteers at the hospice, which is where we met, and he also owns Carstairs, the bookstore downtown."

"What do you take in your coffee, Adam?" Mrs. Morton inquired.

"Black is fine. Thank you."

Domenic's father folded his paper and put it to one side. "Sit down, why don't you?" Domenic gripped the back of one of the chairs with both hands, and Adam noticed his knuckles turn white. He knew Domenic was nervous and unsure, but this was his battle and he had to fight it his own way. "I really just came over to pick up my stuff and to let you know I've decided to move back to Lakeside. Adam lives over on Applewood—the last house on the right at the end of the street. I'm moving in with him." He turned around and reached for Adam's hand. "Unless, of course, Adam has a change of heart and throws me out."

As Domenic turned back toward his father, the older man snagged his son's gaze and the two men stared at one another for a very long moment.

"I take it that you won't be rejoining the firm?"

"Sorry, Dad. I can't. We've gone through this before and nothing's changed. The law's not for me, and there's no point in me pretending it is."

Morton Senior shook his head and smiled. "It's okay, Dom. I understand the way you feel about the law. It's not for everyone. And your mother and I have been expecting this other announcement for some time. We're just glad you had the guts to come and tell us in person rather than leave us to find out some other way."

"You knew?"

"Of course, we knew. You're our son," his mother said, coming over and hugging Domenic first and then Adam. "I won't lie and say we're happy about it, or that it's what we wanted for you. But life these days is difficult enough without us making it any worse, isn't that right, Bud?" Domenic's father nodded. "I realize being gay is not the big deal it once was...gay pride, gay marriages, and all that. And you don't have to worry about your mother or me giving you a hard time about it because that's not going to happen. You're our son, and we love you."

"Warts and all?"

"Warts and all," Domenic's father confirmed, looking a tad watery-eyed as he stood up and briefly embraced his son. "Now, enough of this serious talk. Come and sit down, we'll have some coffee, and let Adam tell us a little about himself."

\* \* \*

"I can't believe they took it so well," Domenic said as he and Adam walked back to Adam's house. "I expected all kinds of tears and high drama. I really thought Dad would throw me out and tell me never to come back."

"It's like they said, they love you," Adam replied, wishing his own parents were still around to say that to him. "They love you enough to let you go."

"Yeah. I guess they do." Domenic wrapped an arm around Adam's shoulders. "And do you love me enough to keep me?"

Adam laughed. Suddenly, his world and everything in it was aligned in perfect harmony. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On you coming to the store with me today. I'd like to introduce you to a few people I know."

"As a friend?"

"No. As my partner."

### **CHRISTIANE FRANCE**

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys two black and white Persian cats.

\* \* \*

# Don't miss *This Time For Keeps*, by Christiane France, available at AmberAllure.com!

Josh and Pete were always breaking up and getting back together. The last time it happened, they swore their ten-year affair was over for good. Pete moved out, and Josh took a job overseas, but Josh figured it was simply a matter of waiting to see who would give in first—the same routine they'd gone through a dozen times before.

Except this time, Pete doesn't call, and when Josh tries to contact him, it turns out both of his numbers are disconnected. Josh tries to convince himself that Pete doesn't love him any more, that Pete has found someone new and moved on. But ten years is a long time—too long to dismiss like it had been nothing. If Pete no longer loves him, then Josh needs to hear that from the man in person.

Determined to find out the reason for Pete's silence, Josh returns home to the mind-numbing news that Pete is dead—he was killed two months earlier when he tried to stop thieves from stealing his car. But during his shock and grief, Josh also comes to the realization that death doesn't always break the bond between two lovers destined to be together forever...

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