



The Gallery on Main Street



ANTIQUES

Christiane
France

THE GALLERY ON MAIN STREET

...Without a word and without missing a beat, Simon picks up where he left off a moment ago. Wrapping an arm around me, I feel the warm, wet glide of his tongue along my lips, while his free hand opens the zipper of my jeans and slips inside. I'm hot, I'm hard, and I hold my breath as I feel his cool hand touch my aroused cock. I tell myself to hold on, to keep my mind firmly focused. I'm a heartbeat from coming, and I want to enjoy this. I want to make it last for a minute or two at the very least.

His fingers skim me lightly from root to tip, and I shiver with excitement. Then he rubs the tip with the pad of his thumb, and the slightly callused texture of his skin pushes me right to the edge.

"Let it happen," he murmurs as he wraps his hand around my shaft and begins to slide it up and down the entire length, gradually increasing the pressure and speed until I know I can't hold back for even one more second, and then and only then do I push away his hand.

A few minutes later, the music changes back to something slow and sexy, and we return to the dance floor. I have no idea what Simon likes, but he solves the problem for me by guiding my hand down and pressing it against his own erection. His zipper is already open, so I slip a hand inside to explore. He's bigger than me in every way—longer, thicker, and I almost orgasm just thinking about how it would feel to have him fuck

me.

But right now, his needs come first, and I begin to caress and squeeze him. As my fingers move faster, his breathing quickens, and the thud of his heart increases, then his whole body stiffens, and I quickly withdraw my hand.

Something tells me he was a lot more needy than I was myself...

ALSO BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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THE GALLERY ON MAIN STREET

BY

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THE GALLERY ON MAIN STREET
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For Roy and The Boys.

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Blinded by fury and frustration, I race up the stairs to what used to be my uncle's office, determined to vent my feelings out loud...and collide bodily with the very person I'm looking for—Simon Deschamps, my late uncle's business partner. The man who has somehow managed to take over my dreams and most of my waking hours for the past year-and-a-half—the man I lust after and dislike with what even I recognize as abnormal intensity.

“Whoa there!” Wrapping one arm around me and grabbing the stair rail with the other, Simon impedes my upward

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progress and, at the same time, manages to prevent the pair of us from crashing in an undignified heap to the floor below.

My nostrils fill with the faint, musky, male smell of his body and, as his arm tightens around me, I forget my anger and everything else, including the reason I'm here. All I can think of is the heat of his embrace, the way my dick sprang to instant attention the moment he touched me, and the pressure of what feels like his equally aroused shaft pressing hard against my belly.

I hold my breath, waiting for him to make the next move, while I wonder what it would feel like to have him part my ass cheeks and fuck me senseless. But like me, he's frozen in place. And, also like me, I suspect he's trying to decide whether to find a dark corner where we can either satisfy our needs with everything I have in mind—and possibly more—in private, or do what we always do and back off.

The moment of indecision lasts less than a heartbeat, and, as expected, he releases me and retreats back up the stairs a step. We've been circling each other like a pair of wary tomcats for months—ever since the first day we met. I have a feeling he wants me as badly as I want him. And if we liked one another, even the smallest bit, maybe this silly dance of ours would have concluded long before now. But we don't. He treats me like I'm a loser or a lost cause. In other words, he keeps his distance, while I think he's a fake and a phony, trying to pretend he's something he's not.

Still, regardless of all that, I'm quite certain one of these days it's going to happen. This mutual dislike we have going

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on will be put on hold, our clothes will come off, and we'll be on each other like a pair of randy rabbits.

"Marty! This is a surprise," he says, his cool back in place as he smooths down the jacket of his dark grey business suit and straightens his tie.

"That I'm here, or that I wasn't looking where I was going?"

"A little of both, I guess."

"Well, I'm sure it's not as big a surprise as the one I just received," I snarl, my fury resurfacing as I push past him and go into the office. I drop the copy of my late Uncle Jack's will that I just picked up from the lawyer's office on the desk. Opening the document, I smooth out the creases and read aloud the two clauses that have me so enraged.

"To my nephew, Martyn Cole, I hereby give, devise and bequeath my one-half ownership of the antiques business known as The Gallery On Main Street, in the hope this will help him to settle down and earn a respectable living. However, in the event my said nephew, Martyn, attempts to sell or otherwise dispose of my said one-half ownership before the expiration of a period of ten years from the date of my death he shall immediately forfeit any and all claims he may have to any part or portion of my estate, and I hereby direct my Executors and Trustees to hold the said one-half share in trust and to pay any and all income derived therefrom to the charities listed below in equal portions.

"In the event my said nephew forfeits his claim to share in my estate in the manner set forth above, and my said business

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partner deems it necessary or desirable to dispose of said business for any reason in whole or in part, the net amount realized on my said one-half share of said business shall be divided equally among said charities in the same manner as set forth above.”

I toss aside the document and glare at Simon. “In other words, do what I say or you’re disinherited. I especially love the ‘settle down and earn a respectable living’ line. It makes me sound as if I’m a pimp or a scam artist, living on ill-gotten gains.” I pause for breath and try to hide my hurt under a humorless smile. “I realize Jack was a worrywart by nature, but this is going a little too far. As far as I’m concerned, what he’s done is nothing more than a blatant attempt to control me from the grave,” I continue in the same angry voice. “He had no right. He always gave me to understand that, when he died, his half would pass to me to deal with however I wished. He’s been singing me the same song for years. Ever since The Gallery first opened its doors. And, fool that I am, I believed him.”

“And you were what back then...ten, twelve years old?”

“Ten.”

“Old enough to know when Jack and my father gave up the flea market and first opened The Gallery, the two of them barely eked out a living. As a business, it was virtually worthless—about half a step up from a junk store and operated out of rented premises. It wasn’t until after my father got sick and quit coming to the office and Jack took control of things that it all finally changed.

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“Even during the time they worked together, Jack was always the more adventurous of the two. He wanted to grow and expand the business, while my dad was the ultra cautious partner, always content to sit back and wring his hands for fear they might lose a dollar or two. I know for a fact it was thanks to Jack the rubbish they had was gradually gotten rid of and replaced with better stock. Once that happened, business and profits increased, and, again at Jack’s urging, they began acquiring a few pieces of real estate as a hedge against the bad times. Sure my father worked here, and he and Jack were both partners and good friends, but he didn’t have Jack’s business acumen or his foresight. It’s totally thanks to Jack The Gallery is the profitable, respected business it is today.”

“What difference does that make? It’s still the same store he and your dad started,” I say in the same belligerent tone.

Something about Simon has always rubbed me the wrong way. And while I want him sexually, I don’t like him. I have no idea why, but I’m pretty sure Uncle Jack didn’t like Simon either. As far as I’m aware, there were never any cozy partners’ dinners or get-togethers with Simon like there were with Jack and Simon’s dad. And I don’t think Simon was ever at Jack’s house, or Jack at his. If there were those kinds of meetings, I’m sure Jack would have told me.

Now, the thought of being forced to work with the man tempts me to reject my inheritance, go study penguins in the Antarctic, or volunteer for the next manned-flight to outer space—somewhere miles from Hamilton.

“Okay, so the store’s better now in every way. Better

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stock, makes a ton more money, and it even owns real estate. But Jack had no right to tell me one thing and then do a complete one-eighty by adding all these ridiculous provisions. I can't even imagine what he was thinking of. He knew I had no interest whatsoever in working here. He tried talking me into it often enough."

"Let's face it, Marty. Your efforts at stable and profitable employment since you graduated from college have not, shall we say, been crowned with mind-bending success, have they? A couple of months back I overheard you talking to Jack...something about wishing you could find a nice little business to invest in. Investing in anything these days is, of course, unbelievably dangerous. In any event, I'm afraid it was me who gave him the idea," Simon admits with a slightly superior smile. The kind of smile that makes my fingers itch to wipe it off along with his smug attitude.

"You?" This second shock robs me of speech, and for a second my lips flap together like a goldfish deprived of water. "You...you thought my run of bad luck was all down to me?" I demand, feeling morally and mentally ravaged, raped and totally scandalized by Simon's admission, while the temper that matches my red hair nears boiling point. "You think it was my fault the gourmet shop I managed on Peter Street closed down when the owner got himself arrested for buying contaminated meat? That I'm responsible for the fire that burned Ye Olde Booke Nooke down to the ground? And I suppose you also believe I should've known better than to take a job with Michael's Music Mart, which turned out to have

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been grossly under-capitalized and, therefore, didn't stand a chance in hell of lasting more than a couple of weeks."

Simon gives me what I imagine he believes is a placatory smile, but, in fact, has the opposite effect. "Calm down, Marty. Give me a chance to explain."

"Explain what? How you've ruined the one chance I had of doing what I want to do with my life?" I rein in my emotions a tad, take a deep breath, and stare up at the pristine white of what appears to be a freshly painted ceiling. "Now I have to wonder what other thoughtless act I, or forces beyond my control, will perform in order to terminate my present employment. Calissa Catering has been in business for over twenty-five years. I'm sure it's financially solid, and I know the owner's character and reputation are both spotless and above reproach, so imminent bankruptcy or arrest are out. Will a tornado scoop up the building and everyone in it and throw us to the four winds? Or do you think a spaceship will arrive and carry us off to some distant planet?"

Simon sighs and his smile vanishes. "Give me a break, Martyn. And quit with the dramatics. We both know what happened with your other jobs wasn't your fault. And we both know what you're currently doing at Calissa's is only temporary—just until the owner's daughter returns from her maternity leave. Following which..."

"Before you ask, she's due back on Monday, and I've already started to look for something else. And, also before you ask, I swear I had nothing to do with her pregnancy, or with her decision to return to the work force rather than be a

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stay-at-home mom.”

“No one is suggesting any of your employment misfortunes have been your fault, Marty. The current economy is a mess whichever way you look at it, and good jobs are almost impossible to find.”

Simon’s patronizing tone and his insistence on calling me Marty grate on my nerves and inflame my temper even more. It wouldn’t be so bad if I liked the guy, but I’m really starting to hate the patronizing, arrogant, self-satisfied prick. “Martyn. My name is Martyn.”

“Very well, Martyn. I realize your work experience has been...shall we say random rather than dedicated to any one particular area of expertise, and you know very little, if anything, about the antiques business.”

“And you do? You inherited your dad’s share when, two or three years ago, and you’ve worked here about a year-and-a-half? Uncle Jack said you worked as a clerk in an insurance company before that. Not what I’d call a dedicated area of expertise. So, your point is?”

“Your uncle cared about you. He was afraid once he was gone and you inherited his share of The Gallery, you’d sell it and lose the money in some kind of risky business venture. Starting any kind of business takes an enormous amount of operating capital, and most people fail to understand that. It’s the reason why so many new ventures close down before they have the chance to get established.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Simon. Contrary to what you seem to think, I’m not a complete idiot.”

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“Good. Then I hope you also know that while attractive business opportunities are a dime a dozen, most of them are either daydreams, wishful thinking, or outright scams.”

“I realize that, too. I have eyes in my head. News flash! I can read. And I even pay attention to what’s going on in the world, economically and every other way.”

“Then you should be able to understand that Jack wasn’t trying to control you. On the contrary, he was trying to behave responsibly by preventing you from being sucked into what might sound like a fantastic opportunity and ending up penniless. His sole aim was to do whatever he could to assure your continuing financial security. That’s why I suggested he talk to his lawyer and have him add a couple of provisions to his will.

“Personally, I think he did you a favor. So what if you can’t sell it? A fifty percent share of The Gallery is still one hell of a sweet deal. It’s not only a well-established and profitable antiques business, it also owns this building, as well as the two buildings on either side, plus every inch of space is rented out.

“I know Jack was hoping you’d become an active partner. But whether you do that, or whether you prefer to leave the operation of the business to me and just take your share of the profits, your immediate financial future is assured. Jack was only acting in your best interests, Martyn, I swear. And the actual wording of the paragraphs in his will was either his or his lawyer’s, not mine.”

“If you say so.” I rub my sweaty fingers hard along the

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edge of the desk and enjoy watching Simon flinch. I don't know if it's the squeaking sound my fingers are making that bothers him, or if he's worried I might leave a dirty smudge or something equally nasty. To be honest, I don't much care. I'm quite aware I'm behaving like an ill-mannered child, and to be truthful, that's exactly how I feel.

My father died when I was a baby and his younger brother, Jack, did his best to take my dad's place. Unfortunately, it never quite worked out. Mostly, I think, because my mom was a bit of a hard-head, and she figured Jack was an old fusspot who didn't believe her capable of raising me herself. In any event, the idea of my uncle and Simon, who is about five years older than me, sitting around deciding my fate as if I were an underage incompetent, rankles me, big time.

"You can give me all the excuses and whatever else you want. It doesn't change the fact the two of you thought I couldn't take care of myself and decided to play mommy with my life. That's insulting."

"Come, on Martyn. Be sensible. It wasn't like that."

"Looks that way to me. Unless..." I hesitate as another thought strikes me. "Unless it was a case of you not having the money to buy me out yourself. You didn't fancy the idea of getting stuck with a new partner, so you made sure that couldn't happen." I hesitate, my temper still very unstable. "Either that, or I was right the first time when I said the pair of you figured I'm some kind of brainless idiot—the kind who can't be trusted with money."

He straightens up in his chair and shrugs. "Maybe you

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should go and see the lawyer.”

“I already did. He said there’s no way the will can be broken unless I can prove Jack was either incompetent or coerced. And I can’t do that because we both know Jack was as sharp as a tack right up to the day he died. He also said he and Jack discussed Jack’s concerns about me and my financial future, and that Jack took his advice on the actual wording.” I pause for breath while I stare at Simon, hard. “In other words, it seems everyone’s happy but me.”

“That’s really too bad, but...” As Simon crosses one leg over the other and runs a hand over his knee to straighten the fabric, I feel another surge of anger, while a shiver of awareness slithers down my spine and comes to rest in my dick. I’m pretty sure the man’s gay, but I’m not one hundred percent certain. He’s not an easy person to read.

But each and every time the two of us get within spitting distance of one another, I get a sexual reaction of some kind. It happened the very first time we met—a reaction so strong and so unexpected it totally freaked me out. At first, I figured it was just one of those silly one-off things and it wouldn’t happen again. But it did happen again. It got so bad I was even afraid to drop by The Gallery unless I phoned ahead and made sure Simon was occupied elsewhere.

There were other times when it happened, too. Like that time at the mall when I saw him trying on shoes. The way he was bending over is still so clearly etched in my mind, I...

I swallow hard, trying to dispel the image. Then that time at the market, when I stood there like a fool, watching those

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long fingers caressing cucumbers and zucchinis...and turning me on to the point I just had to disappear fast before I did something really nutso, like suggesting we visit the men's room together.

I've lain wide awake, night after night, tossing and turning, imagining those beautiful long fingers stroking my shaft, and taking me into his mouth. I imagine him doing it slow and easy, taking his time to suck me dry. And then I imagine what he looks like in the buff. There's not an ounce of fat on his perfectly proportioned body, and in my mind I can see him standing there in the moonlight, legs a few inches apart with his cock loaded and jutting out in all its glory, ready for me to give him some action.

Okay, so I'm obsessed with the man, and my obsession makes no sense. I can't stand slim, handsome, pale-complexioned men with overly long dark hair. Men who look like they belong on the pages of a Brontë novel. Maybe it's a case of opposites attracting. I have no idea. He's certainly never given me any encouragement.

Or is that what it's really all about? *Vive la différence* and all that shit?

"Are you listening?"

While I was busy daydreaming, I realize Simon is still talking, and I try to catch up. "Sorry, I missed that last bit."

"I said it's too bad you're not happy with the way Jack left things. But look on the bright side. Half The Gallery now belongs to you. If you want to apply yourself and learn the business, you have a job here for life. If you prefer to find

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something else, then you can do so and still receive a quarterly dividend check. Whatever you decide, ten years from now, you can revisit the situation and review your options. In the meantime, no matter how bad the job market, you'll have an income."

I move my features into what I intend as a humorless smile. "Ten years from now, we could both be dead."

"I prefer to take the attitude that we're both young men with our lives before us."

To give Simon his due, he knows, from his own personal experience, good jobs for people with a college education but no specialized training or work experience and no money to invest are few and far between. Hence my sporadic and erratic work history, and his previous job as a clerk. And I can even understand, albeit reluctantly, why he would encourage Jack to stop me from liquidating my share of The Gallery to start something of my own.

What Mr. Know-It-All doesn't seem to realize is I don't need a keeper, a seeing-eye dog, or a guardian angel. I'm aware of my limitations, both financial and practical, and I understand the value of learning from other people's mistakes. For those reasons, I wasn't planning on anything large or extravagant, just a nice little business of my own that would start small and grow over time. I love to cook, so I'd thought perhaps a tiny bistro or a coffee bar where I could make and serve my own biscotti. *But since that is not to be...* "Where did you gain your experience of the antiques business?"

"Trial and error mostly. I read every book I can get my

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hands on, and I talk to the experts whenever I get a chance. In this business, you never stop learning and, unless you're really good, there's always the chance you'll get scammed. Fortunately, we have someone here who can tell a fake at six paces."

"Yes, I know—Tom Marack. I believe Jack originally hired Tom part-time as a gofer and delivery boy. But then Jack was pretty smart, too. I also know he and your dad originally started off with separate stalls at the flea market. Later, when they decided to combine operations and go legit, one of them heard about the tenant here defaulting on the rent, they got the space for a song, and The Gallery was born."

"I'd give anything to have Tom's sixth sense for fakes," Simon said, a faraway look in his dark eye. "But that's something a person's born with. And Jack knew the value of Tom's gift. He never bought anything of real value without Tom's approval, and neither do I. That's why Tom does all our authentications and appraisals. When in doubt, ask Tom is my motto, and it's served me well to this point."

I move away from the desk to look out of the window and think. I don't like the guy—and it's not just the weird sexual vibes I get when I'm near him. I don't think Jack liked him either. Why, I have no idea because Jack never said. But it's enough to make me feel wary and confused to the point I'm not sure I can trust him. So, for now, finding another job elsewhere and leaving Simon to run The Gallery alone is not an option.

With the way I react to him sexually, working together will

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be difficult. But if I keep my mind on the job and out of Simon's pants, perhaps in time the feelings will go away. In the meantime, I have more important issues to take care of. I have to eat, pay my rent, and put gas in my car. And, as I've already mentioned, I'm not completely without brains, so I'll have to figure out a way of dealing with any problems if and when they occur.

Turning around to face Simon, I say, "Okay, I hear where you're coming from. So I'm willing to give working here a try, and we'll see how things go. I realize I have one helluva lot of learning to do, but I don't see that as an obstacle. Not if I put my mind to it."

"I made the transition here from something totally unrelated, and so can you." He pauses, flashing his pearly whites in a million-dollar smile, and holds out his hand. "Once you've had a chance to get used to the idea of being part-owner of The Gallery, I think you'll feel differently. I know I did."

"You did what?"

"Feel differently. I didn't want to give up my life out west and move back here to the other side of the country to a business I knew nothing about, and where I no longer had any close friends. That's why I was content to leave things in Jack's hands for a while. But then the economy took a dip, the company I worked for started downsizing, and I, along with a lot of others, was out of a job. I didn't have a lot of choice but to move back east and learn."

And neither, I guess, do I. Unless I'm willing to start

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flipping hamburgers or stocking grocery store shelves. I start to accept his handshake, then hesitate, wondering if I'm making a big mistake. What if, instead of disappearing, the sexual attraction I feel for the man grows even stronger? What will I do? Invent a medical problem that necessitates frequent trips to the toilet? "What if I change my mind after a few weeks and decide the wonderful world of antiques is not for me?"

"I hope that won't happen, but if it does, then it does. Jack may have left you his share of The Gallery, Martyn, but whether or not you choose to work here as an active partner is entirely up to you."

"I know, but I'm just not sure. I..." I hesitate, watching as his expression changes from open to cautious, and his dark eyes narrow as they capture my gaze. Hot, sexy eyes that turn the saliva in my mouth to dust and my legs to water. Yes, okay, I know...I'm off on another flight of fantasy. But I swear the way Simon's looking at me makes me feel like I'm being swallowed alive. For a moment, I even forget to breathe.

Whether it's the way the tension between us tightens to the max, then slowly dissipates, or the softening of the tiny muscles around his mouth, I can't say, but in that breathless moment I have my answer. I know he's on the same wavelength as me. And I know he wants me. Trouble is, there are degrees of wanting, all the way from a passing fancy to outright obsession. So the question is, how much does he want me? Just a little—something he'll get over the moment I'm out of sight? Or do I affect him as badly as he affects me?

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Suddenly, he smiles, and the moment vanishes as if it never happened in the first place. “Why don’t we forget the butts for now, and let’s shake, partner?”

I try to smile at his use of the word partner, but, as his surprisingly warm, dry hand wraps itself around my slightly clammy-feeling paw, a faint groan escapes my lips instead. I can’t believe how exactly his touch matches the way I’d imagined it would feel—erotic, arousing...and as for that hungry look, it’s still there in his ebony dark eyes! I’m getting harder and more excited by the second to the point I’m starting to salivate. I know if I don’t get out of here, fast, I’m likely to embarrass myself by coming in my pants.

His dark brows drawn together in a frown, and the pressure of his hand increases a little. “Are you okay?”

I snatch my hand back. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

He shrugs. “You looked a little pale for a moment. Something you ate, perhaps?”

No, something I touched. I force a grin and mumble an excuse about stale cornflakes and iffy milk as I edge toward the door. How I’m going to work with Simon and keep my pants on and my hands to myself is beyond me, but since my foreseeable future is not exactly littered with choices and I like to eat, I’ll at least have to try.

In an attempt to pull myself together and accept the inevitable, I say, “I have to finish the week out at Calissa’s, so why don’t we leave things until Monday, and I’ll come back then. Let you know what I’ve decided.”

“Fine with me. Take however long you need,” he calls

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after me, as I beat a hasty retreat through the showroom and out to the street beyond.

At the end of the block, I pause to catch my breath. What I need right now is a stiff drink and a quick fuck to get my mind off Simon and back to the world of harsh reality.

I'm due at Calissa's in less than fifteen minutes, however, to supervise the afternoon shift and put the finishing touches to an engagement dinner for fifty people, so my needs will have to wait. I started working at Calissa's part-time and during summer vacation when I was in high school, and I've worked there on and off ever since, whenever they have an emergency or need an extra pair of hands, or like now when I'm between jobs. I wouldn't want to be there fulltime, even though Leon, the owner, has asked me often enough. But I'm familiar with the set up, I know the drill, and Leon trusts me to turn up and get the job done, so I can't let him down.

* * *

After several hours of non-stop fetching, carrying, fixing, and worrying about details, I smile with satisfaction as the last tray of *pétit fours* is loaded onto the delivery truck, and Leon, along with three members of the wait staff, jump into Leon's car and follow the truck out of the delivery area and onto the street.

With my shift finished, I close and lock the back door. If I never see another *hors d'oeuvres* pastry filled with tiny, mayonnaise-coated Scandinavian shrimps, or another dessert tart composed of glazed, miniature strawberries on a custard

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base, Calissa's two most frequently ordered items and biggest money-makers, I'll die a happy man. But I still have a couple of days to go before Leon's daughter returns. And that means I can count on at least one or two more sessions with those nasty little pink things that remind me of anemic worms, and teeny tiny strawberries that look like badly inflamed nipples.

As far as I'm concerned and, I might add Leon agrees with me, both items are so sixties and so far off the "now" scale to make anyone with even the slightest knowledge of current eating trends shudder. But if that's what the customer demands, and there's hardly a day goes by the phone doesn't ring and the caller orders what has become known in-house as Calissa's Pink and Red menu, then who am I to argue?

I love to cook, and if it were my engagement party, I'd probably start off with something simple but very in, like a few shreds of smoked chicken or duck and a fresh raspberry or two over field greens with a light, balsamic dressing, move on to steamed veggies with tilapia seasoned with garlic, ginger and lime, and finish with either my favorite chocolate mousse cake, or my latest invention—a fabulous mango cream mold that cleverly separates itself into three layers—the sponge cake at the bottom, then the fruit and, finally, the sparkling, pale orange gelatin on top.

With another sigh, I open my locker and exchange my supervisor's uniform of white baseball cap, white T-shirt and black-and-white checkered pants for tight black jeans and a blue polo, and slip my feet into my beloved and sinfully comfortable Italian leather loafers. I then wave farewell to the

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night chef, Sybil, who, poor child, has the joy of preparing yet another Pink and Red menu for a special retirement lunch to be held tomorrow at some corporate office somewhere downtown, and leave via the front door.

Once I'm behind the wheel of my car, I sit there, undecided whether I should go home or go out and have some fun. I'm still a tad strung out from the rush of getting the order finished and out on time. Although if it were just that, I'm sure a couple of drinks and an hour or two's relaxation would fix me up just fine. But it's more than that, a whole helluva lot more in fact. What's really bothering me, even now, hours later, is my close encounter earlier in the day with Simon. I can't get it out of my mind.

And I can't quite believe, after months of lusting after the dude from a distance, there we were almost cheek to cheek, and I did nothing about it. I could smell his heat, and I could feel his rod poking at my belly. And what I'd tried to dismiss as a bad case of just wanting him, suddenly escalated into a burning case of gotta have him.

I lean back in my seat and press a hand against my dick. I can still feel his body against mine when he stopped me from falling down the stairs, and the weird moment that happened when we shook hands. Most of all, I can still see the hunger in his eyes. And again I find myself wondering if I'll be able to hack working on a daily basis with a man I feel uncomfortable with to the point of dislike, yet so desperately want to fuck it's become a full blown obsession.

I try to tell myself the feelings are bound to fade after a

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few days of seeing Simon on a regular basis—familiarity and all that. I guess there's a slim chance they will, but what if they don't? I know damn well Simon wants me. I just don't know to what degree. Is he content to just sit back and do nothing about it? Or is he biding his time, waiting for the right moment to pounce?

On the outside, the man's as cool as the proverbial cucumber, but I suspect the inside is a whole different matter. Whatever it was I could see in his smoldering black eyes, it looked hot enough to melt rock.

I'm on what one of my high school teachers once described as the horns of a dilemma, without the first clue what to do about it. I'm not in the habit of lusting after guys I don't like, and even if I did like him, Simon isn't my type. He's too cerebral, too withdrawn, and yes, he's way out of my league every which way I can think of. He probably likes chamber music and poetry, while I like the more open, athletic kind of guy—someone who'll go to a game with me, wrestle with me in the shower, yet listen and try to help if I have a problem.

In a normal, fellow employee situation, I could just ignore the man, keep contact between us to an absolute minimum, and tune everything else out. But this is not a normal situation. The two of us are now business partners. We have to work together and make business decisions together, all of which means we'll have to spend a certain amount of time together. So, either I figure a way to redirect my emotions elsewhere, or I'm going to have to deal with them head on.

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I know...I've probably thought about things so long and so hard, I've inflated the situation in my mind until it's way out of proportion. Even so, the thought of facing my demons sends a shiver of anticipation skipping down my spine. I think about the heat I saw in Simon's eyes and the way he looked at me, and wonder again if it was real or imagined. I know the sensible solution is for me to deal with things now, get it over with once and for all before it gets even worse.

Maybe I should give Simon a little encouragement, see what happens and then take it from there. Although if the look he gave me was not the product of my imagination, I doubt he needs much encouragement. Even so...

Another shiver, this one of excitement, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up to attention. Despite his romance hero appearance, I suspect encouraging Simon to declare himself could be akin to teasing a pit bull—a step not to be taken lightly or without first considering the possible dangers.

A nervous chuckle escapes my lips. I'm behaving like a lunatic, letting my imagination get the better of me, but the pictures that fill my mind are pushing me beyond excited. I press my hand hard against my erection, wishing it wasn't still daylight and I could do something about it. But it won't be dark for a while yet, and thinking about what the pair of us could get up to in a dark closet or a locked room is just a tad too easy and a whole lot too arousing.

And the bottom line is, if I hope to retain even the tiniest scrap of my sanity, all this imagining, wondering and what-iffing has to stop.

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I'd planned to pick up Chinese food and a couple of movies I'd missed and spend the evening at home with Doodles, a friend's cat I agreed to look after more than a year ago and apparently now own by default since the friend never returned to pick him up. But if I go home I know what'll happen. I'll be too busy having sexy daydreams to either watch the movie or keep Doodles' nose out of the fried rice.

Taking out my cell phone, I dial Simon's number, and wait. On the third ring, he answers, "Hello?"

"Simon, it's me, Martyn. We have to talk."

"You want to come over here?"

"Have you eaten?"

"No. I was just thinking about ordering something."

"How about meeting me at Soo Ling's?"

"Sure. I can be there in...say, about twenty minutes. That okay?"

"You know where it is?"

"It's not far from where I live. I've been there several times."

Unlike many Chinese restaurants, Soo Ling's does not bring the check with the appetizer, or rush you through your food as if you're trying to catch a plane that left ten minutes ago. It's a quiet, relaxed kind of place with dim lighting and booths that afford a fair amount of privacy. They also serve liquor, and I'm badly in need of a stiff drink.

But when I reach the restaurant, I lose my nerve completely. I don't have the first idea what I'm going to say to Simon, or how I should behave, or anything else. Somehow, I

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doubt, “I’ve wanted your ass for the longest time, and I know you want me, too, so let’s just go some place private and fuck,” will cut it. I start to pace back and forth, feeling like a prize idiot.

Maybe I could just begin by saying something like, “Before we start working together, I thought it would be nice if we could get to know each other a little better.” But the mere thought of voicing words like that makes me cringe. I’d wind up feeling even stupider than what I feel.

For a moment, I consider the time-honored solution of taking off for parts unknown and staying there indefinitely. But that’s no solution because eventually I’ll have to come back.

“Hey, Martyn, what’s up?”

Suddenly, Simon is standing there before me. Tall, slim Simon in his regulation dark grey suit, complete with white shirt and conservative tie. Whatever remnants of cool I had desert me, and I’m totally tongue-tied. “I...umm...I...” *Oh, shit!*

“What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

“No...I...” I give a helpless shrug. To my horror, my eyes are burning, I have a hard knot in my chest and my emotions have me so wound up I’m not only on the verge of tears, but I feel them starting to trickle down my face. If there was ever a time I wanted the sidewalk to open up and devour me, this is it.

A car draws into the curb, and several people get out. As another car arrives and parks behind the first one, Simon grabs

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my hand and urges me past the restaurant and into a narrow alleyway between the buildings. Wrapping his arms around me, he holds me close as I sob my heart out. I don't even know for sure why I'm crying. Just that something inside me snapped, and the next thing I knew I was blubbering like a baby.

To my relief, after a couple of minutes, the storm passes, and I try to pull myself together. I feel weak and shaky, and aware I must look like a total mess, I start searching the pockets of my jeans for something to wipe my face.

"Here." Without completely releasing me, Simon hands me a package of tissues.

I take out a couple and hand the pack back. After scrubbing my face dry, I shove the sodden ball of paper into my pocket. I can't imagine what he must be thinking, and I'm not even going to try.

"Feel better?" he asks, cuddling me close again.

As a matter of fact, I do. And it feels even better being held like this, but I can't tell him that. "I'm sorry. This is so damn embarrassing," I say, as he begins to gently rub my back. "I don't know what in hell got into me."

Sliding a finger beneath my chin, he lifts my face up, and for a moment I think he's going to kiss me. But then the moment passes, and he sighs and says, "We all have our breaking point, Martyn. And I guess you just hit yours."

"You think?"

"Don't you? You're angry and upset because you feel Jack betrayed you, and you can't do what you wanted to do. I don't

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know if you had specific plans. If you did, I guess they're all shot to hell. And then there's this constant tension between the two of us." He sighs as he lets me go and takes a step back. "I know you don't want to work with me at The Gallery."

"If only it were that simple." I give him a rueful smile as I run a hand over my hair and lean back against the wall. "Yes, I'm disappointed. But I'll get over that given time. It's..."

"Me? You don't like me, do you?"

I hesitate. I know it's juvenile, but I'm fast coming to the conclusion the real reason I don't like Simon is not just because my Uncle Jack didn't like him. It's because he comes across as so damn superior and standoffish, and he's never once shown even the slightest bit of interest in me. "Why would you think that?"

"You're saying I'm imagining it?"

"No." I hesitate as a flicker of sensation in the area of my groin reminds me this is my chance to get everything out in the open. Say how I feel and lay all my doubts and fears on the table. I want to, I really do, but something holds me back. "Like I said, it's not that simple. I admit you're not the type I usually make friends with. I doubt we have much, if anything, in common. But then we really don't know one another, do we?"

His mouth twists in a faint smile. "True. But you can blame your uncle for that."

"Jack? What did he have to do with it?"

Simon's mouth twists again, but this time there's no humor in his expression. "He had rather strong views on certain

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subjects. And homosexuality was definitely not his bag. When he discovered I was gay, he warned me to keep away from you. He also said if I ignored the warning, he'd make sure I regretted it."

I always knew Jack was old-fashioned and stuffy about a lot of things, the provisions in his will being an example, but to do something dumb like making threats? "You're kidding."

"I don't kid about stuff like that."

"But he knew I was gay. He never said anything, but I'm sure he knew."

"He knew. However, as far as he was concerned, what you were doing wasn't anything serious. Just a silly fad you'd picked up in college and would forget about once you realized the error of your ways. He figured it was the real reason why you couldn't get a job with prospects as he called it."

"He actually said that?"

"He said a whole lot more than that. It was like talking to someone from another planet."

"Sorry. I didn't know he was that antiquated in his thinking. There's nothing new about same-sex liaisons. They've existed for eons. Nowadays, though, it's more open. More accepted."

"Not by everyone, and not by people like Jack, who have certain views an earthquake wouldn't shake. As far as I'm concerned, it cuts both ways. I don't agree with wife-beating or treating women as a cross between a dog and imbecile, which a lot of men from Jack's era see nothing wrong with. They even seem to consider it their God-given right."

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“And some gays treat their partners like shit.”

He smiles and gives a strained, half-laugh. “Touché. Life’s a bitch, huh?”

“You can say that again.”

He shuffles his feet. “I’m glad we’ve cleared the air between us. If nothing else, it should make working together a lot easier.”

If nothing else? I’m not sure what Simon’s trying to tell me, but I push away from the wall and gesture with my hand, indicating he should precede me out of the alleyway. Between the crying jag and what Simon’s just told me about my uncle’s attitude toward life, love, and the pursuit of happiness, I feel as if a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I’m even starting to look forward to starting work at The Gallery. As to what happens next between Simon and me, I think I’ll leave that to take care of itself. “I thought we were supposed to be having dinner. I’m starving.”

As we exit the alley, I see another group heading for Soo Ling’s, but when I go to follow them inside, I see a notice on the door—

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“Great! Now what?” I say with a sigh.

“There’s a new place about a block from here where I go sometimes. It’s sort of a modified roadhouse atmosphere—part bar and the other part restaurant. Food’s quite good. And sometimes they have live music.”

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“You mean the new gay club on Carlton?”

“Have you been?”

“Not yet. But I’ve heard lots of good things about it.”

“You want to go?”

Again our gazes lock, and again I forget to breathe as my dick stiffens, and I know it won’t take much to make me explode. “Sure, why not? If that’s what you want.”

“It’s very much what I want,” Simon murmurs as he reaches down and squeezes my hand.

At least that’s what I think he said. But my hand is still tingling from his touch, plus my mind is on overload, trying to figure out how our positions suddenly got reversed, and he’s become the aggressor.

* * *

The new club is everything I’d heard it was and more. Sleek and sophisticated, it’s the kind of place I’d expect to find in New York or LA rather than in a small, blue-collar town on the edge of one of the Great Lakes. The furniture and fittings are all black and brushed steel, while the walls are covered with erotic graffiti, pinpointed by concealed spotlights in the ceiling, and the soft, relaxing music gives the room a dream-like quality.

The lighting itself is dim, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I see there are intimate tables for two with banquette seating in small alcoves around the room. I also see the place is jumping with high-end customers, a.k.a. the shirt-and-tie gang, and I’m glad I’m wearing my new

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designer jeans and high-priced Italian loafers.

As Simon steers me to one of the tables, he exchanges greetings with the bartender and at least half a dozen of the customers, and I realize he's far from the shy, aloof character hiding in the shadows the way I've lead myself to believe. This guy shows all the signs of being a regular mover and shaker, and after everything that's happened so far this evening, my feelings about him are undergoing a radical re-assessment. Already, I like him a whole lot better. And if the way one of the customers has just grabbed him and is trying to kiss him on the lips is anything to go by, the evening promises to be a real eye-opener.

Simon pushes the guy off. "Down, boy," he says with a laugh. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Some other time, perhaps?"

"We'll see," Simon replies, keeping his smile in place.

"You know him?" I ask, trying to ignore a tiny twinge of jealousy, as we sit down at the table, and Simon signals to a waiter.

"Only as one of the regulars here."

"And?"

"Looks to me like he's had too much to drink."

The waiter arrives, and we both order steaks and beer. While we're eating, we talk about a dozen different things. Simon tells me a little about life on the west coast, and I tell him about some of the different jobs I've had.

I kinda thought after everything that had happened earlier—the way Simon held me in the alley and the heated

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looks we've exchanged—maybe after dinner and a couple of drinks the evening had a chance of mutating into something more. But then, just as I'm about to give up hope, it happens.

The lights dim even further, until the room is dark as sin, and it's only the spotlights highlighting the walls. The volume of the music increases, and Simon takes my hand, urging me on to the tiny dance floor a few feet away.

The room disappears as I close my eyes and give myself up to the moment, the music and the man. I'm caught up somewhere between wide awake and dreaming. I know my most outrageous desires are about to come true, and I relish the delicious sensation of Simon's nearness as we slow dance our way around the cramped space.

My arms encircle Simon's waist, and he cups my ass in his hands, squeezing and kneading until I'm breathless with need. Our mouths meet and our tongues tangle. He's as turned on as I am, and I smell his body-heat as his slips a hand between us and begins to caress my dick.

I'm so content and so happy, I could stay like this forever. But the music changes to something a little more up-tempo, and we go back to our table.

Without a word and without missing a beat, Simon picks up where he left off a moment ago. Wrapping an arm around me, I feel the warm, wet glide of his tongue along my lips, while his free hand opens the zipper of my jeans and slips inside. I'm hot, I'm hard, and I hold my breath as I feel his cool hand touch my aroused cock. I tell myself to hold on, to keep my mind firmly focused. I'm a heartbeat from coming,

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and I want to enjoy this. I want to make it last for a minute or two at the very least.

His fingers skim me lightly from root to tip, and I shiver with excitement. Then he rubs the tip with the pad of his thumb, and the slightly callused texture of his skin pushes me right to the edge.

“Let it happen,” he murmurs as he wraps his hand around my shaft and begins to slide it up and down the entire length, gradually increasing the pressure and speed until I know I can’t hold back for even one more second, and then and only then do I push away his hand.

A few minutes later, the music changes back to something slow and sexy, and we return to the dance floor. I have no idea what Simon likes, but he solves the problem for me by guiding my hand down and pressing it against his own erection. His zipper is already open, so I slip a hand inside to explore. He’s bigger than me in every way—longer, thicker, and I almost come again just thinking about how it would feel to have him fuck me.

But right now, his needs come first, and I begin to caress and squeeze him. As my fingers move faster, his breathing quickens, and the thud of his heart increases, then his whole body stiffens, and I quickly withdraw my hand.

Something tells me he was a lot more needy than I was myself. “Better, hmm?”

He makes a sound somewhere between a soft laugh and a sigh. “You have no idea, man.”

I was hoping the evening would last longer, maybe even

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stretch into the whole night. But after our second dance, Simon says he's sorry to cut things short, but he really has to go.

He doesn't say why, and I don't ask. But there's something warm and reassuring about the hug he gives me as we part outside the club, and I take it as a promise of better things to come.

When I get home, I listen to Doodles' complaints and then play with him for a while because he's been left alone all day, but I'm too jazzed to sleep. I don't want to think back over the evening, and I don't want to start speculating about where my new relationship with Simon may or may not lead.

In an effort to distract myself, I open one of the boxes of books Jack's lawyer had at his office and gave to me along with the copy of Jack's will. I know everything else Jack owned over and above his share of The Gallery is to be sold and the proceeds divided among some distant cousins, a couple of close friends and his favorite charities. Except, that is, for these boxes of books. A quick peek shows me they're all reference books related to antiques and, since I'm now resigned to accepting my fate rather than fighting it, I can't wait to start reading. All I know about The Gallery's business is that, apart from the odd, one-of-a-kind ornamental piece and a few minor works of art, the main focus is on horrendously expensive antique furniture for which I understand there is a high demand, so furniture is where I'll start.

Cramming what I already realize takes years of hands-on learning into a few days is impossible. The most I can do

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between now and Monday morning is skim through some of the books, try to get a little overall knowledge of the business as a whole, and hope I can get by on that, at least for now.

* * *

Late Sunday night, I'm surprised by a phone call from Simon. He says, "Hi, how are you?" makes no reference at all to what happened between us a few nights ago, but instead, he goes on to say he has a friend who just bought a condo and adores old style furniture. The friend doesn't have a lot of money to spend, but the storeroom at The Gallery is way overstocked and overdue for a clear out. If I'm agreeable, perhaps we can go through whatever's there and do the man a favor by finding him a few pieces within his budget. He finishes by saying, while the storeroom is a good place to start my introduction to the antiques' business, it's also dirty and dusty, and I should either wear old clothes, or bring some with me.

I opt for a pair of old jeans and a faded Elton John T-shirt, and when I arrive at The Gallery bright and early the following morning, I find Simon in pretty much the same thing. He's wearing a pair of old khaki pants that have seen better days, a paint-splashed T-shirt, and his dark hair is tied back in a ponytail. Dressed like this, he seems more human somehow, and definitely more of a turn-on. I still find him a bit distant and aloof, and I still don't know if we'll be able to work together. But I return his smile more warmly than I would have done until a few days ago.

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“How many people work here besides you and Tom?” I ask, glancing quickly around the empty showroom. “I know you have a deliveryman and someone in the office. What about anything that needs to be repaired?”

“There’s Lester, who is almost as knowledgeable as Tom on the subject of antique furniture—he was with a museum in New York for a number of years, and now works here as a part-time salesman—Thursdays, Fridays and weekends. Betsy takes care of the office, and Norm does all the pickups and deliveries. If we have something that needs to be repaired, something beyond a small touch-up, which Tom or Lester can usually handle, there are a couple of reputable outside experts we call on. So, are you ready to go treasure hunting?”

A couple of hours later, I’ve learned antique dealers often acquire by job lot at estate sales and such, in the hope of finding a treasure or two. As a result, their storage facilities become filled with all kinds of things that may not have a great deal of value at the moment, but might at some point in the future. Simon says some of the dealers sort through everything right away and get rid of what they consider to be worthless. But not my Uncle Jack. Jack knew what might seem worthless today could be worth a fortune a few years hence, and this philosophy had served him well. According to Simon, the habit of biding his time was how Jack had managed to upgrade The Gallery from a junkshop to an antique shopper’s idea of heaven, and the reason why he never threw anything away—just in case.

Simon and I are hot and sweaty from shifting piles of stuff

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around, and we're covered in dust and dirt, but we've found quite a few pieces of furniture Simon figures his friend might like.

As he hands me a cane-seated dining chair to add to the collection, I get a whiff of male sweat, along with something I recognize as his own unique scent, and I feel a sudden, combined surge of arousal and jealousy. I'm curious to know more about this friend we're doing the favor for. Is he a real friend, or just an acquaintance? If a friend, how close are they? Do they hang out together? Sleep together?

Even more important, is he the reason Simon had to leave early the other night?

I accept Simon had a sex life before our little adventure at the club. For all I know he has a regular partner and what happened at the club was nothing more than a momentary distraction. Nevertheless, I won't allow myself to even think about him making out with another man.

But, despite my best intentions and before I can prevent it, my imagination catches fire, and I rub a hand furtively against my turgid cock. I don't want to think of some other guy touching Simon, or kissing him either. As for him and another man in the buff making love... I just don't dare go there.

"Hey, look at this!" Simon uncovers what appears to be an old-fashioned wicker bassinet on a metal framework. One end of the framework extends upward about two feet to support the tattered lace draperies that had once formed a sort of canopy over the infant's head. To me, it looks like a forgotten prop from *Rosemary's Baby*. "I was wondering what to get as

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a house-warming gift and this will be perfect. Once it's been cleaned up and fitted with new drapery, of course. What do you think?"

I take a step back and tug at the front of my jeans, wishing my dick wasn't quite so damn sensitive. I know some gay couples adopt and I'm all for it, but I'm not in the mood to think about Simon and some faceless dude playing mommy and daddy, and oohing and aahing over a little blue or pink bundle in a bassinet. "He collects stuff like that?"

"No. He and his wife are expecting their first child in a couple of months. That's why they bought the condo. I think his wife will love it. She's even more into antiques than he is. They have the next apartment to mine, but they'll be moving into the new place in a day or two."

"That's nice," I murmur, relieved to hear the friend is safely married, but still no closer to finding out if Simon lives alone, or if he has a steady partner, or any of the other important stuff. "Have you made many new friends since moving back here to Hamilton?"

"Not really. I haven't had the time. I was in the same position as you when I inherited my share of this place. I knew nothing about antiques and even less about running a business, so most of my spare time has been spent reading and playing catch up."

I'm not a good poker player and I've never been long on patience, but one way or another, I have to know whether or not Simon is taken. Taking a deep breath, I decide to push a little. "So what do you do for fun? You shoot pool, go

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clubbing, what?"

"I like to ski in winter, and play the odd round of golf in summer. I'm not a clubbing fanatic, but I've been to a couple of the bars downtown."

"What about Sadie's? Ever been there?" I ask. Sadie's is my local hangout, but it's several steps down from the place on Carlton where we had dinner.

He shrugs and reaches for another chair. "I've been a couple of times. It's okay, but I much prefer the place we were at the other night."

Each piece of furniture Simon has selected for his friends has a tag with a number on it. He tells me the tags refer to the number of the lot the piece was once a part of. This means our next job will be to check these numbers against The Gallery's database, find out what was originally paid for the lot and how much of that original cost has already been earned back. Once we know this, he says we'll need to check with Tom, just in case. If Tom feels it's okay to let the pieces go, we can decide what we consider to be reasonable price-wise and invite Simon's friends over to see what they think.

Determined not to miss any opportunities to learn whatever I can on the subject of antiques, I make sure I'm there with Simon later that afternoon when Tom carefully checks over each of the pieces he selected.

Tom tut-tuts several times during the course of his examinations, and I ask him why.

"Because some people think they're improving a piece when actually they're destroying it," he says with a sigh.

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“Take that as an example.” He points to a hideous, baby-sized, dark green chest-of-drawers. “It’s early American and could be worth a few dollars, except it’s been ruined with at least three or four coats of paint, the feet have been sawn off, the original drawer knobs replaced with rubbish picked up in the dollar store, and one of the drawers has been fixed with a liberal application of glue. And if that’s not bad enough, the sides and back of the bottom drawer have been replaced with plywood.”

“Can it be restored?”

He shakes his head. “I doubt it. It would take too much work to make it worth the effort. But this...” He picks up one of the three odd dining chairs. “Now here’s a little gem,” he murmurs. “Nineteenth-century English and in reasonable condition. Apart from a little over-zealous polishing. But we can fix that. As for the rest of this stuff, there’s nothing we can use, so you might as well have your friend come in and take a look, Simon.”

The store closes a few minutes later, at exactly five-thirty, and as I’m leaving, I hear Simon call to me to wait up.

“Any chance of a ride?” he asks. “I’m having problems with my car so I had to leave it at home and grab a cab this morning.”

This not knowing where I stand is driving me mad. And until I figure it out, I need Simon sitting next to me in a confined space like I need an extra head. I’ve spent the whole day far too close to him as it is, breathing in his scent, observing his body movements and the way his muscles ripple

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beneath his shirt, and watching his mouth move. He has the most mobile, fascinating mouth I've ever noticed on another man. After the other night, I know he's not completely immune to me. But was that it? A quick fumble in the dark, then game over?

I take a deep breath and force a smile. I've been nursing a hard-on for hours and having him right beside me in my car isn't going to make it better. "Sure. Where do you live?"

"An apartment behind city hall. You live somewhere around there, too, I believe."

"The corner of Bay and Bold. You?"

"Robinson. Turn right off James, and I'll tell you when we get there."

I'm so wound up it takes all my powers of concentration to keep to the speed limit and observe the traffic laws, rather than hit the gas and get to where we going with all possible speed. But somehow I manage to restrain myself and eventually draw up outside the building Simon indicates.

"Have a nice night. And I'll see you in the morning," I say. Being next to him like this, without touching, constitutes cruel and unusual punishment in my view. Rather like having a delicious meal put before me and being told not to touch. I manage to smile, but barely contain a sigh of relief as he opens the passenger door.

Instead of getting out, he re-closes the door and turns to face me. "I have a better idea. Why don't you come up for a drink?" He smiles and reaches for my hand. "I'm sorry I had to leave early the other night. But I'd promised my friend who

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bought the condo to help him paint before they move in, and I couldn't let him down. That's what I've been doing for the past several days. So, unless you have other plans?"

Whatever I expected, it wasn't this. However, it's what I want and if I say no, I may not get a second chance. At least I don't have to worry about leaving Doodles alone for a while. He won't starve. He came equipped with self-dispensing water and kibble bowls. Like most pets, he's spoiled rotten and demands constant attention, so he'll bitch and complain for hours when I get back, but he'll survive. "Sure, I'd like that. Okay if I leave my car here on the street?"

"You can. But there's visitor parking in back if you want to drive around the building."

I choose the visitor parking on the grounds it's probably safer than leaving a late model vehicle on the street, possibly overnight, where it might attract attention. And, after making sure my baby is securely locked, I follow Simon into the building and onto the elevator.

His apartment turns out to be the complete antithesis of The Gallery. It's a tiny, one-bedroom suite on the third floor, and while it's clean and tidy, the furniture and furnishings appear to be a collaboration of thrift store leftovers and dollar store cast offs. Still, being the cool dresser and obviously classy dude Simon is, I'm sure there's a logical explanation.

Dropping his keys on a rickety chest in the entryway, he disappears momentarily and returns with two cold beers. He hands one of the cans to me, flips open the tab on the other and chug-a-lugs half the contents. Wiping his face with the

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back of his hand, he smiles and gestures for me to follow him.

“After all that dirt and dust we kicked up moving stuff around, I could use a long, hot shower. How about you?”

“Sounds good.” It sounds better than good, but nervous anticipation makes my mouth feel dry and, after pulling off my shirt and dropping it on a chair, I take another long pull of my beer.

By the time I reach the bathroom, Simon has the shower on full force and already the small space is starting to steam up. I put my beer can on the vanity and slip off the rest of my clothes. Thinking about Simon’s big dick reminds me of the condoms I keep in the back pocket of my jeans. I take out two of the foil packages, put them beside the beer can, and join Simon under the pulsating spray of hot water.

The other night, I could only guess at his size. Now I can see his rod for myself. It’s bigger, longer and thicker than anything I’ve experienced before. But right now it’s limp. I want to stroke it, lick it, bring it to life, so I can see it in all its glory—stiff and standing out from his body, ready for action.

As he wraps an arm around me and pulls me close, I slip a hand between our bodies. I pinch his nipples and skim my fingers down over his flat belly, loving his sharp intake of breath as I reach his prick and take it in my hand. As his tongue invades my mouth, teasing and exploring, I stroke his cock, wrapping my fingers around it and sliding them up and down until it starts to lengthen and grow. When I figure he’s ready, I break the kiss and reach around the shower curtain for one of the packages I left on the vanity. Tearing the foil with

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my teeth, I extract the condom and coax it carefully over his erection.

Then, reducing the shower spray to gentle, I kneel down and take him into my mouth in tiny increments, alternately sucking and swirling my tongue back and forth over the tip until he begins to groan and begs me to suck harder. With as much of him in my mouth as I can accommodate, I continue to suck him, and then I add to his pleasure by fondling his balls.

I feel his body start to stiffen, as if he's about to orgasm. Instead, he groans, and as he pulls free of my mouth, he grabs my arms, forcing me to my feet. "No, not yet," he says with a soft laugh. "Turn around and face the wall."

I feel his hands on my ass, squeezing, kneading, and then his fingers are touching my hole. I'm shaking with need, and I want to scream at him to hurry. But then I feel his hot breath on my ass and as his tongue touches my puckered bud, seeking entry, I want to come so badly my heart is thudding against my chest as if it wants to escape. The tip of his tongue gains entry, and as his finger follows, I can hardly breathe.

But then he backs off, and I feel the cool slap of lube gel against my hole. My excitements ratchets up another notch, and I suck in a deep breath.

"God! I've been wanting to do this for so long," he says as he parts my ass cheeks and injects some of the gel directly inside me.

"Since the first day we met?" I ask. "I know have."

"Yeah. I kinda suspected it was mutual. Just a case of when and where." I feel the head of his cock push hard against

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my hole, demanding entry, and again I have trouble breathing. He wraps his arms firmly around my waist. "I may be a bit bigger than what you're used to, so just relax and don't fight it. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

"It's okay." Although I know I can come just from thinking about his huge cock, I brace my arms against the wall, trying to stay relaxed and keep my mind focused as he continues to push slowly, forcing my muscles to expand and accept him until he fills me to the brim. When he's all the way in and I feel the roughness of his groin hair against my skin, he begins to stroke my dick.

"You like it slow and easy, or hard and rough?" he inquires as he nips my shoulder with his teeth.

"If you mean whips and chains and the real rough stuff, count me out."

"No. I worded that badly. I'm not into that either. What I mean is do you like to take your time, or do you prefer to get it over with fast?"

"Depends on my mood," I say truthfully. "Sometimes, if I'm really wound up and desperate, I just want a quick, hard fuck. No preliminaries, no nothing. I just want to get off ASAP."

"And what about right now?" Keeping our bodies firmly locked together, his clever fingers continue to play with my shaft.

I'm teetering right on the edge of climaxing. I love the anticipation of knowing it's going to happen soon, but not knowing exactly when. I also like to make the feeling last as

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long as possible. "Right now, I'm in no hurry. You?"

He laughs and nips again at my shoulder, sending a hot rush of excitement flowing through my veins that makes me tremble. "I guess I feel the same way. There are times when a quick fuck works for me, too. But as a general rule, I don't like to rush my pleasures. I like to take it slow like this. Hold something in reserve for later."

Later?

The promise contained in that one word makes me smile and give my butt a provocative wiggle.

He pulls out slowly, and as he pushes back in, I forget about later and concentrate on now.

"Shit, man, that feels awesome," I purr as he repeats the action.

Gradually, he ups things a bit, pumping a little harder and a little faster. Then he slows and concentrates on my dick for a moment. This taking us to the edge and pulling back is like nothing I've experienced before. My balls are aching and my cock is ready to explode, but I don't care. I love the sensation of his massive dick moving in and out of my hole even more than I want to come. And if he wants to keep fucking me like this for the next hour, I'll find a way to hang on.

But like all good things, I know it can't last forever. He starts to pump harder and faster until he's slamming into me with such force I can no longer hold back. My whole body is stiff, desperate with the need to climax. And as I shoot my load, I know it's about to happen for him, too.

For a couple of minutes we hold on to one another,

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laughing, kissing and nuzzling like a couple of kids doing it for the first time.

“That was nothing short of fantastic.” He grins as he lets me go and takes a bottle of shower soap from the caddy on the wall.

“You can say that again,” I murmur as he begins soaping my body. I feel happy, content and completely boneless. If he’d just turn off the damn water, I could probably curl up right here on the shower floor and sleep for a week. But then he turns it up to hot and hard and the feeling passes.

When I step out the shower, I pick up my beer. It’s warm and tasteless now, but I take a sip anyway and realize I’m starving. “You hungry?”

“Sure am. Which isn’t too surprising since we missed lunch.”

“We did?”

“You don’t remember?”

I take the towel he’s holding, drop it on the vanity, and wrap my arms around him. He feels and smells great, and already I want more. “To tell the truth, I don’t remember much of anything before you lured me in here.”

“You didn’t take much luring.”

“True.” I’m starting to get excited again, and I know he is, too. “But maybe we should have something to eat first?”

“First? As in before what?”

I laugh and let him go. I want to go again, but I prefer to wait. I want the next time to be as good if not better than this one. “As in before I find out the real meaning of the phrase,

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‘Getting fucked senseless.’”

After calling out for Chinese food, we return to the living room with a couple of fresh, ice-cold beers, and Simon flops down on the sofa that looks like it’s seen better days.

“Make yourself comfortable. But you’ll have to excuse the crappy décor. I’m planning on buying, but until I find what I want, I’m renting this place furnished on a month-to-month. In the meantime, all my stuff is in storage in the basement at The Gallery. Trouble is, finding what I want is not as easy as I expected.”

“What do you want? A millionaire’s idea of heaven for a song?”

“Not exactly. What I’d like is an older home, in a reasonable state of repair, with a garden and some character. But there just doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of what I have in mind on the market.”

I open my beer and take a sip as I join him on the sofa. “Sounds nice. If I ever think about buying, I wouldn’t mind something along those lines myself. But I’d have thought there were plenty of places like that. Especially in the older parts of town.”

He sighs. “There are. And in the year-and-a-half since I came back, I’ve looked at dozens of them. But the majority need more work than I could handle myself, and even if I was willing to go the route of paying someone to do the work for me, they’re either too big or too small. Of the few I’ve seen I might consider buying, they’re either over-priced, they’ve already been sold, or the owner changed his or her mind about

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selling.”

“Maybe you should look farther out.”

He shrugs. “I have. But it’s pretty much the same problem there, too. Anyway, I’m a city guy. I don’t think I’d be happy out in the boonies. Especially bearing in mind the kinds of winters we have around here.”

I’m with Simon on this. I like to be downtown where the action is. And I’m not crazy on shoveling the driveway in winter.

“But I can wait. I just know that one of these days I’ll find it.”

Just then the door buzzer sounds, and a few minutes later we’re up to our chopsticks in house special fried rice, honey chicken, lo mein, and my favorite Crab Rangoon. Actually there’s no crab in Crab Rangoon. It’s deep-fried cream cheese in won ton wrappers and served with luscious dark-red cherry sauce. Sounds weird, but I know the dish has a lot of fans.

* * *

Over the next few months, my life with Simon develops into a pattern. We work together all day and spend most of our nights together, too. Usually at my apartment, though, because I have a better bed, better furniture, and I can cook, whereas Simon’s culinary expertise is limited to take out, defrosting precooked food in the microwave, and opening cans of suspicious-looking stuff even Doodles won’t touch. I’ve also noticed that Simon and Doodles have their own thing going on. Simon is always slipping Doodles treats, and Doodles,

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being a pig at heart, has decided he likes Simon...a lot.

One afternoon in early fall, Simon comes rushing into the showroom at The Gallery. His eyes are shining, he looks about to burst, and as soon as I finish talking to a customer, he hustles me off to the office and closes the door.

Grasping my hands, he dances me around the room. "Guess what?"

"A bunch of aliens have landed and you got to meet them first?"

"No. I found it!"

"You found their spacecraft, but not them?"

"No! I found our house."

"Our house?" I haven't the slightest idea what he's talking about. Then I recall him saying something about wanting to buy. "Oh, right. Our house. That's nice. Where is it?"

"Just a few blocks away. It's been there under my nose all this time. A beautifully restored fieldstone cottage with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a huge kitchen where you can cook and we can entertain, plus a formal living room, a good-sized den, and all the other odds and ends like laundry room and a wine cellar. It has a garden with a patio and a tiny pond for goldfish. And to make it even better, the price is right. The current owner wants a quick sale. She was renting it to a couple of lawyers as office space, but they're moving out, and she says she's getting older and doesn't want the bother of finding a new tenant or the responsibility of being a landlord. Of course, we'll have to redecorate, but that's just a minor detail. So, what do you think?"

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“Can I go check it out first?”

“Absolutely. She’s waiting for me to bring you over.”

The cottage turns out to be everything Simon has described. It’s not too big or too small, and there are no weird smells or damp patches I can detect. The owner tells us she bought the property with a view to upgrading and selling, so the wiring and the plumbing are all new. In other words, it truly is perfect. Even the price, which I suspect is lower than she could get if she’d been willing to wait for a while.

After we’ve finished checking everything out, we agree it’s what we want. But then Simon asks the woman if she’ll excuse us for a moment, and we go back out to the garden.

“You sure about this?” Simon asks, linking his fingers with mine. “I’m aware it’s more my dream than yours.”

“I thought sharing our dreams was all part of what we have together.”

“It is.” His eyes look a little bright for a moment, but then he smiles and gives me a quick hug. “In that event, all we have left to do is decide whether we want to take title as joint tenants, or tenants in common.”

“Tenants in common means that if I die first, you inherit my share, right? The other way, it goes to my estate. And since you’d get that anyway, we might as well do it right the first time. Agreed?”

“And vice versa. If anything happens to me, whatever I have is all yours.”

* * *

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Like all great plans, moving out of our respective apartments and into the house has turned out to be more complicated and has taken longer than expected. Partly because we have trouble agreeing on paint colors, and partly because, at the very last minute, we decided to rip out the perfectly functional but basic kitchen and install the kitchen of my dreams. Now it's finished, and we have drawers and cupboards that open and close with a touch of the finger, a magnificent double sink, the very latest in convection ovens, and a refrigerator that has so many extras it has to be seen to be believed.

We've also seen a fabulous bathroom set up we want. Of course, it will involve major work like removing a wall, so it will have to wait until spring. Anyway, before a new bathroom, we need more furniture. What we own between us is nowhere near enough for the whole house, but rather than resort to impulse buying or bringing home a few of The Gallery's rejects, we're doing the best we can with what we've got, and leaving a couple of the rooms empty.

We finished moving in last night, and already Doodles adores his new home. Simon found a wooden baby cradle on rockers at an estate sale, cleaned it up and gave it a coat of polish, added a child-sized blanket and a couple of pillows and now that's where Doodles catches his zees in the corner of our bedroom.

I woke up a just few minutes ago. It's Sunday morning and it's still early. Not even six, according to the bedside clock. Simon's half of the bed is empty, and I'm figuring Doodles

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talked him into an early breakfast since his new bed is also empty.

While I wait for Simon to return, I close my eyes and think back over the past few months—back to the moment when I flew up the stairs at The Gallery, powered by rage and frustration after discovering my inheritance came with strings attached.

Simon said if I gave it time I'd probably feel differently about things, and I do. I know what's happened is not quite what Jack had in mind, but he wanted me to be happy, and I am. And he wanted me to be financially secure, and I'm that, too. So, the way I look at things, two out of three ain't bad.

I feel the mattress dip slightly as Simon returns, and I get the refreshing, minty smell of his toothpaste as he brushes his lips against mine.

After stroking a cool hand down my belly, he takes possession of my cock. "You awake?"

"No. I'm dreaming."

"About?"

"About some tall, handsome, dark-haired, and very pushy guy who just got into my bed and started playing with my dick."

He laughs as he rubs the tip with the pad of his thumb, and I go from zero to a hundred in less than a heartbeat.

"Do you like what he's doing?"

I give my best imitation of a bored sigh. "It's okay. But I'm sure he could do better if he tried."

"You think?"

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"I know he could." He pulls back the covers, and I feel the cool morning air from the open window brush against my overheated skin. "Hey, gimme back my blanket."

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me so close we're touching from lips to toes.

His hands slide down my back, and he starts squeezing my ass cheeks "Would you settle for a little body heat instead?"

"How about you throw in a little something extra to sweeten the pot?"

I feel him slide a wet finger down my crack and press it against my hole, seeking entry. "Such as?"

"Can I leave it your imagination?"

As his finger slips inside, he begins to nuzzle my neck. "That could be risky."

I feel my excitement edge up a notch. "In what way?"

"That estate sale where I found Doodles' new bed..."

"What about it?" I ask, giving a quick gasp of delight as he inserts a second finger.

"I was checking out a few of the other pieces, and I found a little cache of what looks like antique sex toys in one of the drawers."

"Really? You're sure that's what they are?"

"One of the other dealers said he thought they were training tools for children's ponies. There was this little whip thingy—actually, it looks like a whisk broom, but instead of stiff bristles, it has these thin strips of leather. Each strip is about a foot to a foot-and-a-half long. And then there were some other weird-looking things, too. Something that looked

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like a small clamp and this other guy figured was probably used to dissuade the pony from doing something, except he wasn't sure what. And then another wooden thing I imagine could be used as a butt plug."

I'm not into toys and devices, but I must admit the thought of that whip thingy adds a splash of spice to the stew we're brewing here. A little something to stir up the senses and add a whole new dimension to "giddy-up, little doggy". "What happened to the stuff?"

"Do you care?"

As you've already figured out by now, my imagination sometimes gets the better of me and I find myself imagining the exciting sting and tickle of that whip thingy on my bare butt. Just thinking about it has me right on the edge, and if Simon doesn't stop teasing and get down to business here... "Not really. I don't do toys."

"Liar." He laughs as he removes his fingers, hooks my legs over his shoulders, and I feel the head of his prick nudging at my hole. He moistens the entrance with a little of my pre-cum, and begins to fuck me with his usual slow, measured strokes.

I love the feeling of his big dick moving in and out of me like this, but I can't quite lose the thought of that whip thingy. "So, did you buy it?"

"Buy what?"

"The whip thingy."

"I thought about it."

"And?"

"You figure we need stuff like that to turn us on?" He runs

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a fingernail down the length of my shaft, making me gasp with delight. Then he grasps it firmly and moves his hand up and down in tandem with his strokes.

No, I don't. Simon can turn me on with a look, a touch, and sometimes all it takes is the desire I see in his dark eyes. "Not at the moment. But one day, when we're older, we might start getting bored with one another. Lose interest, maybe."

"Never going to happen," Simon assures me as he pushes me over the edge. I feel his lips against mine, and as our tongues tangle, he joins me, the two of us swirling around and around in our own private heaven, trying to make the sensations of the moment last forever.

As the last whisper of the fantastic feeling fades, we pull up the covers and wrap our arms around one another. "I love you, Simon."

"I love you, too."

"Meooooow." I hear Doodles' plaintive cry as he leaps on the bed and tries to insert his fat little body between us. I'm not sure if he's expressing his love for us, demanding attention for himself, or just checking out the chances of a little extra breakfast.

I lift the covers up enough so he can wiggle his way in and share our warmth.

Simon has that faraway look on his face, and I know he's got something in mind.

"What are you thinking about?"

"That we're pretty lucky. We just about have it all. We have each other, a highly profitable business, a beautiful new

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home, and Doodles here to remind us of the really important things in life.”

“You mean like me getting my lazy butt out of this bed and cooking us something wonderful for Sunday breakfast?”

“No, not exactly. I’m thinking we should celebrate our good fortune by getting married. What d’you say?”

Umm... “Yes?” I try the word out to hear how it sounds. “Absolutely. Yes!”

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 *Strangers In The Night*, by Christiane France,
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After a disastrous affair with a man he met on the beach one night, an affair that ended with the man's death, Blaine Tyler is scared to take a chance on someone new for fear of repeating his past mistakes. So scared, he gives up on life completely...

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