

...Josh felt the familiar touch of Pete's strong hands massaging his back, while his lover's hot breath fanned his skin. As Pete's lips trailed along Josh's neckline, licking and kissing, the tension began to build within him and he started getting hard. He loved it slow and easy like this, when they took the time to enjoy each other's bodies.

"Love you, babe."

The whispered endearment tickled his ear, and Josh shivered with a mixture of pent-up longing and excitement. It had been too long since they were together like this. Much too long. "Love you right back."

"I've really missed you."

"Yeah. Me, too. You should've called me or something."

"Didn't see any point." The hands slipped beneath Josh, stroking his belly and brushing lightly against his shaft. "I figured you'd fallen for one of those super sexy, dark-eyed Mediterranean guys, and I was permanently out of luck."

The hands grew more urgent, more demanding, and Josh groaned with pleasure as a finger gently probed the puckered skin around his butt hole. "Not a chance. Anyway, you know better than that."

"Not even tempted?" Pete asked. "I can't believe you lasted that long without a little something to ease the pain."

"Okay, so one night I got drunk. Didn't mean anything. I don't even remember his name."

- "Was it good?"
- "Yeah, actually it was."
- "I see. So you're saying you cheated on me?"
- "No! Wasn't cheating. We'd split up way before then."

Pete revved up his grip on Josh's cock to the max and bit his shoulder so hard, Josh almost screamed aloud with the pain...

ALSO BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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

BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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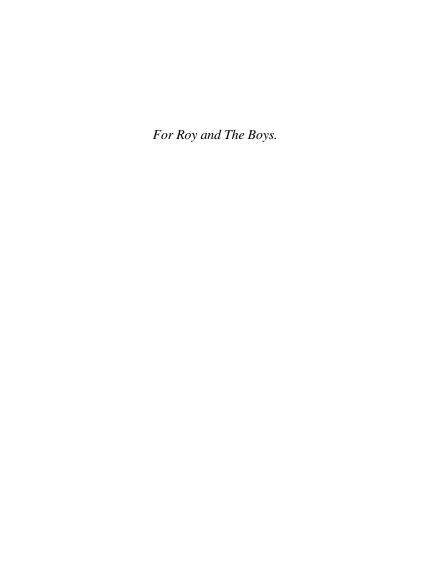
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THIS TIME FOR KEEPS

Josh Amberley paid off the cab driver and hesitated, key in hand, on the sidewalk outside his house on the Beach Strip. Although glad to be home after spending the past six months working in Europe, he was still trying to get his head around the devastating news he'd heard less than an hour ago.

He looked at the front door, remembering. He'd bought the old place a few years back when he and his former partner, Pete Dennison, had decided to give up the precarious, pressure-cooker lifestyle of high fashion models, move in together, and start a business of their own. The same house where he and Pete had lived, loved, fought, broke up and got back together more times than he could count, and parted for

what they'd sworn was the last time a little over six months ago.

They'd both said that was it. No more getting back together and giving it one more try. It was over. Done. Josh had sold Pete his share of Flash Fashion, closed up the house, and taken the first flight he could get out of Pearson, back to where he and Pete had first met as teenagers, on the fashion house runways of Europe.

Despite the harsh words they'd exchanged and his determination not to look back, Josh had checked his messages every day, positive Pete would get in touch, even if only to say sorry for misjudging the situation and no hard feelings. When that didn't happen, he assumed Pete had moved on and found himself someone else. Except knowing Pete and the way he could never keep quiet about anything, at least nothing big like that, he wouldn't have been able to resist bragging a little. He'd have called or texted, on the pretext of just saying, Hi, how are you, and then slipped in a little something to let Josh know he'd been replaced. Permanently.

Josh had also wondered if Pete was playing games by holding out, making bets with himself on who would give in first and contact the other. So, a couple of weeks ago, needing to resolve things and at least find out what, if anything, was going on, Josh had done just that. He'd tried the office first and then Pete's cell. But for some reason both numbers had been disconnected and his calls to the operator for assistance had gotten him nowhere—there were no new listings for a Peter Dennison.

There had even been the odd weak moment when he'd thought about calling friends back home to see if they could shed any light on the situation, but at the last minute, he'd always chickened out. If something had been wrong, someone would have let him know. Anyway, there was always a chance Pete really had had enough of the on-again, off-again state of their ten-years-plus relationship. A chance he'd sold the company and moved far enough away to avoid getting sucked in again. Or he'd changed the company name, or he'd moved in with someone else.

Josh had come up with at least a dozen different reasons why Pete appeared to have fallen off the map. But the not knowing had driven him crazy. He'd needed to come back home and find out for sure.

* * *

Today, on the shuttle from the airport into town, he'd noticed one of his neighbors sitting across the aisle—Ronny something or other. He'd forgotten the dude's last name, but the guy lived a block or two farther down the street and hung out at the same neighborhood bar as him and Pete. They'd all known one another for years.

They'd both said, "Hi, how are you," and chatted about nothing in particular for a couple of minutes. Then Josh had asked if he'd seen Pete lately, and if he knew how he was doing.

For a brief instant, Ronny had done a great imitation of a goldfish who'd jumped out of its bowl and couldn't find the

way back in, but then he'd gotten a grip and said, "Oh! I...err...Well, I guess you haven't heard. I kinda thought perhaps you hadn't when you got on the bus just now. But then I thought, maybe... Anyway, someone has to tell you, and while I'm damn sorry it has to be me...and there's no easy way of saying it, I...err...umm, I'm afraid Pete's dead."

Dead?

As Ronny's gabbling ceased, the world had tilted and swung around Josh in dizzying circles while the words echoed and reverberated in his brain. *Pete...dead!* Pete couldn't be dead. He hadn't been sick and he wasn't the suicidal type. It just wasn't possible. Josh wasn't sure if he was about to pass out, if he was dreaming, or if—

He tried to clear his mind and pay attention to the rest of what the guy was saying.

"...happened a couple of months ago. A bunch of us were at the gym earlier in the day, and we arranged to meet that evening at Cris' and have a few drinks."

"You mean Cristoffe's? The bar down the street from where I live?"

Ronny had shot Josh a funny look, as if he'd lost his memory or something. "Right. The same place we always go. Anyhow, the place was busy that night, and Pete was a bit late arriving. He said the parking lot was full, and he'd had to park farther down the street. I didn't think anything of it, and neither did anyone else. Never been any trouble before—at least none any of us had heard about. Still, it was pretty dark that night and it's not like downtown where's there's always

people around, and, according to Cris, Pete was one of the last to leave.

"Anyway, it seems Pete caught a couple of strung-out druggies trying to steal his wheels. But instead of going back to Cris' for help, or even using his cell to call the cops, Pete tried to deal with the situation himself and got gutted like a fish for his trouble. Maybe he didn't realize they had knives. Maybe he wasn't even thinking. No one knows for sure what happened that night. Except that by the time a passing motorist saw his body at the side of the road and called the police, Pete's car was long gone, and so was Pete from a massive loss of blood."

The thought of his former lover dying alone on a dark street late at night had made Josh feel physically ill. Good thing he was sitting down. "Holy shit! Why didn't someone let me know?"

Ronny had looked away, obviously embarrassed. "Believe me, I would have, if I'd known where you were. But I didn't have a clue, and no one else seemed to know either. Even Pete's lawyer didn't know where you were because he asked me."

"My neighbor, Mrs. Vincelli knew where I was."

"She said all she knew was you'd gone to Europe. She didn't know where exactly, but if you called she said she'd let you know what had happened."

"I called her a couple of days ago..." Josh had frowned, trying to recall the details. "She wasn't home, so I had to leave a message." He'd hesitated, still trying to get it through his

head what Ronny said had happened. "Pete didn't mention anything about me going back to Milan to work?"

"All he said was that you'd taken a year off to find yourself, and he didn't have your itinerary."

Josh had felt a surge of irritation he found difficult to suppress. Leave it to Pete to come out of the situation smelling of roses, even though the blame for that last fight had been one hundred percent down to him and his damn insecurities. Pete had been the one who'd started in on him just as they were going to bed, making wild accusations without a shred of evidence. And Pete had been the one who'd packed his bags and taken off in the middle of the night while Josh was sleeping. "He didn't tell you we'd split up?"

"I figured you had. But Pete kept saying you just needed some time out. That as soon as you got over whatever was bothering you, you'd be back."

As if what happened had been all down to him? Josh swallowed the urge to scream the truth out loud. "Did they catch the thieves?"

"Yeah. Over by the Burlington Bridge. They must have been going too fast when they got to where the Strip feeds into the Queen Elizabeth Way. Probably swerved to avoid oncoming traffic, crashed Pete's car into the guard rail and were too drunk or high on something to run. Last I heard they were both in jail and undergoing some kind of substance abuse program."

"What were they charged with?"

"A bunch of things, according to the media. From grand

theft, to driving without a license, driving while impaired, plus a few other traffic offenses, all the way up to manslaughter. But you know how these things go. They'll get one of those bleeding-hearts Legal Aid lawyers to represent them, work out a deal with the Crown, and the next thing we know they'll be back on the street. Whatever they do to the bastards, it still won't bring Pete back. Right?"

"True." Josh hadn't wanted to think about the way some people had no problem in taking another human life with no regard for anything, except saving themselves from more than a slap on the wrist. But even if they locked them up for a thousand years, forced them to scrub miles of concrete flooring with a toothbrush, and fed them nothing but bread and water, it wouldn't change one damn thing. Pete was still dead. And there was nothing he or anyone else could do to bring him back.

If only he'd been here—if he hadn't gone running off to Europe to lick his wounds, Pete wouldn't have been by himself on that dark street. He wouldn't have been attacked, and he wouldn't be dead, and—

He'd closed his eyes and swallowed hard, still unable to grasp that what Ronny had just told him was true rather than some sick joke. He couldn't believe Pete was dead, that he'd done something so stupid as to try and deal with a pair of knife-wielding crackheads. But, sadly, that was the way Pete had been, always rushing into situations with no thought for his own safety, and always assuming he could take care of things alone.

The mind-shattering news had left him feeling disoriented, and disconnected. He'd just stared through the bus window, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest and willing himself not to cry. After all, it was Pete who'd chosen to toss what they had in the trash and walk out on him. It was Pete who'd said whatever they'd had together was over, it had run its course, and there was no point in them trying again because he was no longer interested.

That's why Josh had gone away. He'd spent the past six months doing everything in his power to put Pete out of his mind and out of his heart. He'd gone through the usual bouts of homesickness, the tears, the regrets, the might-have-beens, and a ton of second thoughts, but he'd been slowly getting there. Pete was no longer his problem or his concern. And if he said it often enough, one of these days he might actually believe it.

"So, what happened to the modeling agency?" he'd asked, aiming for a change of subject. Flash had been Pete's dream long before it became a reality, but Josh had been fifty percent responsible for getting the business up and running.

"I guess it's gone because there's a courier service in there now." Ronny had given a helpless shrug. "With Pete dead and you no longer around, there was no one to run things, so I assume it folded." He'd sighed and looked away. "I don't know if Pete was short of money or something, but I do know he started living in the back room after you left.

"Sorry, I don't know anything more. His lawyer took care of everything, including the funeral. I expect he sold off the

furniture and stuff to bury him and settle his estate. That's what normally happens when there's no family to look after things."

* * *

As Josh carried his bags up the short walkway and deposited them on the porch, he wondered if there had been enough money to pay Pete's bills and give him a decent send-off. Pete hadn't been one to save or accumulate possessions, so there wouldn't have been much to sell. Any time Pete had money in his pocket, he'd spent it on trendy clothes and worthless dot com shares. As far as the company's assets were concerned...while Josh had been a partner, they'd kept their heads above water—just, so there might have been a few dollars in actual cash money, but he doubted there had been anything of significance. The outdated camera and video equipment wouldn't have raised a fortune either. And everyone knew what happened to the value of office furniture and fixtures once they were taken out of the showroom.

Josh hoped there had been enough, but since Pete was the one who'd ended things between them, whatever happened after Josh had left the country was really none of his business.

At least, that's what he kept trying to tell himself. Trouble was, he and Pete had been friends and lovers for far too long for him to just brush everything under the rug and behave as if nothing had happened. If they hadn't both had such hot tempers, always wanting their own way over the smallest, most insignificant detail...if they'd tried to work through the

disagreements, instead of making them worse with all the shouting and stomping around. They could have gotten counseling; they could have retired to neutral corners to cool off. Instead, they'd behaved like spoiled kids, screaming and yelling until their voices were hoarse, then giving up and throwing a relationship Josh had believed would last forever in the trash.

And over what? A young male client both thought the other wanted, when the truth was neither of them was even slightly interested in the posturing little prick.

He slid the key into the lock and opened the door.

Closing his eyes, he put down his bags and breathed in the well-remembered scent of home...except, for some reason, it didn't quite smell the way he remembered or expected. His eyes snapped open and he looked first into the living room on his left, down the hallway to the kitchen, and then up the stairs to the floor above, half-expecting to see Pete sitting there on the top step, laughing at him.

But Pete was dead. Josh knew that as surely as he knew Mrs. Vincelli had given the place a thorough spring-cleaning after Pete moved out, and that she'd done her usual weekly cleaning right before he left for Europe. He'd also left a message on her phone a few days ago, said he was coming home, and asked if she'd air the place out and freshen it up a little.

There was plenty of evidence to show she'd been in because all the polished surfaces were dust free, and he could detect a faint odor of the cleaning product she used on the

kitchen and bathroom floors—a product strong enough to remove any and all odors.

So why could he still smell Pete's aftershave, and Pete's cedarwood shower gel, and everything else Pete, including the god-awful stink of his filthy old running shoes after he'd been for his morning run along the edge of the lake? Especially as Pete had taken all those things with him when he left.

Feeling a little shaky and off balance, he sat down on the bottom step of the stairway and ran a hand through his sunstreaked, dark blond hair.

He knew what he thought he could smell could only be an illusion. Partly reaction from the shock of hearing about Pete's untimely death, and partly from guilt because he'd been thousands of miles away in Europe while Pete was being sliced and diced by a couple of druggie thugs. He knew he had no real reason to feel guilty. He and Pete were adults who'd argued one too many times and made the rational decision to part on the grounds they'd had enough—that what they both wanted was a quiet and peaceful life, the one thing they hadn't been able to find together no matter how hard they'd tried

Except, despite everything, you know damn well chances were good the two of you would eventually have gotten back together. You'd done it before—so many times you've lost count. You had too much history together to throw it all away—too many things you'd shared...the good times and the bad times, the thrill of success when you both got to the top of the heap in Milan, and again when the business finally began to turn around.

Then the awful pain of the final parting...the way you felt that morning when you awoke to find Pete had packed up and left in the night without a word of explanation—pain that had been only slightly alleviated by the fact you knew damn well all you had to do was pick up the phone and talk him around...

Josh stood, took off his leather jacket and put it on a hanger in the hall closet. He'd make himself a coffee and something to eat. After that, he'd unpack and put his stuff away, and give Pete's lawyer a call. So what if he and Pete were no longer an item, and he'd sold his share of the business to Pete? It did not follow he could just blow it all off. He had a moral obligation to make sure Pete's affairs had been properly settled, and also a need to assure himself Pete's remains had not been buried in whatever nameless spot the city considered suitable for those without the bucks for an oak casket and a fancy funeral.

Pete had been Josh's first real love. For sure the man had always been argumentative, suspicious, and cantankerous, and he'd become progressively worse in the months before their final break-up. He'd fly off the handle for little or no apparent reason, and was suspicious about what Josh was doing if he was out of his sight for more than a few minutes. He'd also been irresponsible where money was concerned, and a total pain in the ass all around, but Josh had loved him, warts and all. And probably always would, he reminded himself with a sigh.

It was hard for Josh to admit Pete had stopped loving him. But he knew he had, long before the final break-up, and there

was nothing he could do about that either. While Pete hadn't spelled it out, his actions had spoken louder than any words he might have used. He hadn't put up an argument when Josh offered to sell him his share of the company, and he'd made no attempt to stop Josh when he'd said he was going back to Milan. At the time, he'd thought Pete was just playing the jealous lover to the hilt, and that within a few weeks he'd make some attempt to lure him back. But it hadn't happened, and Josh hadn't known what to think, except Pete no longer loved him and this time it really was over.

Josh checked the food supply in the kitchen and discovered Mrs. Vincelli had filled the fridge with a supply of his favorite things. There were enough salad fixings to feed an army, cheese, and genoa salami from the downtown farmers' market, along with a baguette, and a selection of fruit ranging from mangoes through oranges to bananas, apples, a small, shiny, dark green melon, and a bunch of purple grapes. By the time he'd finished sampling the cheese, some of the fruit and a piece of bread, it was late in the afternoon, and he realized the lawyer's office would be closed for the day. Promising himself he'd make the call first thing in the morning, Josh refilled his mug with the rest of the coffee and took it out to the back deck.

Like the house, the deck was immaculate. The debris from the winter storms that swept across the lake and littered the area with everything from broken tree branches to bits of loose trash had been cleared away and the boards scrubbed clean. It also looked as if Mrs. Vincelli's husband had been busy as the

grass around the house had been cut and all the planter boxes were filled with his favorite brightly colored impatiens plants.

He took a sip of coffee and stretched out on the lounger to catch the last few rays of the day. Even if he hadn't been worried about Pete, it had been time for him to come home. People always said you could never go back. And while he'd still been able to get plenty of work in Milan, thanks to friends and longtime connections with people in some of the major houses, he was older now and less naïve about the fashion business as a whole. There hadn't been the same excitement he'd felt the first time around, or the thrill of the crowd oohing and aahing when he strutted his stuff on the runway. Going back to Milan had been a major mistake—like returning to the scene of the party the morning after and expecting everything to still be bright and shiny the same as it was the night before.

Things changed, and so did people. Josh knew he'd changed from the wide-eyed teenager of ten years ago. He was tired of all the glitter and the glamour. He needed something new, something interesting enough to occupy both his mind and his time. Something as far from the highly competitive, name-dropping, ass-licking, non-stop partying, fast lifestyle of the fashion world as he could get. And if he couldn't find what he wanted right away, maybe old man Vincelli would consider giving him a summer job, mowing lawns and planting flower beds.

He smiled at the thought of grubbing in the dirt the way he had as a kid and closed his eyes. It felt good to be back home on the shores of Lake Ontario, where he could do as he

pleased, when and if it suited him. Even if Flash had still been in existence, he wouldn't have wanted to go back. Pete had been good at dealing with the angst and tantrums of the wannabes who'd lined up outside their office each and every day in the hope of having their talents recognized. Pete had encouraged them, soothed or inflated their bruised egos depending on need, and given them hope. Josh, on the other hand, had been hard-pressed not to tell them the harsh realities of the life of a fashion model—the tiny percentage of those who actually made it to the top and the very real difficulties of staying there for the few who did.

He took a deep breath and pressed his free hand hard against his cock. God! He missed Pete, and right now he wanted him more than he could ever remember wanting him before—even when they were still together. He ran a finger slowly down his shaft, feeling it react and loving the sensation it produced. If Pete were here now, they'd go inside the house, strip off their clothes and—

"Glad to see you're back, loverman. How was Milano? Did ya have fun? Did you see the prince? Bet that disgusting old queen was there, sitting in his usual seat in the front row, trying to feel you up while suggesting you should come to his office so the two of you could have a chat about featuring you in one of his crappy magazines."

Positive the speaker had been Pete, Josh sat up fast, sloshing hot coffee everywhere as he opened his eyes and scanned the immediate area. He could hear a dog barking and some kids playing on the beach. A light breeze was moving

the leaves of the maple tree in the next-door-neighbor's yard, and the sun was fast slipping below the horizon, but there wasn't another living soul in sight.

Unsure if he'd just imagined Pete's voice, or if he'd fallen asleep and dreamed he was there talking to him, he put down the mug, pulled a couple of tissues from his pocket and mopped up most of the spilled liquid from his clothes. He was tired, jet-lagged, and still in shock from hearing about Pete's death, so the most logical explanation was a simple case of his mind playing tricks. Once he'd had a good night's sleep, gotten back into his routine and started to focus on what he wanted to do with his life, he'd be fine.

In the meantime, a short run along the beach, and a stop for a drink at Cristoffe's, would be the perfect way to clear his head before he turned in.

It would be fun to get reacquainted with old friends. And once he had his life back in gear, he might even feel like making a few new ones.

Josh knew was going to miss Pete, no question. Especially now that he knew Pete was gone forever. Most of all he would miss waking up in the morning to the feeling of Pete massaging his back and kissing his neck, and, if it was still early, the two of them would get down to some hot and heavy loving before breakfast.

Just thinking about those days made him start to get hard again. He pressed one hand over his aching dick, fingered the diamond stud in his left ear with the other, and told himself he needed time—time to get past what he'd lost before he could

even consider rushing into anything new. The stud had been a present he'd given himself last Christmas in a feeble attempt to make up for the fact he was spending the holiday alone, away from Pete. He'd had a dozen different invitations from friends and co-workers to parties and other festivities in and around Milan, as well as ski trips to the Swiss and Italian Alps. If he'd gone, he'd probably have had a great time. Except it was his first Christmas without Pete, and he just hadn't been in the mood. He hadn't felt like shopping for gifts, dancing around the tree or singing carols or any of the other stuff normally associated with the holidays.

He'd felt so lonely and miserable he'd gone to Rome instead, gotten stinking drunk on *vino*, and allowed some kid in a back street tattoo parlor to ink a tiny, stylized letter P on his butt as a surprise for Pete in the event they did get back together. Of course, thinking about Pete had made him even more depressed, so he'd consoled himself by buying the diamond stud and picking up some English guy in the hotel bar. And if all that wasn't stupid and pathetic enough, he'd gone to bed with the dude and pretended he was Pete.

The English guy had been a fantastic lover, though. He said he'd broken up with his partner about the same time Josh had split with Pete, and the two of them had been so damn starved for sex they'd gone at it like a pair of bunnies. It had been exactly what he'd needed at the time, even though the next morning, he'd looked and felt like he'd been run over by a truck. In fact, it had taken two lengthy spa sessions before he'd even dared go back to Milan.

Josh sighed, wondering what Pete would have said if he was still around and could see the tattooed P on his ass. Would he tell him he was an idiot for doing it? Or would he laugh and say a monogrammed lover was the one thing he'd always wanted?

He picked up the coffee mug and took it with him into the house. The house was so full of memories—he could see Pete chopping veggies at the sink, having a tantrum because he was a lousy cook and his soufflé had fallen, or screaming with anguish when he scorched his brand new designer jeans with the iron. He could still smell Pete's aftershave, and that fucking cedar shower gel he'd always loved. As he set the mug down in the sink, his eyes filled with tears and he felt a rush of emotion that threatened to overwhelm.

Pete was gone, and he was still here, and the knowledge was almost too painful to bear. Somehow, though, he had to keep going. Keep putting one foot in front of the other until he found something to occupy his mind and his time and, in the process, make a success of his life because he knew damn well if Pete was still here to give advice that's exactly what he'd tell him to do. The same advice he always gave when the going got tough.

You just gotta stare straight ahead and keep on trucking, man. No matter how much it hurts.

Grabbing his keys and a jacket, Josh left the house. He'd thought he was over Pete, thought he was past all the second guessing, and the vague hope that, given time, they'd work out their differences and get back together. But with Pete dead it

really was over. It was finally finished. Done.

Coming home had been hard. Now, he needed to get out of the house for a while. Talk to people he hadn't seen in months and catch up on all the news and local gossip. Mostly he needed to get away from the memories and think of other things, otherwise he'd never sleep.

Halfway between the house and Cristoffe's bar, he hesitated, knowing the memories would fade after time, but how long would it take? He knew the best way to deal with the problem would be to sell the house and start afresh somewhere new. He also knew lakeside properties had increased enormously in value over the past few years, and with his place in tiptop shape there would be no problem getting a good price. He could then invest the money and live on the proceeds while he figured out what he wanted to do.

Trouble was, he loved the house, and he loved living on the Beach Strip. The last thing he wanted to do was move away. And right now was too soon to start making that type of decision. He needed to wait until he was over the shock and able to look at the situation with a clear head.

In the meantime, he needed something else to occupy his mind. He made a mental note to check the newspaper and the Net for business opportunities. There was bound to be something that grabbed his attention—preferably something small and low key. Something where he could be his own boss rather than work for someone else.

When he reached Cristoffe's, Josh found Ronny and a couple of other old friends at their usual table in the back. He

ordered a pint of his favorite brew from the barman and joined them. But after a few minutes of the usual, Hi, how are you chitchat, they started talking about Pete and how it was really too bad what had happened to the guy. Which was fine by Josh, to a point. He expected to hear the usual condolences and regrets—had even needed the comfort of knowing Pete was still loved and missed. But Ronny and a couple of the others had known Pete since they were kids, so when the conversation settled down into a Pete Dennison retrospective, complete with all the "do you remember when" shit, Josh knew it was time for him to drink up and leave.

Mourning the death of his best friend and former lover was natural and normal. Filling up on booze, getting maudlin and weepy was self-indulgent and a total waste of time and tears. It wouldn't help him or Pete, and it wouldn't change anything.

He needed to put Pete in his memory box and move on. And if that meant selling and moving to the other side of the country, away from everyone he knew and all things familiar, that's what he had to do.

After leaving the bar, he felt too tired for any strenuous physical exercise, but even so he pushed himself into a short run along the beach trail. Within the first few seconds his muscles began to burn from the exertion, and he knew he was out of shape. Not too surprising since he hadn't run in months, but with a little luck, even this small amount of activity would exhaust him to the point he could depend on falling asleep instead of tossing and turning.

Just to be sure, though, when he got back home, he poured

himself a shot of whisky, turned the TV to the Weather Channel and sat down in what had once been Pete's favorite chair to watch the seven-day forecast. Tomorrow, he'd get back to what had been his and Pete's daily five-mile run along the edge of the lake. And, hopefully, by next week, he'd be ready to resume his daily workout at the gym.

According to the reporter, the weather for the next several days promised to be unsettled. Josh didn't mind running in the rain. But then the smiling blonde reporter went on to say a major electrical storm was moving up the U.S. from Texas and was expected to hit the eastern portion of the Great Lakes area sometime late tomorrow. The storm would be accompanied by what was anticipated to be at least forty millimeters of rain in low-lying areas.

Once he'd finished his drink, Josh turned off the TV and the lights, and went upstairs. After going through his usual night-time ritual of brushing his teeth and taking a cool shower, he dumped the clothes he'd been wearing in the laundry hamper, pulled back the duvet and slid into bed. Burying his face in the pillows, he inhaled the soothing fragrance of lavender and...the smell of Pete's damn cedarwood shower gel?

The last time Pete was here in this house was more than six months ago, and he'd been dead for the last two of them.

Josh sat up fast. He knew the people who made laundry detergent and fabric softener were always coming up with new scents. One minute it was green apple, or cucumber, or mango, and he'd even seen a magazine ad for a combination

of lavender and vanilla, but now cedarwood? Presumably the soap company had done its usual job of research and consumer testing. Even so, cedar was more a masculine fragrance than a feminine one. Then again, maybe they were doing his and hers detergents to go along with the his and hers towels.

He took a deep breath and released it slowly as he lay back down. Rolling over onto his stomach, he tried to ignore the smell and not think about Pete. Instead, with a little effort, he managed to visualize a lush green meadow filled with tiny, fluffy white lambs hopping over a fence. One lamb, two lambs, three lambs, four...

* * *

Josh felt the familiar touch of Pete's strong hands massaging his back, while his lover's hot breath fanned his skin. As Pete's lips trailed along Josh's neckline, licking and kissing, the tension began to build within him and he started getting hard. He loved it slow and easy like this, when they took the time to enjoy each other's bodies.

"Love you, babe."

The whispered endearment tickled his ear, and Josh shivered with a mixture of pent-up longing and excitement. It had been too long since they were together like this. Much too long. "Love you right back."

"I've really missed you."

"Yeah. Me, too. You should've called me or something."

"Didn't see any point." The hands slipped beneath Josh,

stroking his belly and brushing lightly against his shaft. "I figured you'd fallen for one of those super sexy, dark-eyed Mediterranean guys, and I was permanently out of luck."

The hands grew more urgent, more demanding, and Josh groaned with pleasure as a finger gently probed the puckered skin around his butt hole. "Not a chance. Anyway, you know better than that."

"Not even tempted?" Pete asked. "I can't believe you lasted that long without a little something to ease the pain."

"Okay, so one night I got drunk. Didn't mean anything. I don't even remember his name."

"Was it good?"

"Yeah, actually it was."

"I see. So you're saying you cheated on me?"

"No! Wasn't cheating. We'd split up way before then."

Pete revved up his grip on Josh's cock to the max and bit his shoulder so hard, Josh almost screamed aloud with the pain.

"Hey! Watch it, Pete. That hurt. In both places."

"Sorry! But you shouldn't say things that make me mad." Pete loosened his hold only slightly and laughed, a soft, seductive sound that turned Josh's insides to mush. "Want me to kiss it to make it better?"

"It's going to take more than a kiss to make up for an infected shoulder and a bruised dick. How about...how about you surprise me? But you'd better make it good."

"It'll be good. Better than anything you got from that other dude, I guarantee." Pete began to massage Josh's ass, his

touch firm but loving as he spread the cheeks wide. Then Josh felt the delicious sensation of a stiff, wet tongue, licking and teasing as it slid down the crack of his ass to his balls and back. "Did the other guy do this?"

The tip of the tongue invaded his anus and retreated, and Josh shuddered in response. "What other guy?"

"The guy you cheated on me with."

"It wasn't cheating."

The hot glide of Pete's tongue resumed its activities, then paused. "What was it then?"

Josh grasped the edge of the mattress, gritting his teeth and willing Pete to keep going. "Absolute sheer bloody desperation, if you want to know the truth."

"Are we feeling a tad desperate right now?"

"God!" Josh groaned. "You're such a sadistic bastard."

"And you need to be punished for leaving me to play with myself. Anyway, you love it, yes? Desperation gives it an edge, and that's how you like it." The tongue gave way to the finger. "Makes it so much better in the long run."

"Just quit teasing and do me! Okay?"

"In a minute. First, you gotta relax and loosen up, babe. You're tight as a drum."

Josh heard the sound of a drawer in the nightstand opening and closing, then the rush of cool wetness as Pete injected a shot of lube gel into his hole.

"Now, up on your knees."

"I'd rather do it the other way."

"This way first. I've got needs, too."

Josh did as requested, raising his butt to the right angle. He waited, but nothing happened and, for one nasty instant, he thought nothing would. Then, with a soft and sexy chuckle, his lover moved in behind him, grasping his butt in both hands and sliding his big cock straight in without a pause.

"Got you worried there, didn't I?"

"Not really."

Pete's arms wrapped around Josh's waist, holding him close, and he began to ride him in slow, easy strokes. "Liar. I thought about turning you on and leaving you to it, just as a little payback. But you know softhearted old me. Can't stay mad for more than a few seconds." He paused and lovingly stroked Josh's erection from root to tip. "Now if you can just hold this guy in check while I finish myself, we can give him the attention he deserves. Sound like a plan?"

"Okay. But make it fast. I always have trouble holding my breath."

Pete resumed stroking, slow and easy at first, but then he started slamming into Josh like a freight train. Until, finally, the explosion came, and he collapsed on Josh, laughing and shouting with glee. "I made it, man. Six months of fucking nothing, and now I feel soooo good."

"I'm happy you're happy. Maybe now you'll consider taking pity on me?"

He flipped Josh over onto his back and began tickling him and kissing his belly. "Now, what can I do for you, my man?"

Josh's prick was screaming for attention, and he was having real trouble hanging on. "Either get me off, or go away

and I'll do it myself."

"Say, please."

"Please. Whatever you want. Just do it. I'm begging here."

"Begging? Hmm...I love it when you beg."

Josh closed his eyes as Pete's cool hands wrapped around his dick. He felt a touch of something brush the sensitive tip, and then he was being sucked into the warm, moist heaven of what he'd always suspected was the hottest mouth in town. Once he was part way inside, his lover held him immobile with his teeth, while he licked the tip with his tongue. This kind of delicious torture always drove Josh crazy, and today was no exception. He couldn't move forward, and he couldn't back out. He was so hot with the need to come he was sweating, and so excited he was having trouble breathing.

But then his lover relented and started sucking him so hard it only took seconds before he came in one long, satisfying rush that left him feeling boneless and spent.

At some point, just before dawn, Josh was roused by the sound of voices somewhere nearby. Deciding it was either a neighbor getting an early start to the day, or someone on their way to work, he checked the clock to confirm it was still too early to get up, pulled the covers over his head and drifted back to sleep.

When he awoke fully, an hour or two later, he felt refreshed and revitalized. Okay, so he'd dreamed about Pete, and for sure he had a sore dick—he had a sore shoulder, too, for some reason—maybe something to do with the way he'd slept. He'd also had at least one wet dream, but he knew it

wasn't unusual to have vivid dreams after a loved one died. He'd had dreams like that about his parents after they died in a plane crash. His grandma had told him it was Mother Nature's way of helping the mind accept what it couldn't change, and she'd been right. After a while, the dreams became shorter in duration and less distinct, and eventually disappeared altogether.

He went into the bathroom to relieve himself and brush his teeth. He flicked on the light and hesitated. The smell of cedar was amazingly strong in here. And he wasn't overtired, imagining it or dreaming it. He was wide-awake and his nose was in perfect working condition. He checked around the old-fashioned, claw-footed tub, the sink, the shower stall, and all the cupboards. Nothing!

As he was about to give up and turn on the shower, he noticed what looked like the bottom of a can of some kind on the floor beneath the tub. Getting down on his hands and knees, he groped around in the empty space...and came up with a pump-can of Pete's favorite shower gel. The can was empty except for a still slightly-gooey dribble of gel around the end of the nozzle. Assuming the can had been knocked over, then had rolled under the tub out of sight, and whatever gel was left inside had slowly bled out, he sighed and threw the empty container into the wastebasket. At least now he knew why the scent still continued to pervade the house in spite of Mrs. Vincelli's expert cleaning methods.

He recalled his grandmother's trick of sprinkling baking soda on unwanted smells, but decided against it. The smell of

cedar wasn't unpleasant, and, like the Pete of his dreams, he preferred to let it gradually fade away and disappear in its own good time.

After throwing on a pair of cut-offs and a T-shirt, he went down to the kitchen. As he filled the tank of the coffee machine with water, he glanced out the window. The sky was dark and threatening, and he could see whitecaps out on the lake. He added coffee grounds to the filter and pressed the on button, then turned on TV to check the weather. The forecaster had said the storm wasn't expected until later in the day, but maybe things had changed.

However, instead of the calypso music and the perky announcers he always associated with the Weather Channel, the picture that appeared on the screen was an old *Everybody Loves Raymond* rerun. He frowned and picked up the channel changer. The weather was on Channel 23, and he was positive that's where he'd left it after watching the forecast last night. If it had been one channel up or one channel down, he supposed he might have hit something accidentally. But this was weird...Raymond wasn't one forward or one back. Raymond was several stops away on an entirely different channel. And why was Raymond on now instead of its usual time, later in the day? Unless maybe they were having a Raymond marathon.

Not that Josh cared. Pete had been the one who loved the sitcoms and the non-stop judge shows. Pete had been sitcom and judge show crazy. He'd watched reruns a dozen times and still found them funny, and he'd yell at the judge if he thought

their verdict was off. In fact, when they were still together, after watching the weather, Josh would automatically turn it back to the channel with Pete's favorites before Pete had a chance to ask. Maybe that's what had happened here. Josh had simply switched channels out of habit without thinking.

He clicked on Channel 23, waited for the ads to finish, and learned the day would be dull and overcast and the expected storm would arrive in the Niagara Peninsula in the late afternoon—right on schedule. In other words, if he wanted to go for a run, he could do it and not get wet. He turned off TV and went in search of his running shoes. Last time he'd seen them they were in the cupboard under the stairs.

* * *

Instead of the five miles he used to run and had planned to start doing again, Josh knew within the first few minutes he'd never make it. He was more out of condition than he'd realized. As a couple of other runners passed him and disappeared around a bend in the trail, he slowed to a jog, aware he'd have to work himself back up to five miles slowly. Push too hard now, and he'd suffer the consequences. A sore shoulder and a sore dick were enough for him to contend with for the moment. At the end of the first mile, he stopped and sat down on one of the benches at the side of the trail.

He still felt a tad stiff and jet-lagged, but a long, hot shower ought to fix that. Especially if he tried some of the higher settings on that new massage showerhead he'd bought right after Pete left. It was an expensive, top-of-the-line

product designed for athletes and sports enthusiasts, and until now, he hadn't had the time or the interest to properly check out all the features.

Later, after breakfast, he'd fire up the computer and see what was available in the way of business opportunities. Money wasn't a problem. He had more than enough to keep going for quite a while, so he didn't have to grab the first thing that caught his eye. And he knew to be careful of franchising opportunities, no matter how attractive they sounded. If he started something and it failed, so be it. He just didn't want someone looking over his shoulder, or setting impossible conditions and targets he'd have to work 24/7 to achieve.

Feeling better for the short break, he stood up and used the bench to do a few stretching exercises before turning around and jogging back home.

Eager to see if the new shower could do something about his sore shoulder, the moment he got home, Josh went upstairs, stripped off his clothes, stepped into the shower, and turned on the hot water. He then set the jets to high and adjusted the spray to shoulder height. Spreading his feet slightly apart for balance, he closed his eyes and let the water do its work. It felt wonderful, better than advertised, and better than a professional massage. It felt more like someone's fingertips were locating and smoothing out the knots instead of what he knew were high speed jets of water. He moved back, even closer to the spray, loving the way it pounded against his shoulders, forcing him to relax.

Strong arms held him tight, while firm lips moved along

his neckline, hotter than the water and more demanding than he remembered. The embrace slackened and the hands slid down his belly, finding and stroking his shaft into aching awareness. The stroking continued, slow and easy, pushing him closer and closer to the edge. He wanted to scream out his pleasure and his ever increasing need to ejaculate, but the clever fingers held him in check, urging him on, then backing off. And all the while the greedy mouth continued teasing him from behind, licking his back and nibbling his butt.

He held his breath as the tongue slid down his crack seeking out the puckered bud of his hole. Then, as the tongue sought and found entry, the fingers on his cock began to move faster and faster until the hot juices flowed from his body like oil gushing from the ground.

He sighed with pleasure, aware that what had just happened had been nothing more than his imagination. Even so, this new shower was the greatest. If only Pete were here now, and they were enjoying the experience together. Making love under here was like that time they'd done it outside while a storm was raging. What a rush, what an absolute out and out hoot. He could hardly wait to—

He slammed the door shut on his thoughts. *Pete's gone!* And he had a choice: either spend his life in misery, living in the past and grieving for what he'd lost, or get it through his head that that was then and this was now and move on.

He turned off the shower and grabbed a towel. The trick would be to fill his mind with other things, other pursuits, and before he knew it, Pete would be nothing more than a

beautiful memory.

He wiped the condensation from the full-length mirror with a corner of the towel and checked himself out. Thanks to watching his diet and regular exercise, his body still looked almost as good now as it had ten years ago. Okay, the exercise had been much lighter over the past few months, but at least it didn't reflect on his physique. His stomach was as flat as ever, and his upper arms...but what the hell were those funny red marks on his sore shoulder? He moved closer to the mirror. They looked like teeth marks. He could see bluish bruise marks there, too.

He glanced down at his dick and lifted it up for inspection. No wonder the damn thing hurt. It was sore to the touch and, same as his shoulder, showed visible evidence of bruising.

If he didn't know better, he'd think he'd been in a street fight. He must have somehow attacked himself in his sleep. A little experimentation proved that, while he wasn't able to bite his own shoulder, he could have gripped it roughly with his hand and the marks were therefore from his nails. And the same applied to his cock. After all, he had had a wet dream. Maybe even more than one.

He'd also dreamed about Pete last night—a very strong and detailed dream. He started rerunning snatches of the dream through his mind. It had seemed so real, as if Pete was there in the flesh. Especially when he'd pulled the jealousy act and...and bit his shoulder and squeezed the hell out of his dick?

Omigod! His head spinning, Josh sat down hard on the

edge of the tub. He'd dreamed about Pete. No matter how lifelike or real it had felt or seemed, that's all it had been—a dream, nothing more. He needed to get a grip and stop imagining things. Pete was dead and buried, but he was still so desperate for Pete's touch he'd attacked himself in his sleep. That had to be it. There was no other answer—at least none that made sense. Shock did funny things to people. And there was no getting around the fact the news of Pete's death had been one gi-normous shock.

He got up from the tub, found some antibiotic salve in the medicine cabinet and applied a little to both affected areas. He needed to get a grip and forget about Pete, otherwise he'd start believing in ghosts or something else just as weird.

He threw on some clothes and went downstairs. Taking milk, cheese and eggs from the refrigerator, he set them on the counter. A cheese omelet wasn't on his low-fat diet, but he was hungry and it would be enough to last him through to supper. He reached for a bowl and the whisk to beat the eggs, only to hesitate when he noticed the TV was on and yet another episode of *Raymond* enjoying its umpteenth rerun.

Acknowledging the sitcom must indeed be having a marathon day, his head started spinning again. Maybe he was going crazy. He was one hundred percent sure he'd turned the TV off before going for his run. And no way had he, by accident, design, or automatic response, switched over to that other channel. What the hell was happening here?

He poured himself half a cup of stale, almost cold coffee and chugged it down fast. When he bought the house, the real

estate lady said the house was supposed to be haunted by a former owner who'd died while still pining for his lost love. She hadn't said who the former owner had been, or whether the lost love was male or female, but the house had needed considerable work and had been on the market for quite some time, so Josh took it to be one of those silly, made-up-on-the-spot tales aimed at attracting buyers to hard-to-sell properties. He hadn't seen or experienced any weird voices or footfalls in the night, and no strange apparitions floating up or down the stairs. And, as far as he knew, the house had none of those cold spots, or whatever it was the psychics called the most sensitive areas.

Although a little ambivalent on the subject of ghosts, in all the time he'd been here, nothing had happened that didn't have an acceptable or reasonable explanation...except, of course, for the red marks he'd found on his shoulder this morning, and the way the TV kept switching itself back to the same damn channel. He supposed there was a chance even those oddities could be explained if he just took the time to work them out. In this day and age, TVs could be programmed to do just about anything. For all he knew, Pete had programmed theirs to return to a certain channel the same way a computer could be programmed to go into sleep mode after so many minutes of inactivity.

But could it also be programmed to turn itself back on?

And what if the ghost who was supposed to be haunting the place was fact rather than a story invented to attract a buyer? And what if that ghost had somehow found his lost

love and the pair had gone sailing off into the sunset together or wherever it was satisfied, happy ghosts retired to spend eternity? It might explain why he'd never been subjected to any ghostly activities in the past.

But if the first ghost was gone, did it mean any other old ghost could move in and take over? Maybe a bossy, rambunctious ghost who loved old sitcoms?

"Not so much of the old, thank you very much. And yes, that's exactly what it means. Anyone who dies within a certain area surrounding a property is entitled to take up indefinite residence in said property. Provided, of course, no one has already beaten him or her to it. I knew about your alleged ghost because you'd told me, but no one was here when I found myself in need of a new home, so I moved right in."

"Pete? That you?" Josh grabbed the edge of the counter for support, barely able to believe he'd asked the question. Again, his head was spinning out of control and his voice had come out as a strangled whisper. He was going nuts. Only crazies carried on conversations with the voices they heard in their heads.

"Of course, it's me. Who'd ya think it was? The new neighbor's amazing talking cat?"

"I have a new neighbor?"

"Across the street. She's okay, until she starts yammering on about her huge great hairy feline she swears can talk."

Josh pushed away from the counter and looked around the room. Save for him, the house was empty...unless he counted the characters yakking away on TV. "But you're dead."

"So?"

"So, I can't see you."

"Bet ya could if you still loved me."

"I do still love you. It was you who stopped."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You did."

"Oh, yeah? What did I do? First you walk out on me—"

"It was you who did the walking."

"Maybe so. But I just left this house. You left the country. Then, months and months later—"

"I was only gone about six months. You make it sound like years."

"Whatever. It felt a whole lot longer than six months to me. Anyway, you finally come home, and I try to talk to you. I ask you about the trip, and if you had a good time, but do you listen? Not a chance. You figure you're hearing things and take off. And if that's not enough, you decide I'm not your problem any more. You no longer love me, so you're just going to go ahead and shut me out of your life. Move on to something new and wonderful or whatever."

"You're dead, so I have no choice," Josh muttered weakly, wondering what in hell he thought he was doing besides talking to himself. "And all the loving in the world won't bring you back."

"Well, my old lover, my old pal, in case you haven't noticed, I *am* back. I got you good last night, didn't I? So good, I think we may even have a couple of teeny tiny little war wounds to show for it this morning. Am I right?"

"Not so teeny tiny. They're damn sore. Then again, I guess I can count myself lucky it was only my shoulder you bit."

A sudden burst of laughter somewhere close by made Josh jump. Except he knew he'd imagined that, the same as he'd imagined Pete's voice. He shook his head hard and raked his fingers through his hair, unable to get his mind around the fact for a moment he'd actually thought he was having a conversation with a dead person. *Man!* If he believed Pete's ghost had taken up residence in his house and they could talk to one another, then he needed to find a psychiatrist and get himself checked out. Although if he told anyone what had been happening since he got back home, he'd likely find himself in line for a guaranteed one-way ticket to the funny farm.

He shoved the eggs and the other stuff back into the fridge. Time to get out of here, fast, before the neighbors caught him behaving like a lunatic and called in the guys in the white coats. He'd go out for breakfast. Someplace as far away from the voice in his head and old sitcom reruns as he could get. A place where there were normal people with normal stuff on their TVs like the weather or sports or even a soap opera. Then later, instead of thinking and worrying about Pete's final resting place, he'd drop by the lawyer's office and make sure everything was in order.

Grabbing his wallet and keys, he locked up the house and headed for the garage. After leaving the car in an unheated garage for the past several months, he'd fully expected the battery to be dead. To his relief, it started on the first try.

On the outskirts of Hamilton he slowed at what had always been one of his favorite restaurants, but at the last minute changed his mind and drove on by. It had also been a favorite of Pete's.

A few blocks later, he stopped at a fast-food place where he bought coffee, juice and a breakfast sandwich and consumed the food in his car. The juice was warm and the sandwich tasted flat, as if it had been sitting around for a while, but at least he'd been able to eat and drink in peace, free from non-stop sitcoms and the voices in his head. He was even beginning to feel like a normal person again.

But was this just a temporary respite from something that would start again the moment he returned home?

After the dreams he'd had about his parents following their deaths, Josh knew only too well shock could and did do strange things to a person. It could make them see and hear things that just weren't there. Whether he wanted to or not, he knew, deep down, he would always love Pete, and trying to tell himself he was over him probably hadn't helped—especially if his attempts to deny his feelings had given rise to subconscious feelings of guilt.

Josh finished his coffee, crumpled the paper cup into a ball and added it to the paper sack containing the remains of the sandwich and the empty juice carton.

Chances were the marks on his body had been self-inflicted. However, the TV turning itself on and jumping from one channel to another couldn't be dismissed quite so easily. It was the kind of classic paranormal happening he'd read about

in books. But he'd give it a few days and see what happened. If things didn't settle down in that time, he'd have to assume the real estate agent had told the truth and the house was haunted, either by the one she'd told him about, or maybe even by Pete. Assuming that was possible. In which case, he'd either have to call the local ghostbusters, or find somewhere else to live.

He hoped it wouldn't come to that. He loved that old house. But one thing was for sure—he could not continue to live there under current conditions.

His mind made up, Josh started the car, backed out of the parking space, and headed for downtown and the lawyer's office. He and Pete had first met Don Stackley when they were setting up Flash Fashion. They'd both liked the guy and the way he'd handled their business, so they'd seen no reason to find anyone else whenever they'd needed legal advice after that. Josh knew he should have called ahead and made an appointment, but with a little luck Don would be in and willing to spare him a few minutes.

As he waited for the light change at the next intersection, Josh wondered if he should think about selling the house anyway. He wasn't looking to hook up with someone new and he was quite happy living by himself for now, so it wasn't a decision he needed to rush. He had more important things to think off first, such as a job of some sort to occupy his time. But if he did meet someone and things turned serious, he knew he couldn't stay in the same house where he'd lived with Pete.

The lights changed and he maneuvered the car around a

slow-moving truck bent on hogging the best part of two lanes. If he felt lonely and in need of company, he had friends and acquaintances he could call. If he needed more than friendship, and he knew there would be times when he needed the close contact of another body, there were a couple of gay clubs in the area where he could get what he wanted and no questions asked.

When he reached the law offices of Stackley Associates, he was only kept waiting a few minutes before the receptionist showed him into Don's office. As usual, the desk was piled high with a mess of files and assorted papers, but from past visits, Josh knew the forties-something lawyer could immediately put his hand on whatever it was he needed.

"Hey, man, how goes it? I gather you got my letter," Don said as they shook hands, and he waved Josh into one of the clients' chairs. "Too bad you weren't able to make Pete's funeral. Unfortunately, I had no idea where you were. I asked around, but..." He gestured helplessly with his hands. "Anyway, you're back now. And you've read my letter, yes?"

"Letter? I only came back yesterday."

"And you haven't had time to go through your mail. Still jet-lagged, hmm?"

"I had my mail redirected to my accountant's office so she could take care of the mortgage payments and utility bills. After I leave here, I'll go over there and collect it."

Don pulled a file from the stack to his right, extracted a single piece of paper and handed it to Josh. "Not to worry. I have a copy here. As you'll see, Pete made you his sole

beneficiary and named the two of us as his executors and trustees. There's a bunch of paperwork on which I'll need your signature before I can complete all the formalities and wind up the estate, but we can get to that later."

Josh put the letter down on the desk without reading it. "Where's Pete buried?"

"In the cemetery, right next to his mother, of course. Where did you think?"

Josh shrugged, feeling a tad embarrassed. "I didn't know if there was enough money to cover a decent burial, or if—"

"He'd been interred at the city's expense?" Don chuckled. "No worries there. Pete was given the kind of send-off he wanted—a plain wood casket with no ornamentation and no flowers as per his will. It's a shame you weren't there considering the two of you were together for so long. There was a short service, very nice and respectful, and some of his friends got up and said some lovely things about him. Afterwards, we had a little get together and drank him a fond farewell at that restaurant on the Beach Strip."

"You mean Cristoffe's?"

"That's the place. A few of his friends had contacted me to find out details of the funeral, and one of them said it was Pete's favorite spot. I figured it was as good as anywhere else."

"It was. Umm..." Josh felt downright uncomfortable, but certain questions had to be asked. "I realize this sounds a bit tacky, but where did the money come from to do all this? I mean the funeral and the wake. I know the company usually

ended each month about even, so no big profits to stash, and I know Pete didn't have any insurance. At least none I ever heard about. And he didn't have any savings."

"His dot com shares." The lawyer grinned happily. "Or more correctly, what started off as his dot com shares. He was complaining to me one day how badly his portfolio was doing, so I suggested he use my broker and let him reinvest his money properly."

"And?"

"He took my advice. In spite of the lousy market conditions we've been enduring this past year or so, after taking care of all his bills and last expenses, there's still a little over a million sitting in the estate's name, waiting for you to decide whether you want to continue investing the money where it is or move it elsewhere."

"Me? Pete left me a million bucks?"

"Read the letter and you'll see. Although I believe it's closer to a million-and-a-quarter, if I remember correctly." Don shuffled through the papers in the file. "Here it is. Last quarter's statement shows it standing at just under that."

Josh rubbed his forehead, trying to organize his jumbled thoughts. "This is crazy. I'm not entitled to anything. Pete and I broke up before I left for Italy. I guess he didn't find the time to change his will. Maybe he didn't think about it."

"He thought about it. I knew the two of you had parted because he told me, and one day when he was in the office on company business, I suggested he might want to consider making some revisions to his will. He said he'd think about it

and get back to me. A couple of days later he called and told me to make you the sole beneficiary, and make it clear the charities previously mentioned as co-beneficiaries would only inherit in the event you died first."

"But we were no longer together."

"I know that. So did Pete. I even reminded him. But he said the split was only temporary. The two of you had never had a fight you couldn't get past, and as soon as you got your head sorted you'd be back. In the meantime, just in case something happened before things got straightened out between the two of you, he wanted to put his affairs in order. That's also when he told me about the plain wood casket and no flowers." The lawyer hesitated, flicking the corner of the file with his thumb. "Almost as if he knew something was going to happen."

Josh felt an icy shiver run down his spine. "You think?"

"Maybe. People get strange premonitions all the time. You know, that weird I-gotta-do-this-but-I-don't-know-why kinda feeling. Take the money and run, Josh. It's what Pete wanted."

"What in hell am I going to do with a million bucks?"

"Keep it properly invested, and you'll never have to do another day's work in your life."

"I'm too young to retire."

"You could blow it on the high life and have a great time for a few years. Or you could do some good with it. It's up to you, my friend. Take time to think about it. If you need any advice or help, you know where I am. In any event, give me a call in a day or two, so we can set a time to deal with the

paperwork."

Josh left the lawyer's office in a daze. He'd been worried about Pete being buried in a pauper's grave, while all the time Pete had been swimming in money. Pete must have known his financial worth way before they had that fight, yet he'd never said a word, always behaving like he was one step from broke. Josh's eyes burned with unshed tears and his chest felt like it was caught in a vice, but despite all that he laughed out loud, startling a couple of passersby who shot him funny looks and hurried on their way.

After their last fight, he'd truly believed Pete no longer gave a damn about him. Pete was the one who'd picked up his marbles and left without a word. But after what he'd just found out, he knew whatever Pete's reason had been for leaving, it wasn't because he no longer cared. Pete hadn't stopped loving him and he hadn't stopped trying to take care of him either.

And the best part was that Josh could keep the house on the Beach Strip. Whether the place was genuinely haunted, or what he'd experienced had been the result of emotional overload triggered by a shock, the thought of selling it was akin to chopping off an arm. If he didn't want to live there for whatever reason, he wouldn't have to sell it in order to finance a new place. He could rent it out, or just maintain it as an escape hatch for when life got to be too much and he needed somewhere to go and sift through old memories.

He hesitated and looked around, wondering where he was, only to realize he'd walked several blocks beyond the lot

where he'd parked the car. He turned and retraced his steps. He'd already known it would take a few days for him to get over the shock of Pete's death and now, with this second shock on top of it, his head was swimming. But he didn't have to make any rush decisions about anything. He could spend the next few days relaxing and thinking about what he wanted to do and where he wanted to spend at least a part of Pete's money.

Pete had loved kids. Pete had also been a great believer in random acts of kindness. Perhaps there was a way of combining the two. Charitable foundations and good causes usually had hefty overheads and pages of rules to deal with up front, but with Don's help, it was possible a way could be found to circumvent all the red tape and deal with the need direct.

He found the lot where he'd left the car, paid the attendant on his way out, and headed in the direction of home. He had no particular desire to rush back, so on the way, he stopped at his accountant's office and picked up his mail, and then again at the post office to arrange for regular mail delivery to be resumed.

With his errands finished, he drove slowly down the Strip toward the house, mentally bracing himself for whatever he found when he got there.

However, when he unlocked the door and went in, everything was quiet. The television was off and there were no voices in his head, clamoring for attention. He could still detect the faint odor of cedarwood shower gel, but that no

longer bothered him since he'd found the empty can under the tub.

He gave a soft sigh of relief, opened the fridge and took out a cold beer. Hopefully, the voices had been a simple case of his mind playing tricks, and the TV the result of faulty wiring or pre-programming courtesy of Pete. If not and they started up again...

Reluctant to drive himself crazy by looking for other reasons, he took a pull of the cold beer and headed for the den. He'd spend a couple of hours checking out worthy causes for kids and see what he could come up with. Even with a million dollars, he didn't have the resources for anything too heavy such as impossible medical conditions, but perhaps he could help sweeten the small stuff. He still remembered when he was young how some kids like him got to go to camp all summer and were given a ton of gifts on their birthdays and at Christmas, while others got little or nothing.

Josh had been "discovered" as a teenager and, instead of going to college, after enjoying some success locally, with his family's encouragement, he'd gone on to become a high profile and highly paid fashion and photographer's model. But he knew there were hundreds of potentially talented young people out there who went into dead-end jobs because either they lacked the scholastic abilities for higher learning or didn't have the money for some other type of job training. Maybe that's where he could do something—set up a scholarship or trust fund to help the kids who fell between the cracks.

Instead of turning on the computer, he sat down in the

chair, leaned back, put his feet up on the desk and closed his eyes.

Lord! I miss Pete so damned much.

If only Pete were here now, bitching about the correct way to slice carrots and dice peppers, and telling him how to do this, that and everything else like he was his mom.

"I am here, bro. I've been here all along, and I've done everything I could to snag your attention. I slept with you last night. I massaged your back in the shower. And I even keep putting the damn TV on that station you hate. I don't know what else to do. Come on. Open your eyes. I'm over here by the door."

Josh hesitated. He'd loved Pete so much, but the voice wasn't real. He was either daydreaming again, or indulging in wishful thinking. Even so, after a couple of tension-filled seconds, curiosity got the better of him, and he opened his eyes and turned his chair toward the door. At first, he saw nothing. It was late in the afternoon on a dark day, there were a few spots of rain on the windows and the room was in shadow. Then he noticed something in the open doorway...the outline of something vague and insubstantial that hovered in the air for a second, then vanished.

"I can't see a thing."

"Give it a moment and you will. Just have patience and concentrate. Try to remember how you felt when we first met. How much we loved one another, and how we couldn't stand even the tiniest fraction of space between us. I remember we'd find any excuse to touch each other. We held hands under

cover of restaurant tables and...and remember that time in Milan when we almost got caught making out in one of the dressing rooms?"

There was something different about Pete's voice. He still couldn't see him, but Josh knew he wasn't asleep this time, and he wasn't imagining things either. He strained his eyes, staring at the doorway and...gradually something appeared, shimmered briefly and was gone again.

"You'll have to try harder, loverman. Think about that walk-up apartment we had in Milan. How we roasted in the summer, and how it was so cold and damp come winter we just about froze our asses."

Josh chuckled softly, his mind filling with a shower of remembered tender, love-filled moments from those early days. "Right. I remember those winters. And how you'd steal all the covers, so I had to snuggle up to you for warmth."

"You really loved me in those days."

"I still you love you now, Pete baby. It was you who stopped."

"No, I didn't stop. That wasn't it. I just had to...I just had to step back and let you go."

"Let me go? You're talking crazy. I don't know what happened to you in those last few months, but you were acting so weird. Okay, so you were always a bit jealous, and you lost your temper easily. But you got so much worse, and without any reason I could figure. And what happened the night you went after those guys who stole your car? I know, you had a bad habit of jumping in without thinking, but it was two

against one, for God's sake. You didn't stand a chance. You must have guessed they'd be armed. What in hell were you thinking?" Josh sucked in a deep breath, wanting to kick something, pummel the wall with his fists. Hit something...anything. "You let them kill you and break my heart, but you...you just didn't give a shit, did you? As long as Pete could do whatever Pete wanted that was just fine, right? Screw the consequences, and screw the whole fucking world, especially anyone who might care about you. You...you fucking arrogant, selfish bastard."

A shadow reappeared in the doorway. It hovered for a moment, gradually gaining substance...then it seemed to stabilize, and Josh could see what looked like the Pete he remembered. The image was still a little insubstantial and indistinct, but it was Pete. Pete dressed in his beloved, ripped old blue jeans and his favorite faded, navy-blue polo, and his short, dark hair looking all spiky, fresh from the shower.

"Those guys did me a favor, Josh."

"A favor? How on earth do you figure that?"

"I was dying."

Josh's stomach flipped over like a pancake, and he could have sworn his heart skipped a beat. "Dying? Are you putting me on? Dying from what?"

"An inoperable thing in my head. I didn't want to tell you about it until I knew for sure. And when I did, and they said I only had a few months left, I just couldn't find the words. I tried, but... Anyway, I figured if I chased you away, you'd stay in Europe long enough for me to get it over with without

you even knowing. But the tumor wasn't growing as fast as the doctors predicted, and I knew damn well you'd soon get tired of the old life and come back, so—"

"You decided to speed things up by throwing yourself in harm's way? That was real clever."

"No! I didn't intend it to be clever or deliberate or anything else. I didn't think. I just reacted. That was my car, and I loved those old wheels almost as much as I loved you." As the voice continued, the image seemed to gain a little strength. "It was only when those jerks pulled out knives and made it clear they meant business I started to get a little worried.

"Then, when they came at me, and I knew they had me cornered, I also figured it was maybe a blessing in disguise. If they killed me, it would be my ticket out. I wouldn't have to linger on for months, and you wouldn't come home and find out what was happening. It was what I wanted, bro—a quick and easy finish. No hospital and no teary-eyed deathbed scenes. I couldn't have faced that."

As Josh watched, Pete's image grew stronger to the point where, if he hadn't known better, he'd have sworn the old Pete was back.

"So...where do we go from here? I mean you and me?"

Pete's ghost came a little farther into the room—although maybe glided was a better word—and stopped a couple of feet short of where Josh was sitting. "Impossible to say, man. I've never been in this position before, but from what I've been able to figure out, I suspect it's based on emotion. I think I

was able to come back because I still love you and want to be with you. And as long as you continue to love me, I think that'll keep me visible. But that's all I know. Guess we'll just have to play it as it comes."

"What if I meet someone else? Will you just fade away?"

"No idea. Maybe it will depend on how I feel about the person. If I think it's a good thing, I might."

"And if you don't?"

"Again, no idea."

Josh smiled. "No? But I bet you'd soon figure something out."

"Perhaps. You go to see Don today?"

"Yeah."

"Figured that's what you'd done. Thought they'd buried me on Boot Hill, did you?"

Josh chuckled. "I admit the thought crossed my mind. In fact, all that money you left was one huge surprise. As far as I knew you were either broke or close to it."

"Nah. It never got that bad. It's true I was no good with money, but I found someone who knew how to hang onto the stuff and make it grow. What will you do with it? Buy a fancier house... Umm, no, better forget I said that. I don't think I could come with you."

"I haven't had much time to get used to the idea, let alone anything else. Is there something you want me to use it for?"

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Kids. There are lots of needy kids out there. I don't mean needy in the sense of them lacking the basic necessities...there

are government agencies to take care of that. I mean kids who can't get the help they need through regular channels. Maybe they can sing or dance and auditions are being held nearby, but they don't have the money for bus fare. Or they have to pass on a part-time job because it's too far too walk and transportation is iffy at best. Anyway, they can't afford the uniform. You know the kind of thing I mean."

"Random acts of kindness?"

"Think it would work?"

"Don't see why not. The people who know about that kind of need are usually schoolteachers, social workers, and church ministers. You could ask Don to contact people like that and ask them if they know of any worthy cases. He can say he has a client who wants to help anonymously, and then it would be up to you to decide where the money should go."

"How would I know if the need was real or a scam?" Much as Josh hated to think about that angle, he knew the world was full of scammers trying to suck dry both the system and the unsuspecting.

"That's where the community leaders and such would come in. They're the ones who know what's going on with the kids and where real need exists. And the kid wouldn't know a thing about it unless his or her problem was fixed."

"Right. And even then, all they'd know was that magic happened and their dream came true. They wouldn't know where the money came from or who was behind it."

"Right. And maybe that's what you should call it...the Magic Happens Foundation."

"Hey, I like that. I'll check it out. See if we can use the name, and what Don thinks about the idea as a way to go."

* * *

Over the next few months, most of Josh's time was taken up, with the help of a junior lawyer in Don's office, in establishing Magic Happens. A company was formed with Don and Josh as the directors, and a monthly budget decided upon. Rather than involve complete strangers, Ronny, as one of Pete's oldest friends and an established youth counselor at the high school, plus the Vincellis, who were active in local community affairs and probably knew where magic was needed better than anyone else, had agreed to help out when it came to deciding where Pete's money would do the most good. Mrs. Vincelli had pointed out the dangers of giving cash to kids and came up with the idea of a voucher system instead. All the child would have to do was exchange the voucher for their little bit of magic at the specified store or business who, in turn, would bill Magic Happens for the cost of the item.

Josh knew the voucher system wasn't perfect—mail went astray, kids could easily lose a small piece of paper, and if the lucky child didn't ask for the store manager, or other person in charge, the voucher might not be honored. But these were all minor glitches that could be worked out over time, unless one of the Magic Happens team came up with a better idea.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, Josh filled a mug with hot apple cider and stretched out in front of a cozy fire of pine logs and scented wood chips to enjoy the new thriller

he'd just purchased that afternoon. He'd barely got settled on the sofa when he felt a blast of icy air invade the room. The house was well insulated, the doors and windows all tightly closed, and the drapes drawn to shut out the winter storm that was picking up strength as it roared across the lake. But Josh knew at once what had caused the sudden chill, and it wasn't the weather.

"Where you been?" he inquired with a smile. "I haven't seen you in days."

"Hiding out under the blankets. This house is so damn cold, I'm freezing my ass off."

"I didn't know ghosts could feel the difference between hot and cold."

"Now you do. Do you mind if I wrap myself up in this rug?"

Josh's smile increased as he watched one end of the sheepskin rug in front of the fireplace lift up, apparently all by itself, and roll itself into a cylinder shape. "If it'll help, go ahead. But can you make yourself visible, please? I'm not sure I want to watch a rolled-up rug cavorting around the room all by itself."

"It would not be by itself, and please note I do not cavort," Pete informed him haughtily. "Anyway, the drapes are all closed. No one would see me."

"It's not you I'm worried about. It's the thought of that rug doing the light fandango all by itself." Josh gave a long, exaggerated sigh. "I'm liable to burst into peals of hysterical, uncontrollable laughter and injure myself."

"That's not even slightly funny."

"I think it is."

"Well, it's not." There was a slight hesitation, then Pete said, "Wanna cuddle instead?"

Josh felt a breath whisper across his face as unseen hands began to stroke and touch him just about everywhere. Fingers plucked at his clothing and danced over his belly and between his outstretched legs, and he immediately began to harden and grow while red-hot need built within him.

Living with a ghost was weird and strange and a whole lot of other stuff that took quite a bit of getting used to. Especially the way Pete walked through walls and closed doors as if they weren't even there. But, since he couldn't have the live Pete back, this was way better than nothing at all. Anyway, he liked this version, a lot. The new Pete was still the same great guy and fantastic lover he'd always been, just less moody and argumentative, and a lot more relaxed and entertaining.

"I'm not cuddling if I can't see you. It's no fun trying to make out with the invisible man."

"Close your eyes."

Josh did as he was told.

"Okay. Now open them."

Again, Josh did as instructed. But the moment he saw Pete encased in the sheepskin rug with his head sticking out one end and his feet the other, he started to shake with laughter. "You...you..."

Pete narrowed his eyes and glared at him. "You find something amusing about terminal frostbite?"

"You've already been terminated, so I'm not worried about that," Josh replied, doing his best to get his laughter under control. "It's just...you...you look exactly like one of those new chicken wraps they've started serving at Cristoffe's. All you need is a few shreds of lettuce in your hair and around your toes."

"And a carrot stick through my nose?"

"Sure, why not?"

Pete dropped the rug and joined Josh on the sofa. After a couple of seconds, he muttered, "This isn't working. I'm still freezing cold."

"Wanna stop wriggling around so I can read my book?"

Before Josh knew what was happening, the book flew out of his hands and landed on the floor several feet away.

"You can't read and make love."

"That's what we're doing?"

"You got a better idea to warm me up?"

Once again, Josh closed his eyes, giving himself up to the moment and the scent of cedarwood shower soap as the magic of Pete's mouth and hands took over.

"Love you, man," Pete murmured as his tongue traced the outer edge of Josh's ear. "But there isn't enough room on this sofa, and that sheepskin rug is not only one helluva lot warmer, it's closer to the fire."

"The floor's hard," Josh argued, determined to stay where he was.

"Maybe so, but it's still better. You'll see," Pete insisted, as he pushed Josh off the sofa and down on to the rug, then

wrapped his arms around him from behind. "I don't know about you, but I'm feeling warmer already."

"I was warm enough where I was."

"That so? Well, I'm gonna make you one whole helluva lot warmer. In fact, I want you hot," Pete said with a chuckle as he eased Josh's track pants down over his hips and began to caress his shaft. "I want to make you so damn hot and needy, your teeth'll start to ache, and you'll be begging me to fuck you silly."

Pete had always been the aggressor, and Josh laughed, loving the way the tension was starting to build within him as his dick responded to his lover's ministrations. "Lucky for me you haven't lost your confidence or your touch."

"Don't plan to either," Pete mumbled as his clothes disappeared and the dancing flames of the fire began painting intricate patterns on his summer-tanned skin.

Pete's mouth brushed against his, and his tongue touched Josh's lips and slipped inside to initiate a dance as old as time itself, while his clever hands continued to pleasure his cock. The seconds slipped away and the tension increased, drawing them closer and closer to the edge, until Josh felt like an overtuned violin string, ready to snap. He held Pete close, squeezing his balls and kneading his ass cheeks, and wondering how much longer he could hold on, or if he'd have to beg.

But, as always, Pete had the timing down perfect. As Josh lost control and his juices burst forth, Pete hoisted Josh's legs over his shoulders and, using his cum as lubricant, slid his

thick, hard rod into Josh's hole.

"Feel good, babe?" Pete asked softly as he began to ride him.

"Fantastic. But you know that."

Josh held on to the hearthrug as Pete's strokes increased in speed until, finally, he felt a rush of heat and Pete collapsed on his chest, chortling with glee. "That was beyond fantastic, man. Even better than it was before."

"You think so?"

"I know so. By the way, is that P on your ass for me?"

"I guess. I had it done in Rome last Christmas."

"You mean it was last year's Christmas present?"

"Whatever. I figured it would be a nice surprise if we ever got back together."

"We are back together."

Josh smiled. "Yeah, I guess we are."

"Only this time it's for keeps, right?"

"Absolutely, Pete. This time for keeps."

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.

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