

# THE LONG WAY HOME

CATT FORD



# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

SOME Christmas. Guess it was going to be a white one after all, even though I hadn't been dreaming of it.

The snow had been too light and dry to stick yet, swirling over the tarmac ever since I left the city. I rolled down the window and caught the unmistakable hint in the air that told me more snow was on the way. It didn't matter much; the state was good about keeping the thruway cleared. I'd make it home all right.

It would be the first time since I'd graduated college that I was going home and my parents wouldn't even be there. I always found some excuse to avoid going, and surprisingly, my mother accepted them no matter how lame.

But this year, they'd gone to Florida for the winter and my mother hadn't bought my line when she called. She had a "feeling" that something was wrong at the house and ordered me to go check on it. She always claimed that she was psychic, and she was right just often enough to hang onto her reputation for womanly intuition.

When I told her I didn't want to go, she asked what I was doing that was more important than doing a favor for my mother.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Well, when you put it like that,” I’d said.

“I do. Andy, get your butt up there and *call* me to let me know you made it all right. Be careful driving.”

“I will, Mom.”

Which is why I found myself counting exits instead of sitting alone in my apartment in the city. The snow was coming down harder now and starting to stick. By the time I made it home, it was four inches deep.

Pulling into the driveway, it was hard knowing that they wouldn’t be there, my mother coming out to urge me to eat a snack to hold me until dinner, my father gruffly slapping me on the back and shaking my hand....

The house looked like it always did and it hit me how much I’d missed coming home. Not just to see my parents, but the feeling of being in a place I was completely familiar with. It was strange, as if I’d lived there in a previous life long ago, which in a way I guess was true.

I should have taken my bag inside and gotten settled right away, but just being home made me want to see the old fishing hole again. Instead of coming straight down, the snow was dancing sideways, as if promising that it would hold off long enough for me to walk there and back before dark if I started out now. I pulled my cap down to cover my ears and turned up the collar of my coat. With my hands dug

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

into my pockets, I set out cross-country through our apple orchard, taking the shortcut from when we were kids.

The bare trees cast pale blue shadows across the new snow and the pond was frozen over, a flat disc of silvery grey surrounded by the wizened sumac at the edge. Where the creek flowed in the ice was thin and black, showing the sluggish current beneath.

The big flat rock still jutted out over the water like it always did. We used to sit there in the sun to dry off after swimming. I brushed off a spot and sat down cross-legged like I used to, squinting into the misty glare, wishing I could see Jake jump from the rope just one more time. It still hung there, rigid and glittering with ice, or maybe it was a new one, replaced by the boys who swam there now, whoever they were.

Maybe it was nostalgia, but I could swear the air felt balmy on my cheek and the sky was blue again as I watched Jake swing on the rope and launch himself into the water. For just one moment, it was as if time froze and I could see his naked body stretched out, achingly beautiful, muscles taut and firm, the round lushness of his ass as he soared through the air before cutting into the water sleekly.

How often had I wished that I'd owned a camera back then and could have captured that shot to keep it forever.

He'd always be laughing when he broke the surface and gave that little shake to get his hair out of his eyes.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

From the time I first started to feel the unmistakable tug of attraction to other boys, rather than girls, the fishing hole became both heaven and hell for me. I would sneak glances at the other boys, getting a thrill from looking at their undeveloped torsos. It was the contours, hard instead of soft, angular instead of curvy, except for the sudden swell of their buttocks, the hint of something between their legs that kept me submerged most of the time.

Once I moved to the city, my fishing hole became the gay bars where you could find action every night of the week even if you were a quiet, nerdy guy like me.

But back then this was my personal fishing hole and Jake had played a starring role in all my fantasies. He developed faster than most of us, his lean body hardened with muscle. He had big biceps, and his forearms were defined under his tanned skin. Farm work developed his trapezius muscles, sloping along the top of his broad shoulders. Where other boys' chests were flat, his pecs were filled out, with pink nipples that pebbled in the cold water so they cast tiny shadows on his chest in the sunlight.

He was adventurous. He was the one who'd tied the rope in the sycamore and swung into the water the first time, shouting with glee. And where he led, we all followed. He invented a complicated game of tag that had us all jumping off rocks and clambering up the tree in an attempt to escape from whoever was "it".

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

He was loud, funny, and a star, even back then. And yet I was the one he chose to pal around with - quiet, introverted, and shy.

Jake was the flint that struck sparks from my steel.

The fishing hole lay between our farms on state land, part of a right-of-way for the power company. The other boys had to come further to join us but Jake was so much fun to hang out with that they did.

Some days, though, it was just us. Those days were magical for me. As if there was something unspoken that was understood just between the two of us.

Watching Jake was my greatest pleasure. I always wore my jockeys when I went in, but he swam in the buff. I used to love floating in the water and watching him climb the tree to get to the rope. The memory was so vivid to me, as if I was reliving a hot summer day and we were together again.

A snowflake hit me in the eye and shook me out of my reminiscences. The sky was still grey and the water was frozen hard. Like my heart. I laughed at the triteness of my passing sentiment and stood. Gazing over the fields in the direction of his family's farm, I saw no lights in the dusk. Just grey fields blending into grey sky as if the grey went on forever.

It was pretty dark when I got back to the house. I unlocked the door and dropped my bag inside.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Holy fuck.”

If possible, it was even colder in the house than it was outside. The furnace must have gone out. I flicked the switch and breathed a sigh of relief when the lights came on. Trying to light the furnace by flashlight would have been a bitch.

Grumbling to myself, I found the matches in the kitchen. They were where they always were. Mom likes things in their proper places and I guess she had no reason to switch things around after I moved out. I went downstairs, knelt in front of the furnace and opened the door to check the pilot light. It was off.

I lit a match, touching it to the jet while I held the knob in place, waiting for the thermocouple to warm up enough to keep it lit. The concrete floor was hard and cold, and my knees were starting to complain when I turned the knob to the *on* position.

The pilot promptly went out.

I went through the whole procedure two more times before I gave up in disgust. Most likely I would see myself replacing the thermocouple before I left but if I knew Wally down at the hardware store, he was closed up already. If only I hadn't taken that walk down to the pond. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and I hoped Wally would open the store at least until noon. I wondered if psychic powers usually ran to thermocouples.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I got to my feet and dusted off my pants. My mother had been busy at harvest time, as usual. The plank shelves against the wall were lined with jars of canned tomatoes and spiced peaches, ruby and amber pools of warmth in the frigid grey basement. At least I could be sure there was plenty to eat; the freezer was probably fully stocked as well.

My most immediate problem was warmth. If I chose to stay here tonight, I'd need to get a fire going. I went up the stairs and realized I was going to have haul in wood from the screened-in porch and it was going to be wet.

Putting that off for the moment, I carried my bag upstairs. I hadn't brought much by way of clothing because I wasn't planning to stay long, but I thought I remembered leaving a heavy, fisherman's-knit sweater in the bureau. I was probably going to need it until I fixed the furnace.

When I turned on the light, I stood motionless in surprise. My mother had been busy in my room. It was unchanged except for the gallery of photographs she'd hung on one wall, like a historical archive of me growing up. Me alone, me with my father, riding on the tractor behind him, me picking apples with my sister, but the majority of pictures were of me and Jake.

The first one that caught my eye was obviously posed by my mother, with both of us looking at the camera. We must have been about ten and I caught my breath seeing how uncomplicated life had been for us in that moment. He

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

was taller than me, husky with the puppy fat he carried before he'd muscled up as a teenager. His hair was dark, badly cut, and he still had the gap between his front teeth back then. He was grinning and leaning in toward me. I was shorter, skinnier, with straight, dark blond hair falling into my eyes, my arm slanting up as I rested my elbow on his shoulder.

We both grinned at the camera with the happy unselfconsciousness of childhood friendship, before sex or love or yearnings that could never be fulfilled intruded. Well, maybe I was wrong about one thing; the love was there already.

Then there was the one year I was taller than him, ever so briefly; at least now I had photographic evidence. I'd had a growth spurt, which made me tall and rawboned at fourteen, while he was still on the chubby side. I had one arm around his neck, giving him a noogy while he squirmed to get free.

The next photo was from high school, just before I went off to college and left Jake behind forever. He was in front, clowning for the camera with a big smile. The gap had closed up by then, and he was already showing signs of the handsome man he was going to become, although he still looked like a boy. I was behind him, slightly out of focus, but I could see the yearning in my eyes. I thought I'd hidden it well under the patina of sulky emo angst, but it was as obvious as if I'd been wearing a sign.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I wondered if my mother's psychic powers had revealed to her that I was gay, because I certainly hadn't. What was the point? I was never going to bring anyone home to meet the parents unless I loved them, and I was never going to love anyone but Jake.

I turned away from the wall of pictures and tossed my bag onto the bed. I found my sweater in a drawer and pulled it on over my shirt. I was definitely sleeping on the couch tonight, even if I didn't need to be near the fire for survival. There was no way I could sleep in here, knowing he was looking down at me with those eyes.

There was a wrapped present sitting on my bed. I roused myself enough to look at the tag. I wasn't surprised to read my name in my mother's handwriting, although she had signed it as Santa Claus. I chuckled, wondering if she still hoped I believed in him. There was also a P.S., warning me not to open it until Christmas day. And probably she'd know whether I followed orders or not, what with her extra sensory perception.

I left it there, turned off the light and went down the stairs, pausing on the landing to look out of the octagonal window like I always did, and I could have sworn I heard his horn beeping, and my mom yelling up the stairs to me, "Andy! Jake's here!"

"Coming, mom," I muttered, although there was no old blue truck stopping in a swirl of dust like he always did.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

The flashes of memory just kept assaulting me.

I used to run down the stairs and yell to my mom, “See you later.”

She never asked where we were going or when we’d be back, because she already knew if it was summer, we’d be going to the fishing hole. I heard her tell my dad once that she never worried where I went as long as I was with Jake.

After I hauled in wood from the back porch, I knelt at the hearth, patiently building the foundation for the fire. Crumpled newspaper first, then a little lean-to of dried twigs. It seemed to take forever for the twigs to ignite after I lit the paper and blew on it. The logs were damp from the snow and smoked when I laid them in the fireplace. It seemed that it was my fate to have a cold night.

The logs eventually caught, more smoldering feebly than burning. I settled on the couch, wrapping a blanket around myself, sniffing the bitter tang of damp smoke and wondering what to do with myself. If my parents had been there, my dad would have demanded that I help him cut down a tree and bring it in. My mother would have been baking cookies or making hot chocolate. And I bet the damn furnace would have been working.

Instead the room was cold and frost had etched a delicate lace pattern over the windows so I couldn’t see out. The corner where our Christmas tree usually stood was

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

empty except for my dad's recliner, still holding the place of honor.

The sight of his chair reminded me of my promise to call my mother and let her know that I'd arrived safely. I went to the phone and picked up the receiver when I heard something. I raised my head, listening. I could swear I heard tires crunching on the new snow in the driveway.

I was already by the door when I heard the knock. I opened it and took a step back in surprise.

"Jake."

"Hi, Andy." He shifted his weight nervously. His face looked grim. My laughing Jake, grim, with sunken little dents on either side of his mouth as if he didn't smile much any more. He had a better haircut, though.

"Can I come in? It's cold out here."

"Oh, yeah, sure." I flattened myself against the wall so he could pass me with a wide berth.

He went to the fireplace and stripped off his gloves, holding his hands to the fire as if it was giving off heat. "Saw the lights, and thought I'd come over and make sure everything's okay."

"That was nice of you," I said inanely.

"Why is it so fucking cold in here?" Jake demanded.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Thermocouple’s busted.”

“Oh.” His eyes were dark and closed off, as if he never let anyone get a look inside any more. I wondered what had happened to him. “Guess you’re kinda stuck then.”

Other than appearing unhappy, he looked good. He had filled out some, no longer a boy and now fully a man, but he was still lean and strong looking. The sun had etched some lines around his eyes and his mouth, as if life hadn’t been easy for him either in the years since I’d last seen him. His hair was still dark, hanging over his forehead, and his skin was tanned, like he’d been dipped in bronze, glowing in the firelight as if it had kissed him with health and life.

“How’ve you been?” I asked, knowing how lame I sounded.

He didn’t give any indication that he heard me speak as he studied me, searching out the changes, cataloging good and bad. “You look good,” he said, carefully, and I thought, grudgingly.

“You do too.”

I felt as if I was treading water in place, wishing he would just go, and yet dreading it.

“How come you just left that way? Without a word?”

I shifted restlessly. “It was better...” I stopped, realizing I didn’t want to have to explain *why* it was better.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“It’s better out there?” He swept his arm, as if including the entire outside world.

I shrugged. “Some things are.”

“What was so bad here that you had to run?”

Seeing him again aroused all the same yearnings within me. I wanted him so bad and I couldn’t tell him that was why I’d had to run. That I couldn’t trust myself around him. Even now, wanting him to go, terrified that he would be repulsed if I shared my secret and never want to see me again, I was half hard with wanting him.

I stood there staring at him. It was a vain hope that he would leave; he wasn’t like that. He was tenacious; he’d asked me a question and he would stay there until he got an answer.

“You can’t run from me that way,” Jake said. “Why did you leave without telling me?”

Suddenly I didn’t want to hide who I was any longer. What really made up my mind was the bone-deep loneliness I felt radiating off him. I could relate; I’d lost him too. I’d been living openly as a gay man in the city and it made me mad that my best friend didn’t know me. Even if he recoiled from me in horror, at least the truth would be out in the open at last.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

"I didn't want to dance at your wedding." I could have smacked myself in the forehead. Way to boldly declare my sexual orientation!

His lips curved slightly upward and trembled, like he was trying not to smile. "What wedding?"

"I thought you were engaged to June Singer," I said stupidly. "You've been married the last five years.... Haven't you?"

"Married? What makes you think I was married?"

"I – I just assumed – Your sister Leslie told me you were engaged," I said, feeling stunned.

"Did you ever ask your mother?"

"No." The truth was that I couldn't bear to hear about his wedded bliss so I'd never asked.

Finally the smile that was struggling to emerge succeeded and familiar dimples dug into his cheeks. "June was her best friend. Les was always trying to get me to date her." He waved a dismissive hand. "She's not my type."

"Oh."

"Aren't you going to ask what my type is?"

"Jake, I'm gay," I blurted. I steeled myself as I waited for his response, for him to yell at me, or sneer, or maybe just leave without another word.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Well, damn. So that’s what it was.”

I looked up; his eyes were luminous again and he was grinning at me, the same open, delighted smile of the photograph when we were ten. “I thought you ran because you figured out how I felt about you.”

“You – you – felt about – *I* ran –” I sputtered. “*You’re* gay too?”

“Yeah, you, me, and I.” He looked good enough to eat. “What are the odds?” He stripped off his gloves and held out his hand to me.

I took his hand and his warm fingers closed around my freezing ones.

“You’re cold,” he said.

I launched myself at him and he caught me in his arms, feeling so good. I stared into his eyes seeing the truth there, naked and laid out for me to see. “How – what – why didn’t you – I can’t believe this.”

“I just know I’ve always loved you,” he said softly.

I kissed him. It was too soon for a hot, sexy kiss; I just wanted to taste him, like I’d been dreaming of all these years. I wasn’t disappointed; his mouth was delicious and soft, eager for me as I brushed my lips against his. I felt his body tremble and wrapped my arms around him protectively. I could sense that this was all new to him. I had a brief

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

moment of bitter regret that my first time couldn't have been with him, but I tossed it away. It was what it was.

Then I pulled back and studied his face.

"Don't do that," Jake pleaded.

"What?"

"Give me that look full of doubt. I've never lied to you and I wouldn't about something as important as this."

I touched his cheek with my fingertips and he closed his eyes, turning his face into my hand and rubbing against my palm like a cat, before shivering because my fingers were cold.

"I always loved you," I said in a tone of wonder.

"I should have told you. I always swore to myself that I would, but I thought there was time. I kept putting it off and then you went to college." He stared at me accusingly. "You never came back. Not even for summer vacation."

"I had to work my way through, I got a job...." My voice trailed off. We both knew the reason I hadn't come back.

He bent his head to kiss me and his lips were hungry, if clumsy, as if he didn't do this very often. "I want us to make love."

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in six years. "You sure you want to strip in here? It's freezing."

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

He covered one of my cold hands with both his warm ones and grinned. "Let's take this to my place. I've got a tree up and the furnace works. I'll even throw in a fire if you want."

"Great, let's go. I really wasn't looking forward to freezing my ass off all night."

He leered at me and I was struck by how easily he seemed to be accepting all of this. "I'll keep your ass warm."

"Is that a promise?"

His eyes were intense as he stared at me. "You know it is."

I ran upstairs to get my coat and grabbed my mom's gift off the bed, stuffing it into my bag. Jake was bent at the fireplace when I ran back down, banking the fire before pulling the screen into place. He grabbed my hand, pulling me to the door as if he couldn't get me over to his place quick enough.

I studied his profile in the blue light reflecting off the snow as he drove. "You seem sure that this is what you want."

"This is all I've ever wanted, Andy," he said. The intensity in his voice shook me. "All I ever dreamed about." His hand found mine, and we held hands all the way to his place.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I balked suddenly at the door. “What about your parents?”

“They went to Florida this year. Something about old bones getting cold too easily.” He dragged me inside and I had just the glimmering of a suspicion about who his parents went to Florida with, but then he was unbuttoning my coat with eager fingers. “Don’t worry, I wouldn’t drag you over here to have my way with you if they were here. We could have gone to a hotel.”

“Motel 6?” I was unbuttoning his coat just as eagerly.

“Only the best,” he said with a grin.

Once both our coats were off and we tossed them onto a chair, he seemed nervous and at a loss.

“First time?” I hardly knew which I preferred, that he knew what he was doing or that he’d waited for me. And despite my experience, I was nervous too.

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard. The hopeful expression on his face melted me. This was so much more than just sex, for both of us.

As if to break the tension, Jake went to the fireplace and built a fire. Of course, for him the flames came easily; the wood caught right away, giving off a welcome warmth.

Then he went to the tree and turned on the lights, illuminating all the colors of the glass balls. His family still

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

used the old bubble lights. He flicked one with a fingernail to get it started, and it made me remember how he and I had always circled their tree, hunting down every last one to make sure they were all bubbling properly.

I smiled at him as I joined him and we went through the familiar ritual together, as if this was *our* home and *our* tree. It gave me a thrill just to think about it.

“Did you eat yet?” he asked, when all the lights were frothing like champagne.

I looked at my hands. I hadn’t realized how dirty they’d gotten while I was fiddling with the furnace. “No, I didn’t have time.”

“Hungry?”

“Yeah.” I followed him to the kitchen and washed my hands at the sink, while he got out a familiar blue box. I hadn’t realized how hollow I felt inside. “Mac and cheese?”

“Comfort food.” He grinned and started making it.

“So can you cook?”

“Worried that you’ll starve?” he chuckled. “I have everything ready for a big Christmas dinner, so I was planning on something easy for tonight.”

I wanted to go and wrap my arms around his waist and look over his shoulder while he cooked but I just wasn’t

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

comfortable enough yet. Everything seemed like it was happening too fast.

He must have seen my face, because he asked, “A little weirded out?”

I smiled at him. “A little. I wasn’t expecting to see you at all and it’s just....”

“Something you’ve been wanting all your life and thought you couldn’t have, and then suddenly in half an hour, it becomes a reality?”

“Like my fairy godmother swooped in and granted me a wish.”

Jake snickered at my choice of guardian. “Same here.”

We ate in front of the fire. It felt good to eat, good to be warm, good to be here with him. From the cold grey landscape of my life, suddenly everything was warm and golden and comfortable.

And yet, it was all I could do to sit there quietly next to him and keep my hands off him. A little thrill kept bubbling up inside me whenever I looked over at him. My best friend and only love was about to become my lover.

Back when we were kids, I had been glad to let him take the lead, but now it was my turn. During our years apart, I had learned just about everything two men could do together sexually and it gave me a thrill to think of showing

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

it all to him, to take his hand and lead him through the physical act that was new to him.

And it was all new to me as well, because for the first time I loved the man that I was going to make love to. Even though I knew how to go through the motions, everything I'd done had just been fucking before this.

I reached over and took the dish from his hand, putting it on the coffee table with mine. "Want to make out?"

"Want to give me a hand first?"

I had no idea what he had in mind but I followed him into the spare room and helped him pick up the mattress, leaving the bedspread and sheets in place. He walked backwards into the living room and we set it down by the fireplace.

I was laughing a little as I asked, "What the fuck?"

Again that burning look full of desire. "I like to unwrap my presents under the tree."

I caught my breath. "Me too."

He got down on the mattress and opened his arms. I couldn't get into his embrace fast enough. His kisses tasted of macaroni and cheese, his tongue slick as it slipped over mine.

I pressed myself against him, unable to wait any longer. The prize that had always hovered out of reach had

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

fallen into my grasp and I wanted more. Even if this was some sort of twisted dream, I had to go for it while I could.

Jake was still the flint that struck sparks deep within me and in an instant I was on fire for him, a raging conflagration that nothing could put out. All finesse, all that I wanted to show him flew out the window when I felt the wonderful hardness of him pressing against my stomach. To know that I'd made him hard, that he wanted me as badly as I wanted him, there was no finer aphrodisiac.

I slid my hand inside his shirt, wanting to run my fingers through the light covering of hair on his chest. He moaned and thrust up against me, urgently yanking my shirt out of my pants, his hands pressed against the small of my back, as if he couldn't explore any lower without permission.

Our kisses became more heated and my hands started to roam. I was grinding myself against Jake's thigh, moaning into the kiss when I felt his hands slide down cup my buttocks, holding me closer.

Jake arched up against me as closely as possible as we kissed passionately.

I broke away, resting my forehead against his. I could see he was looking at me apprehensively.

"Gotta breathe."

"True, I prefer you alive."

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I was staring down at him, his cheeks flushed and his hair mussed up. The grim look was gone from his face as if it had never been. He looked happy.

I must have been grinning myself because he grinned back at me.

“So proud of yourself.”

“Shouldn’t I be? First date and I got you in the sack.”

He drew me down for a kiss. “You’ve got me wherever you want me.”

We held each other in silence for a while. I cushioned my cheek on his shoulder and he lay on his back staring into the fire.

“Don’t you – want to –” he asked hesitantly.

“I’m courting you, Mr. Webster. I missed out and I want to take it slow. I have a lot of years of pent-up longing here.”

He gave a sigh of relief. “I thought I was courting you, Mr. Johnson.”

“I’m willing to share the glory.”

He shook under me as he laughed. “So how long have you liked me?”

“I think I was hot for you from the moment I met you.”

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“You mean when we were both wearing footy pajamas in our playpen?”

“You were a hot number even as a baby.”

“Yeah, I was,” he said smugly.

I loved how he went from uncertain to confident so quickly, but I guess I was riding the same rollercoaster. “So how long have you liked me?”

I could see his blush even by the firelight. “I guess I caught on a little later than you. I was fifteen when I realized you were the one for me. But I wasn’t sure, you seemed so distant....”

“Because I was trying to hide my giant crush and be nonchalant around you.” I was afraid to ask but I had to know the answer. “What if this fucks our friendship? Did you ever worry about that?”

“What kind of friendship have we had since you left?” Jake’s voice was gentle in contrast to his hard words, but it was only the truth.

“I was afraid of ruining it, that’s why I left. I couldn’t bear to see disgust in your eyes....”

“Look at me, is that what you see?”

His eyes were amber and gold like the fire, full of warmth and desire. So easy to read where once they were opaque to me.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

"I guess you still like me."

"Yeah, I do."

It gave me a little thrill to hear him say I do, in the only way I could ever get to hear those words. "Are we spending the night on the floor?"

"My mother used to let me and Les sleep out here after Christmas."

"It's not Christmas yet. What if Santa doesn't come down the chimney because of us?"

"I've already got the only thing on my list right here." Jake pulled me to him and kissed me softly.

The lights illuminated the room with sparkling points of color, like being inside a prism, so different from the darkness I'd inhabited since I left.

I just lay there and held him, listening to his heartbeat slow under my ear. There was no hurry, now that we knew we wanted the same thing. We touched and kissed and stared at each other all night. It was enough. For now.

WE must have fallen asleep eventually, because the fire had died down to a bed of glowing orange embers when I finally came to.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I stared at Jake's face, marveling at the new peace I saw there. His dark lashes lay on his cheek like the wings of a butterfly and his parted lips made him look vulnerable. During our childhood, when he'd been so sure and confident while I was so insecure, I'd never seen the vulnerability that he revealed to me all in a rush last night.

His eyes opened and he smiled when he saw me. "I had the best dream."

"Yeah?"

"That you were here and I was holding you. And then I woke up and it was true."

I grinned at him. I loved that he was taking this all so easily. "Funny. I had the same dream. Want to take a shower together?"

His eyes lit up. "Oh man, I'd love that!" He led the way upstairs, to the hall bathroom.

I was looking forward to undressing him, but I didn't get the chance. He started stripping quickly, eyeing me uncertainly, as if hoping he would measure up to my standards. His body was different now, that of a full-grown man, beautiful in contour and definition. I felt a little tingle in my groin just looking at him.

"Wow," I whispered. "You're more gorgeous than I imagined."

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

He grinned shyly and swayed a little. “Shucks, you’ve seen it all before.”

“Not like this. Not knowing....” I stopped to clear my throat. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Did you always stare at your toys on Christmas or did you play with them?”

“I gloated first.” I can take a hint. But unlike Jake, I decided give him a show. I couldn’t have done it for anyone but him, but that’s what I mean about him and me and sparks.

I unbuttoned my shirt slowly, smirking with anticipation.

His eyes lit up when he saw it. “Damn, you have a nipple ring! Kinky!”

I laughed, and then shivered as he tugged on it gently. “Too kinky?”

“No, I like it.” He did, I could tell, he couldn’t take his eyes off it. “You always had that hidden side of you. Quiet on the outside, with that little kick of rebellion in you.”

I gulped to swallow the lump in my throat; it killed me that he knew me so well, that he noticed something I thought I’d kept hidden. “Yeah, when I moved to the city, I guess I went a little wild with freedom.”

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

Tentatively, Jake rubbed his thumb over my nipple, making me gasp. “Sensitive?”

“In a good way. They always were, but once I got this one pierced –”

“A hot spot,” he murmured and bent to suck my nipple into his mouth, engulfing me in wet heat, sticking his tongue through the silver ring and flicking it.

Heat flamed through my veins and I grabbed his head, pressing him closer to my chest, holding him there. I managed to push him away when I felt his fingers fumbling at my belt. “I’ll do it.”

He straightened up and licked his lips, still staring at my nipple, shining with his saliva and reddened from the attention he’d lavished on it. “You’ve filled out some.”

“I started working out when I went to college. Running.”

“I think I hit the jackpot this Christmas.”

I kicked off my shoes and undid my pants, hooking my thumbs into the waistband. He was looking at me just like a kid on Christmas morning, glowing with anticipation.

I took a deep breath and pushed my pants and boxers down my legs, kicking them off, slipping my socks off while I was down there.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

When I straightened up, my cock slowly filled and lifted, pointing towards him. He looked fascinated, as if he'd never seen a guy get hard before, and maybe he hadn't. He stood there rooted to the ground, as if he wanted to touch but wasn't sure he was allowed.

I went toward him, knowing it was up to me to help him across the divide. Jake gasped when I rubbed my chest against his and I felt his arms tremble as he slid them around me.

"Oh damn, baby, you feel so good, so fucking good."

I could have happily stood there rubbing against him all day. I loved how silky his skin felt over the firmness of his muscles, honed by real physical work. A little hit of delirious wonder rippled through me, just to be naked and against him. "Mmmm." I rubbed my face on his shoulder. "I think someone mentioned a shower."

"Right." He sounded breathless, but he reached into the shower to turn on the water to heat up, still holding me with one arm.

Steam began to fog the mirror as we got under the water, still clinging to each other. I reached for the soap. He moaned as I ran my slippery hands over his body, down his flank, rubbing my thumb over his prominent hipbone before I cupped the swell of his buttocks in my palms.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

Our erections swayed and crossed playfully, until he grabbed me, digging his fingers into my cheeks and holding me flush against him. I loved the way our cocks rubbed together, but I didn't want it to end too soon.

"Let's take it slow. We have time."

"Time for a lifetime of showers," he leered at me, wiggling his brows.

I shook my head, amazed that Jake could possibly feel the same level of attraction for me that I did for him. For right now, I just wanted to take care of him. He let me do as I wanted. I slid soapy hands up his inner thighs, knowing how sensual that feels, soaping his genitals gently. When I ran a finger down the slick valley between his buttocks, his hips leaped forward and his mouth dropped open on a low groan.

I washed his hair and rinsed it. I nuzzled the wet hair in his armpits, kissing my way to his nipples and licking the water droplets from his chest.

Then he took charge and did the same for me, paying special attention to my nipple ring. Everywhere he touched me he seemed to set off trails of fire under my skin. When he turned me to the wall and kissed down the line of my spine, I trembled at the touch of his lips on my back.

I was panting for air when I turned back to face him, letting my hands skim down his torso as I sank to my knees. When I sucked the head of his cock between my lips, closing

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

my mouth around him, he let out a gasp that told me what he was feeling. It was like you go your whole life wanting something, needing it, and then in the moment when you get it, you find out that it's better than you ever could have imagined. And you can never go back after you feel it.

Watching the look of ecstasy on his face, how his eyes rolled up and his head fell back, water trickling down his chest, I relived the intensity of my first time. And I hadn't even had any feelings for the guy who went down on me.

His hips began to move and he staggered back, flattening his hands against the wall as if the sensation was just too much for him. Slowly, I relaxed my throat and took him all inside till my lips brushed the curly hair at the base.

"Oh my god..." he moaned. "Not like that..."

"What?"

He tugged me to my feet and held me against him. I wrapped my hand around his cock and mine, pressing our erections together, staring into his eyes, as our hips flexed in concert.

He was the first to come, groaning softly as his essence spurted over our joined hands, allowing me to watch as the rapture of his orgasm transformed his face. I loved it, watching him sent me over the edge and suddenly my release rocketed from me, like champagne from a bottle.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I sagged against him and he held me against his heaving chest.

Finally the water started to cool off.

"I think we emptied your water heater," I said in a shaky voice.

"Doesn't matter. Let's go back to the fire."

We dried each other off, mostly with towels, some with tongues. He stuck his little finger through my nipple ring and admired it.

"Maybe I should get my other one pierced so it can get some attention too," I teased.

"Yeah, or I could get a matching one." He laughed. "And we could hook them together."

"And go through life, stuck chest to chest? What would people think?"

"That we love each other. Or that we're crazy."

I was beginning to think he was serious about this. I didn't want to let go of him and he didn't seem to want to either so we walked downstairs with our hands linked. He disengaged to tend to the fire, while I admired the flex of his haunches as he crouched to add more wood.

"Want some breakfast?"

"Yeah."

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

We got dressed and went into the kitchen where Jake seemed to feel the need to demonstrate his culinary skills. He whipped up a breakfast that my mother wouldn't have sneezed at, with pancakes, bacon, muffins, homemade plum preserves and hash browns. I made the coffee.

Jake walked around me, carefully not touching me while I set the table. I giggled internally, amazed to look at my best friend and realize I'd been rubbing against him naked up in the shower. I wanted to get us back to normal, so I went up behind him and hip checked him gently. He grabbed me and kissed me lightly.

Eating at the same table, pouring out coffee for him, and taking care of the dishes with the poignantly sweet implication of shared domesticity made me a little giddy, even though we really hadn't talked about the future yet. Everything was making me giddy.

Once the kitchen was cleaned up, Jake asked, "Want to go for a walk? Or have you become all pansy-assed living in the city, and too afraid of the cold to set foot outside?"

"I'm pretty sure I can still keep up with you, Jakester."

"All right, Android. We'll see if you've lost your touch on snowshoes."

It had stopped snowing in the night, and the sky was that deep blue you see sometimes on a winter day. Even though the thermometer on the side of the house said zero, if

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

we kept moving it didn't feel too bad. There was no wind, which helped. It's always fun to be the first human to leave your footprints in a pristine, dazzling fall of snow.

It startled me when I felt him take my hand. It's not like anyone was around, but still, the first time you touch another man like that out in the open air ... it takes some nerve. I was amazed he was willing to walk along holding hands with me like that.

It probably wasn't a coincidence that we ended up at the fishing hole.

"I came down here yesterday," I said.

"A walk down memory lane?"

"Something like that."

"What did you think about? Me?"

He looked so eager I almost said yes. "No, just general thoughts about my parents, and Christmas –"

He tackled me and pinned me in the snow, holding my wrists over my head. "You thought about me, didn't you?"

"Were you showing off for me when you went swimming nekkid?" I demanded.

He blushed! Again! "Well, maybe, kinda," he mumbled.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I rolled him off me and struggled to my feet before sprinting away. A snowball hit my shoulder and exploded into white powder. “Oh, that’s it! This means war!”

I scooped snow with my mittened hands, packing it tightly and let it fly, catching him full in the mouth. Well, it wouldn’t have been such an easy shot if he hadn’t left it hanging open laughing at me.

We ducked in and out of the trees, snowballs flying between us, laughing as if we were ten again. Suddenly my world seemed just as uncomplicated as it was back then, with my only goal being to best him.

He had me in strength, but I was quick and wily. As long as I didn’t let him catch me –

I went down face first into the snow, all the breath knocked out of me. But at least he went down with me, on top of me and then at the bottom as we rolled, laughing when we came to rest. He gazed up at me, looking as starry-eyed as I felt.

“This is like some kind of dream,” I said. I leaned forward to kiss him and he met my lips eagerly.

“Afraid you’ll wake up de-Scrooged tomorrow morning, with an impulse to buy a turkey and send it to an indigent family?” he teased when we broke the kiss.

“You’re not the ghost of Christmas bait-and-switch, are you?”

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

He looked at me tenderly. "I wouldn't do that to you. I love you."

"I believe you're a romantic."

"I'm a flaming romantic, I've just never had anyone to show it to."

I rubbed my nose against his. "Me too."

"Let's go into town."

"Why?" I fell back into the snow as he raised up from under me, but he gave me a hand up. We brushed the snow off each other with lingering little caresses.

"The tree is being lit up in the square tonight. Want to see it?"

"Sure," I said uneasily. Cocooned as we were in our private little world, I wasn't quite ready to let anyone else in. If my dream was going to be deflated, I didn't want it to happen just yet.

It was just barely dusk when we stood in the town center, along with a hundred other people, watching as the tree was lit. It was pretty, glittering with white lights against the dark blue sky, but I was so nervous I could hardly enjoy it.

Nervous because Jake was holding my hand.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

In front of everyone. All the kids we'd gone to school with, well, *they* weren't kids any more either, but the people who kept the stores, other farmers, and our teachers. People who knew our parents and had known us all our lives.

Miss Bleiweiss, our third grade teacher, glared at us disapprovingly.

I nudged Jake, trying to pull my hand out of his. "Did you see Miss Bleiweiss?" I hissed.

He held onto me firmly. "Yeah, she always hated me. I don't think she cared for you too much either, but she hated everyone."

"So you're saying it's just general hate, not specifically because we're holding hands?" I muttered.

"Who cares? I want everyone to know you're back and you're mine."

He was still the leader. I was the one living out in the city, but I wouldn't have had the nerve to do what he did. I couldn't doubt him any more. He was looking at me anxiously and I realized he must be waiting for a similar declaration.

I squeezed his hand, surprised at the feeling of possessiveness that surged up inside me. "And you're mine."

"If we're going to do this, I can't pretend any more," Jake said, looking at me anxiously.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Some people are going to hate it.”

“I know.” He bumped his shoulder against mine. “Their problem.”

The church choir had their robes on over their coats, looking like fat, jolly penguins as they began to sing. I pressed up against Jake’s side, and we swayed gently to the music.

Jake turned to me, all the lights of the tree reflected in his eyes. “Let’s go home.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Home. It sounded good to me. He raised my gloved hand to his mouth and kissed it before leading me through the crowd. Look, I’m realistic. I’ve lived in the city and I know some people were probably staring at us, but I didn’t care any more. I hadn’t felt this happy in a long time.

And although we hadn’t said it, I knew we were going home to make love.

Once we were inside, he looked at me hopefully, the lights of the tree kindling his eyes in colors of crimson and gold and purple.

We undressed in silence, our eyes locked together.

He came to me, his cock proud and erect and I reached for him, stroking him gently with my fingers. He gasped and his knees buckled.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Maybe you’d better lie down.”

“Maybe.”

He was shaking so hard I hung onto him as I led him to our mattress. I was equally excited, not only by his unexpected surrender after all these years but at how wonderful it was to be the one to show him what he needed.

He went down like a sack of potatoes, flat on his back, looking up at me with a pleading look I couldn’t have resisted if I’d wanted to. I didn’t want to. I bent to kiss him and he thrust his tongue into my mouth. I met it with mine, enjoying the lazy slide of our tongues as we battled playfully.

I left his mouth and brushed my lips over his jaw, feeling the stubble of his beard, down to his throat where I was seized with a sudden desire to leave my mark on him. I sucked at his neck where it flowed into his shoulder until he was squirming under me, his hands clutching at my waist, but I wouldn’t let him pull me against him. Not yet.

I trailed my lips over his chest, enjoying the texture of the light fur. At the first sweep of my tongue over his nipple, he yelped and arched up into my caress.

“You like that?” I whispered against his skin.

“Oh yeah.” He gave a tremulous sigh as I sucked his nipple between my lips, holding it there as I let my teeth graze the erect nub. I nibbled my way to the other one, and

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

bit down gently, soothing it with my tongue while he groaned with delight and writhed under me.

As I kissed my way down his body, pausing to investigate the angular planes and strong curves along the way, he propped himself on his elbows to watch me. I caught his gaze and held it as I felt the muscles of his stomach flutter under my hand. I licked over the head of his cock and he gave the softest, most heartfelt moan of pleasure I'd ever heard.

I pulled off and cradled his cock in my hand, slowly stroking him. "How do you want to do this?"

"Could you ... would you ... fuck me?" His voice was nothing more than a croak.

I stared at him. "I want to be inside you more than anything, well almost. But the first time, I think you should fuck me. I've had practice."

He chuckled even though his hips were still moving in concert with my hand. "You going to coach me?"

"I'm taking one for the team," I joked back.

He held my face between his hands as he studied me. "Are you sure? I mean, I want to, damn, *how* I want to, but if you usually top –"

"How do you know about that?"

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Internet, doof,” he said, just like he used to years ago. He gave me a wicked grin. “I have a lot of theoretical knowledge, I just haven’t put it into practice.”

“So I’m your gay test dummy?”

“I want you.” He ignored my levity, his gaze hungry as he stared at me, licking his lips.

“I’m all yours.” I got to my feet.

“Where you going?”

“Lube. Protection.” I went to my bag and rooted through it. I hadn’t had sex in nearly two years, but the supplies still languished almost forgotten in my travel kit.

He watched my cock sway from side to side as I came to him, sitting up to touch it, giving me a couple of light strokes.

“Don’t keep doing that if you want this to last longer than a minute,” I warned, backing away from him.

“Can I suck it?”

“You want to?” Stupid question. Faced with an erection like his, I wanted it in my mouth; I guess I was still just not taking it in that he was that way too.

In answer, he held my buttocks in his palms, using them to pull me closer. He opened his mouth and ran his tongue over the head and down the shaft like an expert.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Are you sure you haven’t done this before?” I gasped.

“Cucumbers,” he said briefly, before reapplying himself.

I laughed, not sure whether to believe him, but I was so crazily turned on. He slid his fingers into my cleft and over my opening while he sucked my cock softly. I ran my fingers through his hair, looking down at him thinking this had to be a dream. One of his fingers pushed gently at the sensitive skin of my entrance and I bent over him, convulsing with the sudden power of my orgasm as I shot into his mouth.

He supported me as I slid to my knees, coming to rest against him, gasping and shivering in the aftermath. “You liked it?”

“More than the cucumbers did, I bet.” I laid there in his arms, panting for breath and felt his cock hard against my hip, as if to remind me that we had some unfinished business. “You have some serious aptitude for this. Let me rest a minute.”

“Long as you like, babe.” His eyes were tender as he looked at me. “You’ll have to tell me what you like.”

“Or you could find out for yourself.”

“You like this?” He circled a fingertip around the aureole of my unpierced nipple. I nodded and he took it between his finger and thumb, pinching lightly.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

The thrill of watching his farmboy hands on my body sent a tingle down my spine. I'd thought I wouldn't be able to get hard again for at least an hour and here I was, taking notice already.

He ran his hand down my chest. I had very little hair, compared to him, but he seemed to like the difference, tracing a line in my iliac furrow. "I always used to look at you, see that line going down in your shorts, and wonder what it felt like to touch you there. I wanted to lick you."

"Go ahead," I murmured.

He pushed my leg out wider and leaned over to draw his tongue over my skin. It felt so good; I felt my hips start up in the rhythm and spread my legs wider. He nuzzled my cock and licked around my balls.

"Oh man, don't stop...." I spread my legs wider and he shifted to kneel between them.

"What?" He looked at me with a half smile.

"The internet is a wonderful thing," I gasped.

"Kept me going," he agreed. He lifted my legs onto his shoulders, squeezing my cheeks in his hands. I expected him to be a little hesitant, or awkward, but he seemed eager instead.

I felt my entrance pulse with anticipation. "Hand me the lube," I croaked.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“What are you doing?”

“Have to prepare to take you.”

He watched intently as I spread lube around my opening. The look of lust as he watched me finger myself made me realize I was fully hard again and wanting him inside me badly.

“Let me help.”

It seemed so natural when he slid a finger inside me. I clenched down on him and then let up as he stroked my passage, his finger slick and smooth inside me. I just let myself float away on the sea of sensation he was creating. I didn't care that he didn't have much technique; it was just the thought that he was willing to do this his first time out. I caught myself whimpering with burning desire and felt embarrassed for a moment, but then I wanted to give him everything, I wanted him to know how much he was turning me on, so I just let it out, making sounds I'd never heard myself make with anyone before.

“Oh god, take me now....”

He eased his fingers out. His face was alight with arousal and anticipation as he hurried to tear open the packet and roll the condom over his hard length.

“I'm going to make love to you, Andy,” he murmured, amazed. He took his cock in his hand and rubbed it along my furrow.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I held my legs back to my chest, offering myself to him, jerking every time the head of his cock passed over my entrance. At last he leaned in, nudging at my opening and pressing forward until the head pushed inside me. He watched himself disappear inside my body with an incredulous look, as if he'd never seen anything so erotic.

I gave a cry of pain and pleasure and rapture to feel him invading me, filling me with the blazing heat of his shaft. He paused, looking down at me with concern.

"Just go slow at first ... It's been a while...."

He held completely still until the initial stinging pain passed off and I nodded. Slowly he pushed forward, inching inside my channel until he was fully seated inside me.

I looked up at him as he slid inside my body, running my hands over his shaking arms, hard with muscle. The look of wonder on his face made me feel like my heart was going to burst; I felt so good that I was able to make him feel this way.

He didn't start pumping away at me, he just remained still for a while as if he couldn't believe we were actually doing this either. He leaned down to kiss me, his eyes very tender as he pulled away.

"I always dreamed of making love to you," he whispered.

"I did too," I confessed.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“This is better than anything I ever imagined.”

I smiled, too afraid of what I might say, because I gave myself completely to him in that moment. My heart was lost and I was his forever.

He started to move and he moaned with the sheer pleasure of it. “You’re so hot inside, so tight....”

Damn, he felt good. He was just the right size for me, filling me but not hurting me, long enough that his shaft dragged over my prostate with each slow glide, sending shivers of pleasure through me. But most of all, this wasn’t all about cock. I had never loved the person attached to the cock fucking me before, and it made such a difference. This wasn’t just fucking for sex; this was love.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, wanting to hold him inside me forever. He started moving faster now, still looking down at me with that startled expression, as if he couldn’t believe we were actually doing this.

The feeling of him moving over me and inside me, his hard abdomen rubbing against my cock was more exciting than anything I’d ever experienced.

When he hit that spot inside me, I lunged up to meet him, lost in the thrill of pleasure he was creating inside me, bucking and wrapping my legs around his waist, trying to drag him ever deeper inside me. This was as close as two

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

people could ever be and he was made to be inside me. We fit together perfectly, inevitably, like two pieces of a puzzle.

I came without him touching me, shooting off into space with an orgasm so powerful that I was dizzy and lightheaded with bliss. The heat of my release burned my skin as he continued to glide in and out.

His face was limned with ecstasy as he thrust harder. I could feel the pulse of his cum, hot inside the rubber and wished that one day I could feel him come inside me without that barrier. He stiffened above me for a moment, his arms trembling before he let out a shaky breath and lowered himself to rest against my body. I kept my arms and legs wrapped around him, and pressed my cheek against his as he panted for air.

“That was amazing,” he finally said in a quiet voice.

“I’m glad.” That was inane, but I didn’t know just what to say. I still worried that he’d never done this before and maybe now that he’d gotten it out of his system, he’d feel differently than I did.

“I always loved you, you know,” he said, as if taking up a conversation from years ago.

Every time he said that, a little flutter of excitement kicked up in my stomach. I started to laugh and he joined me after a second. “If I’d known you were carrying a torch for me, I’d have come home sooner.”

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

“Seriously. When we were growing up, I couldn’t imagine my life without you.”

I turned nuzzle his throat. “I resigned myself to living without you.”

“So,” he started in a conversational tone, “what do you do?”

“For a living?”

“Yeah.”

I cracked up and we both started laughing like loons, so hard that his softening cock slipped out of me. I moaned in disappointment.

He took care of the condom and got up with an athletic grace that I had always admired, coming back with a wet cloth and wiping his stomach and mine, before settling next to me again. I rolled into his embrace and shivered again at the warm kiss of his naked skin against mine.

“I’m a writer.”

“Really? Is that what you went to school for?”

“Agriculture and writing.”

“What do you write?”

I grinned. I knew he’d get a kick out of my job. “I write catalog and instructional copy for farm equipment. Power Mule.”

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

*"The kick of a mule and twice as tough?"* he sounded amazed.

"Yeah, that was me."

"Well, it worked. I've got all Power Mule stuff out in the barn." It was his turn to chuckle. "I knew someone wrote that shit who knew the land and loved it."

"You can take the boy off the farm...."

"But you shouldn't."

"I shouldn't?"

"Are you happy in the city?"

I looked away so he wouldn't see the glint of sudden tears. "How could I be? I just did what I thought I had to do."

"And do you regret all those other guys?"

I wondered if it was jealousy I heard in his voice. "I didn't love any of them. But I don't regret them; I found out who I was and that I liked it with men. And this way we're not groping around in the dark. At least one of us knows what he's doing."

"Hey! I thought you liked it!"

I laughed and he smiled against his will. "I loved it. I love you."

He laid his head down again. "I love you too."

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

There it was, that fluttery feeling again when he declared his feelings.

“So, what do you do?”

“I farm, with Dad. One day the farm’ll be mine. I like it.”

We lay there in silence for a while, snuggled up against each other in front of the fire. I stared into it, feeling really happy for the first time in years. After being miserable for so long, it was so simple, I was happy to be here with him.

I got everything all wrapped up in one gorgeous package, the intimacy of my old friend and the excitement of a new lover, with so many things yet to explore.

And then I was asleep.

JAKE was watching me when I opened my eyes. I stretched and smiled at him a little shyly, remembering the night before.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” he said, and leaned in to kiss me. Just a sweet, chaste kiss, as if he was also shy about what happened between us.

“This is a first for me,” I said, snuggling closer.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

He encircled me in his arms and held me. “What? I thought you’d ... been with other guys.”

“I’ve never woken up in someone’s arms,” I mumbled into his chest. “And never with someone I loved.”

“I’m glad I could give you something too.” His arms tightened around me. “Time for your present.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah.”

The huskiness of his voice made my nipples hard and sent a charge of electricity to my groin. I wanted him so bad, but I had to make sure his first time was special.

“I want to watch your eyes when you take me,” he whispered

Damn. If I didn’t love him already I would have fallen for him so hard when he said that.

When I entered him, the connection between us felt as if it was physical, a rope that bound us together. All the time that we’d been apart, we were never apart. We belonged to each other.

Our faces were so close I could feel his breath waft across my lips. He stared up at me as we moved together.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I felt him close around me, blazing hot and tight, pulling me deeper. The intensity built so fast I could feel my orgasm gathering to roar through me.

And then he was coming, spurting liquid fire over my hand and I followed him over the abyss. We were swinging from the rope, falling together, clinging to each other as we went underwater and came up for air, panting and slick with sweat.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Move in with me.”

“Here? What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“I’d feel a little weird fucking with them in the house.”

“Don’t worry, they’re getting hard of hearing.”

I lifted my head to stare at him. He was teasing. “You jerk.” I hit him, but not too hard. I was too happy.

“I’ve got a place of my own, back in the woods by the creek. It’s small, only a cabin, but ... I don’t think I could bear to lose you again.”

His eyes shimmered suspiciously, and he turned his head away.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

I realized that he was afraid of being rejected. By me. “It’s not that, Jake. It’s – your family, the town. Are you sure you want to come out like that?”

“You live out, don’t you?”

“I do in the city. I’ve never told my folks.” I shrugged. “It didn’t seem worthwhile, you know?”

He gave me an odd look that I couldn’t read. “I love you. I would be proud to have you as my partner, and I’d want everyone to know you were mine.”

He was waiting for me to say the same back to him. “I guess I finally have to have that talk about the birds and the bees with my parents.”

His face relaxed instantly into a relieved smile. “You’ll stay?”

“I’ll have to go back and hand in my notice, but maybe they’ll let me telecommute. Think you can stand to support me if they don’t?”

He grabbed me and pulled me down against him. He was always stronger than me. “You belong here, you know.”

“I know.” And it was true, I’d missed living close to the land. And with my parents getting older, well, they’d always wanted me to move back and take over the farm. But most of all, I belonged here in Jake’s arms.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

HE was nuzzling my shoulder blade when I woke up again, lying on my side with him behind me, one arm loosely draped over my waist, his body cuddled up to me. As it should be.

“Merry Christmas,” he murmured.

“Merry Christmas.”

When I rifled through my bag for clean underwear, I found the gift my mother had left on my bed. “Hey, I guess I do have something to open.”

Jake leaned up on one elbow, watching me unwrap it. “What is it?” he asked when I started to laugh.

I showed it to him; my mother had framed a picture of Jake smiling, and attached a sticky note to the glass. In her bold hand, she’d written, “Kiss him already! Love, Mom.”

There was also a brand new thermocouple for the furnace. I thought I smelled a rat about her “premonition”.

And there was a sprig of mistletoe nestled at the bottom of the box.

“I guess I wasn’t fooling her after all,” I said ruefully.

Jake grabbed the mistletoe out of the box and held it over his head, his eyes twinkling as he regarded me expectantly. “Well?”

Of course I kissed him.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

It turned out to be some Christmas after all. I'd found my life partner in my best friend and I knew I would never be alone again.

I could hardly wait till my mother got back from Florida so I could tell her—

“Fuck!”

“So soon?” Jake quipped. “You fiend!”

“I forgot to call my mom and tell her I made it here safely.”

“I bet she knows.” He knew about her special senses. “Why don’t you call her now? I’ll get dinner started.”

He slipped on his jeans, and went to the kitchen, humming one of the hymns the choir had sung.

I was grinning as I dialed. “Hello Mom, it’s me.”

Of course, she knew that already.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

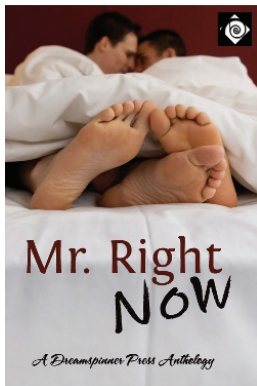
CATT FORD lives in front of the computer monitor, in another world where her imaginary gay friends obey her every command.

She likes cats, chocolate, swing dancing, sleeping, Monty Python, Aussie friends, being silly, spinning other realities with words, and sea glass. She dislikes caterpillars, cigarette smoke and rude people who think the F-word (as in faggot, or bundle of sticks) is acceptable.

A frustrated perfectionist, she comforts herself with the legend about the weavers of Persian rugs always including one mistake so as not to anger the gods, although she has no need to include a mistake on purpose. One always slips through. Writing fiction has filled a need for clever conversations, only possible when one is in control of both sides, and erotic romances, where everything turns out happily ever after, for the most part.

# THE LONG WAY HOME / CATT FORD

Other titles from Catt...



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