

A movie poster featuring two men. The man in the background is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The man in the foreground is wearing a dark, open jacket, looking down with a contemplative expression, his hand near his chin. The background is dark and textured.

Christiane
France

The Cop
and
The Drifter

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...As Davie said, they were grown men with men's needs, except Brad had been so busy wallowing in his grief and his pain, he hadn't realized until now quite how much he needed what Davie was offering. He actually needed the physical closeness and comfort of another man, along with the warmth and reassurance of knowing someone cared, even if it lasted for only a few minutes. "I just don't want you to think I expect something in return for a couple of lousy bits of chicken because I don't. From what you've told me, your life has been full of users and abusers, and I have no interest in joining the list, okay? That's not the kind of man I am."

To Brad's surprise, as he released his grip on Davie's wrist, Davie resumed the stroking.

"This has nothing to do with the people I told you about," Davie murmured softly, "This is because I want to and for no other reason."

"But I can't let you—"

"Yes, you can." Davie drew down Brad's zipper and slipped his hand inside. "Can't we be nice to one another without making a big deal about it? Call it my way of saying thanks for dinner, if it makes you feel better."

"I wasn't expecting anything. Certainly not this."

"I know that. All the more reason why you should just go with the flow and enjoy."

What Davie was doing felt so fucking good Brad would have been a liar to pretend any different. In one way, even though he hadn't gone looking for sex or even initiated what was happening to him now, he was ashamed of himself for taking advantage of Davie and being disloyal to Rob's memory. In another, it felt like Rob was there beside him telling him he understood, that Davie needed him as much as he needed Davie, and for that reason it was okay. Life had to go on...

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This Time For Keeps

THE COP AND THE DRIFTER

BY

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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THE COP AND THE DRIFTER
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For Roy and The Boys.

*And the Hamilton Police Service for
help with a few technicalities.*

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Daylight was already starting to fade and, before it got fully dark, Davie Kenton needed to find a reasonably comfortable spot in the woods where he could spend the night. He didn't take up much space and he wasn't overly fussy, so something small and relatively cozy, like one of them big old hollow trees he'd passed, or even an overhang beneath the rocks, would suit him just fine. Provided, of course, nothing else was using it, like a raccoon or a skunk.

The aroma of something that was neither animal, rotting vegetation, nor damp earth caught his attention. He stopped and sniffed, his search temporarily distracted by what smelled like chicken, slow roasting over a campfire. As always, Davie was hungry, and the delicious aroma was impossible to ignore. He sniffed again, then he licked his lips and moved, quiet as a shadow,

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through the undergrowth, closer to where he could see a fire burning a few feet from the edge of the lake. He'd managed to get himself a good long drink of cold water at a gas station about an hour ago, so he was no longer thirsty. But thinking about a mouthful of delicious, freshly roasted meat was driving him nuts.

He'd had nothing to eat since sometime yesterday, and only then because he'd been lucky enough to find the remains of someone's half-eaten lunch, lying by the side of the road. The carrot muffin and bologna sandwich had been stale as hell and full of bugs, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and once he'd dusted off the creepy-crawlies, it had satisfied the constant, gnawing ache in his gut, at least for a while.

Now the ache was back, and the thought of biting into that chicken...the crispy skin, the hot juices running down his chin, and the hot and spicy BBQ flavor of the meat, were enough to drive a guy clear out of his mind.

A sudden, loud snap broke the silence as hunger overcame the need for caution and he stepped on a fallen twig. Davie froze and held his breath. He'd only seen one guy by the fire, but that wasn't to say the man was out here in the woods by himself. He could have a buddy or two wandering around within easy call. He slowly lifted a hand and touched his still-sore ribs. One way or another, Davie had been having the shit kicked and beaten out of him since the day his old man realized his young son's blond hair and pretty-boy looks were a guaranteed source of income. Still, just because he was used to being used as a punching bag, it didn't make the injuries any less painful, and it sure as hell didn't mean he was ready for another session anytime soon.

"Hey! Someone out there?"

The slight quaver in the voice immediately assured Davie of

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two things—the speaker was almost certainly alone, and he was also more than a tad jumpy. He started to step out of his hiding place, then hesitated and dropped to the ground when he heard the metallic click of what sounded to him like a gun being cocked.

“Come out right now, or I’m gonna shoot.”

“It’s okay. I’m coming out.” Figuring the guy was nervous enough to do exactly what he’d threatened, Davie moved forward a few feet on his hands and knees. The last thing he needed was to add the misery of gunshot wounds to his current injuries. However, as he stepped out of the woods and into the clearing, he was surprised to see the dude was pointing a handgun in his direction rather than the hunting rifle he’d expected. He immediately halted, dropped his old Stetson and the rolled up blanket that served as a bedroll and held up his hands. “For Christ’s sake, don’t kill me, mister. I don’t mean you no harm.”

The man lowered his gun, and Davie put his hands down. “Sorry if I scared you. I saw your fire and smelled your food cooking, and...” He sighed. With his luck, the guy was probably on the run from the cops, or he’d escaped from jail. Then again, maybe he was one of those eco-friendly city dudes wanting to experience life in the raw. “I was just looking for somewhere to spend the night is all. So if it’s okay with you, I’ll be on my way.”

“What’s in the backpack?”

“Nothing worth stealing, that’s for sure.” Without taking his eyes off the stranger, Davie slipped the straps of his pack down his arms and let it fall to his feet. “Just a few bits and pieces. Clothes. Water bottle. Shaving stuff and a toothbrush.”

The man gestured with the gun. “Empty it out, so I can see.”

Davie bent down and did as the man instructed. “See? No weapons. No phone. No drugs. No money. Nothing. Can I go

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now?”

* * *

Brad Nierstrom put away his gun, but he didn't completely relax. As an undercover cop, he'd spent enough time on the streets to know runaways could be resourceful little bastards, as well as being slippery as eels. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been attacked with something like a woman's plastic tail comb or some other similar but innocent-looking object. Items that weren't lethal like a gun or a knife, and there was no law against carrying them, but oh, man, they could sure inflict a lot of damage in the right hands. One time, he'd almost lost an eye when a druggie attacked him with an ordinary yellow HB pencil. "What you running away from, kid?"

The boy gave him a narrow-eyed glare. "Who you calling a kid? I'm not a kid. And I'm not a runaway."

Brad smiled. He wished he could count the times he'd gotten that answer. When he was a kid, he couldn't wait to get home to his parents, his dog and his dinner. Nowadays, it seemed all the kids were running in the opposite direction. "Right. I suppose you *just* turned eighteen."

"No. I *just* turned twenty-one this past January. Okay? Not my fault I'm small for my age."

Twenty-one, my ass, Brad decided as the boy began shoving his possessions back into the tattered old rucksack. It would soon be dark, but there was still enough light for him to take note of the kid's innocent, pretty-boy looks—blond curls, blue eyes, slight stature and scrawny arms. If appearances were anything to go by, he wasn't more than fifteen, sixteen max. "You have proof?"

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“Kiss off, mister. I don’t have to prove anything to you. I’m not the one breaking the law here.” Hooking one of the rucksack straps over his shoulder, the kid jammed the battered Stetson on his head, picked up the bedroll and got to his feet. “If anyone did anything wrong, it was you. You had no cause to go pointing a gun at me. And you have no right to ask for my ID.”

From his readiness to stand up for himself, to the cautious, narrow-eyed gaze, the belligerent set of his mouth and the coiled-spring readiness of the kid’s body language, Brad knew he’d be well advised to relax and back off. Even if he wasn’t on suspension, he still had no jurisdiction out here in the woods and no right to pull a gun on a defenseless kid or anyone else without just cause. Even though, without ordering the kid to strip, he had no idea what he had tucked in a sock or strapped to the small of his back.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry. You want to go wandering around in the bush at this time of day, I agree, it’s none of my business. I hope you realize it’ll soon be dark?”

The boy rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know. It gets dark around this time every day. Okay with you if I go now, *sir*?”

“Sure. Go right ahead, I’m not stopping you. But...” Brad gestured toward the fire. From the look of the kid, he was in desperate need of a decent meal. “Why don’t you help me eat some of this chicken before you do that? You’ll be doing me a favor. I’ve made far too much for one person, and it seems a shame to let it go to waste.”

The boy hesitated, as if unsure whether to stay or disappear back the way he’d come. “You’re out here all by yourself?”

“Yeah. But I have nothing worth stealing either...unless you count my dad’s beat-up old wreck I left back where the dirt road

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ends.”

Clearly offended by the suggestion he was less than honest, the kid pulled back his shoulders and shot Brad a hostile glare. “I’m not a thief, mister. I don’t take other people’s stuff.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be offensive. Anyway, I think we’re getting a little off track here.” Brad tried for a friendly smile. “I have more than enough food for the two of us. And since you’re out here and you don’t seem to have anything to eat in your pack...at least not that I noticed. I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you’re hungry, you’re welcome to share.”

“If you’ve got any of that plastic wrap, you could wrap up the leftovers and save them for tomorrow.”

“I could, but... Brad shook his head. “Nah. Truth is, I hate to eat alone, so I could use the company. Whadya say? I got baked potatoes, crusty rolls and coleslaw. A beer, too, if you want since you say you’re over nineteen.” He paused to give the boy another moment to decide. “By the way, my name’s Brad. What’s yours?”

“Davie.”

“Nice to meet you, Davie.” Brad reached in the cooler for a fresh brew. “Come on. Grab yourself a plate before the food spoils. You like regular beer or light?”

“You have lemonade or a cola maybe?”

Brad poked around in the mess of cans and partly melted ice. “I think there’s a couple of colas in here somewhere. Nothing fancy mind, just the store brand.”

“S’okay.”

He handed the kid a cola. “You don’t like beer?”

The kid popped the tab. “No.”

The negative response hadn’t been exactly shouted at the top of the kid’s attractively husky voice, but there had been such a wealth

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of emotion in that simple, two-letter word, Brad knew he'd hit a nerve. But then he wasn't too surprised. Alcohol was often the reason for teenagers leaving home. "Your dad a drinker?"

"My dad's a mean-minded drunk who beat my mom to death and then he kept me chained up in the root cellar rather than pay a sitter. Yeah, I guess you could call him a drinker."

"That what made you run away?"

The boy gave Brad a pitying glance. "You kidding? He made sure I never got the chance to do that. He needed me there to keep the handouts and the welfare checks coming in. Later, when I was older, I think he suspected I was more interested in boys than I was in girls. Like everyone else, he knew there were plenty of men ready to pay good money for the company of a kid with my looks, so that's when he figured he was onto a real good thing.

"For the price of a bottle, he sold me to anyone who wanted a blow job or liked fucking young boys in the ass. Booze skews a man's thinking real bad, and that's why I don't drink. I'd rather die than be like him." Davie sucked in a breath and released it slowly as he picked up one of the plastic plates and eyed the chicken pieces on the square of wire mesh Brad had used for a grill. "Does it matter if I take light meat or dark?"

Shit! Brad swallowed hard and took a quick slug of his beer. Rather than ask, he should have guessed straight away...the hostile, defensive attitude, the body language, a slight limp as he walked, the whole fucking nine yards. He'd been trained to spot the differences between those who ran rather than suffer further beatings and other forms of abuse, especially sexual, and those who'd taken off as an act of defiance or outright rebellion.

Yet all he'd thought about when the kid showed up was his own personal safety, and if he had the time to say a quick prayer

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before his life came to an untimely conclusion. "I don't much care which I have so long as it's well cooked. You?"

Davie gave him a brittle, humorless grin. "Me? I'm hungry enough to eat the wrapping it came in, bro."

Although the boy had apparently suffered some pretty horrendous treatment at his father's hands and looked to be two steps from starvation, Brad knew a survivor when he met one. It hadn't extinguished Davie's zest for life, and it hadn't turned him into a whiner. The kid was no one's fool, and Brad liked that about him. Brad also noticed that somewhere along the line someone had taught the kid a few manners. Davie didn't just grab food and stuff it in his mouth, he used the tongs to take two of the smaller pieces of chicken and the smallest potato, then he added a couple of spoonfuls of slaw and picked up a paper napkin, along with a plastic fork and one of the rolls.

"There's butter in the cooler, if you want some for your potato and the roll. And it's the real stuff from a real dairy, not that god-awful spread the health nuts say is good for us."

"Butter?" Davie gave him a genuine smile this time. "In the cooler, you say?"

As Brad filled his own plate, he watched out of the corner of his eye while Davie added butter to his potato and roll before he found himself and his belongings a spot on the other side of the fire, just a few feet from where he'd appeared out of the bush. Brad could see the kid was still uptight, ready to run if he said the wrong thing or made a wrong move, so he left him to eat in peace while he concentrated on his own dinner.

Nevertheless, Brad's thoughts continued to race around his head like a mouse on a wheel. They were only a few miles from the nearest town and less than a mile from the main highway, so

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the boy was probably drifting from place to place. And, since the weather was good, he must have figured he'd be safer spending the night out here in the woods than take his chances with the other runaways and street people who slept in empty buildings downtown.

Still, Brad had a feeling the kid hadn't been on the road for long. The curly blond hair wasn't overly long and while his clothes were shabby, they appeared to be clean, and so did he. At least, he didn't give off the rank odor Brad usually associated with runaways. Being summer, it was easy enough for Davie to wash both himself and his clothes in the lake. How would he manage, though, a couple of months from now when the temperature dipped below zero and there was a foot of snow on the ground? Would he have enough sense to find a job and a place to stay, or would someone trip over the poor little bastard's remains out here in the woods come spring?

Brad finished his beer and put the empty in a box he'd brought along for the purpose. As he did so, he saw Davie's plate was empty except for a couple of chicken bones. "Want some more chicken? There's lots left."

"No, thanks. But what I had was very good."

"There's another cola, if you'd like. Or coffee. I was planning on making a pot for myself. I also have cookies and some pecan tarts."

"Coffee sounds good, and cookies, too. That's if you have enough to spare. Don't run yourself short on my account."

"I won't, don't worry." Brad filled the coffee pot with water and set it on the fire to heat. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black is fine. And with sugar if you have any."

Davie got to his feet, collected the plates and cutlery they'd

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used and took them over to the edge of the lake. "Do you have a cloth or something so I can do a proper job?"

"Here." Brad tossed him a partially used roll of paper towel. "Although you don't have to do that."

Davie grinned and shrugged his thin shoulders. "You cooked, so least I can do is clean up the dishes."

Just from the considerate way Davie behaved and his generally adult behavior, Brad was starting to think maybe he'd been wrong to go on looks alone and assume Davie was still a kid. If actions were anything to go by, he could well be in his early twenties just like he'd said. He waited until the coffee was poured and Davie was munching on his second cookie. "How old are you really?"

"Twenty-one. I told you that. Don't you believe me?"

"Sorry. You don't look it. I thought you were maybe sixteen max."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, I'm small and skinny, and I look young. So what?" Davie removed one of his sneakers, lifted the inner sole and pulled out a flat, plastic wrapped package. After unwrapping the plastic, he took out a twenty-dollar bill, what looked like an old black-and-white photograph, a thin gold ankle bracelet, and a piece of folded paper. "Here. This is my birth certificate," he said, unfolding the paper and handing it to Brad. "And I swear it's mine. I didn't steal it."

It was almost dark now, too dark for Brad to actually read what appeared to be little more than a collection of blurred lines on a piece of paper. "Give me a minute to find a light."

Brad found his flashlight in the side pocket of his sports bag. Switching it on, he was able to see that Davie had given him the original of an official birth certificate issued by the government of the Province of Ontario. The certificate informed the reader that

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David Donald Kenton was born in Renfrew, Ontario, and in January, a few months from now, he'd be twenty-two. Brad smiled as he refolded the paper and handed it back. "Do you find looking young for your age to be a problem?"

"Yes and no. I'm always being asked for my ID, which is a pain. Still, it's good for business in an emergency."

Brad didn't have to ask what kind of business. Between the ill-treatment Davie had undoubtedly suffered at home and life on the road, Davie had clearly been around the block a few times, and he'd learned what he had to do to survive. Still, despite his less than perfect background, there was a refreshing openness and honesty about him that Brad found unexpectedly endearing. He also had that aura of innocence usually only found in young children. A guaranteed attention-getter for those whose taste ran to underage boys—or those who appeared to be underage, and Davie definitely qualified on that score. At least, until you looked into his eyes—which he doubted Davie's customers bothered to do—and saw a man experienced enough to close the shutters if he figured someone was trying to read his reactions or gauge his feelings.

"What about the twenty you in have there? That should keep you in food for a few days."

Davie frowned as he closed the package and put it back in his sneaker. "That's my insurance against getting arrested as a vagrant. A truck driver gave it to me after he rescued me from being hassled by a couple of Ontario Provincial Police officers by telling them he was my uncle. He said I should never spend it. That I should just stick it in my shoe as insurance because being hungry for a day or two is way better than being in jail. He said he'd been there once himself, so he knew."

"He was absolutely right." Unable to contain his curiosity,

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Brad added, "So tell me, exactly how long have you been on the road?"

* * *

"A while." Davie stared at Brad for a moment, then he said, "You're a cop. Right?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"The gun. Your haircut. Your attitude."

Brad laughed. "My attitude?"

"You figure you have the right to ask questions and demand answers. Only cops do that. Regular folks don't."

"Occupational habit, I guess," Brad conceded. "You don't like cops?"

"Can't say I'm crazy about them. At least not the ones who go out of their way to hassle drifters and folks down on their luck." Davie grinned. "But you seem okay. Except you're very uptight for some reason. I doubt you're scared of me, so you out here on your own time, or you on a case?"

"Now who's asking the questions?"

"You object?"

Brad sighed and sipped his coffee. "No. I came out here to chill and try to think. Although God only knows why I bothered. Thinking won't change one damn thing."

"Think about what?" Davie asked.

"It's a long story."

"We've got all night, so if you want to unload..." As far as Davie was concerned, it didn't take a genius to recognize when a man was in pain. He could see Brad was definitely hurting and if there was something he could do to help, such as listening...

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Reaching out, he laid his hand lightly on Brad's forearm. "Sometimes dumping your troubles on a stranger is one heck of a lot better than keeping them to yourself. Strangers don't have much to offer except gut opinions cuz they don't know them as are involved, but they don't judge the same way friends and family do either."

"I guess."

"So, what happened?" Davie pressed.

"I screwed up. Screwed up big time, in fact."

"Personally, or at work?"

"Every which way I can name." As Davie removed his hand from Brad's arm, Brad reached for the coffee pot. "Want a refill?"

Davie held out his mug. "Please." He waited until Brad had topped up both mugs and handed him two small packets of sugar.

However, instead of continuing with what he'd just started, Brad just sat down on the ground, folded his arms and stared into the fire.

Davie gave him another gentle push. "You were saying?"

Brad rose to his feet again and began to pace back and forth. "If I'd just kept my mind on the job, instead of letting it wander. But I didn't; I screwed up. Rob died anyway, so did the man I was supposed to be protecting, and the thief got away with about a million dollars' worth of uncut diamonds."

"When did all this happen?"

"A few weeks ago."

"You say your partner was killed, too?"

"Rob wasn't my partner on the job and he wasn't killed. He was sick and he died."

"But he was a cop?"

"No, a lawyer. After my marriage ended in divorce, I was

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pretty much tapped out financially. Rob suggested I move in with him for a while until I got myself straightened away, and I jumped at the offer.”

“This Rob was a friend?” Davie asked.

“Best buds since junior school. I always kinda guessed he wanted it to be more, but I wasn’t interested, plus my parents didn’t seem to like him for whatever reason. Anyway, I’d met Sara and I wanted us to get married and have a couple of kids and live life the way it’s supposed to be lived, or how I’d been brought up to believe.”

“And that way you and your family would all live happily ever after,” Davie said quietly. “Or so you thought.”

“Just shows how wrong a guy can be,” Brad muttered. He got up and added a couple more pieces of wood to the fire. “Before we got married, Sara said she was desperate to have kids. But, once the honeymoon was over, it was always, ‘Let’s wait for a while and buy this first,’ or ‘Why don’t we have some fun before we tie ourselves down for the next twenty or thirty years.’ Turned out what she really wanted was to have a career and a high-flying social life, not kids.

“She also wanted a whole bunch of other stuff a cop’s paycheck couldn’t begin to cover, such as expensive cruises, weekly trips to a spa, and the latest fashions in everything. When I started clamping down on her spending, she filed for divorce and cited irreconcilable differences. By that point, whatever feelings I’d had for her were gone. I could barely stand to be in the same room, and I felt so damn guilty about it, I let her clean me out.”

“Did she find what she wanted?”

Brad gave a snort of disgust. “Oh, yes. Right after the divorce became final, I discovered that’s why she’d dumped me. She’d

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already found another guy who could afford to give her what she said she wanted. She had it all. My money and his, too.”

“You feel bitter about it?”

“Not really. I’m pissed I was stupid enough to let her grab it all without a fight, but it was my own fault for getting involved with her in the first place. I knew my parents wanted grandkids, and I rushed into marriage for all the wrong reasons.”

Davie had heard similar stories from other guys, both gay and straight, although he didn’t know Brad well enough to know which slot he fit into. From some of the things he’d said, could be Brad didn’t even know himself. Even so, the stories had all been from men who thought it was their responsibility to please the whole world without stopping to think who they might hurt in the process, and that included them. No matter how a person looked at it, life was a guaranteed, one-hundred-carat bitch, and he knew that for an absolute certain fact. “Sounds like the only one who got really hurt was you.”

“I guess. I know my parents were disappointed. At least they were until my sister had twin boys. Now, they barely seem to remember who I am.”

Davie reached for another cookie. “So what happened with your friend? The one you said died.”

Brad sat down and resumed staring into the smoldering embers of the fire. “I always knew Rob had a weak heart—some type of congenital heart disease from what he told me. I don’t mean he was an invalid because he wasn’t. His doctors kept him stabilized with a ton of pills that allowed him to work and lead a fairly normal life, and if you didn’t know about his heart condition, it wasn’t something you’d guess. He just had to be careful about getting overtired and avoiding too much stress. Then I moved in

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with him, and...and..."

"Then what happened?"

"It was wonderful." Brad's voice had dropped to a whisper and his eyes looked overly bright in the flickering remains of the fire. "At least it was once I got past Sara and conforming to the person I thought I was and the image I had of myself. But Rob and I had such a short time together. Just a little over a year."

"You mean you became much closer?"

"I guess you could call it that."

Davie suppressed a flash of what he recognized as good, old-fashioned jealousy. He'd never had a real friend—no one he'd had the chance to get close to and confide in, except his mom, of course. That was until his dad got roaring drunk one Saturday night, and the bastard beat her unconscious. Her injuries were so bad she never regained consciousness and, two days later, she'd died. His dad told the cops she'd slipped on something and fallen down the basement stairs, and the brainless jerks had believed him. "Closer as friends? Or real close, as in lovers?"

"We were lovers."

"As in you loved and cared about him, and he felt the same way about you? Sounds nice."

Brad sighed. "That's the way it is with people who genuinely love one another. It's so much more than just sex. There's the caring and looking out for one another. Then there's the feeling of oneness and the sharing of everything. It's kinda hard to explain."

"Was it all good?"

Brad nodded. "If I'm honest, it was beyond good. Better than my wildest dreams could've imagined."

Along with the jealousy, Davie felt an unexpected stab of envy. He'd had a ton of so-called lovers, but not one of them had given a

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shit about him. They'd used him, some had even misused him, but every last one of the dumb ass pricks had tossed him aside like an empty soda can and just gone on about their business as if he was some nameless object with neither sense nor feelings.

"So the reason you screwed up is because you were too busy thinking about your sick friend rather than what you were supposed to be doing?"

Brad nodded, and Davie continued, "Why didn't you take time off work if he was that sick?"

"I would have, if I'd known. I didn't. No one did. It all happened so fast. One minute, he was feeling a bit off-color. The next, I had to call an ambulance, and he was in ICU. Then..." He sucked in a breath and said in a voice that came out in the barest whisper, "I squeezed his hand, willing him to hang on. I knew he wasn't completely conscious, still he sorta smiled, like a baby does when it has gas, and then...he made this funny sound in his throat, and...and...he was gone."

The fire suddenly flared up, showing tears sliding down Brad's cheeks. Davie's throat felt tight, and before he even realized what he was doing, his hand had reached out and now lay, light as a butterfly, on Brad's forearm. He half-expected Brad to shake him off, snatch his arm away, even tell him to get lost. When that didn't happen, Davie didn't know if his attempt to comfort was appreciated, or if Brad was so awash in his memories that he hadn't even noticed.

It wasn't something Davie was used to doing. Except for his mom, he couldn't remember feeling the urge to offer comfort to anyone even one time before tonight. Any show of softness, be it a small gesture of comfort, or an attempt at kindness or sympathy, was usually met with suspicion in Davie's "everyone for

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themselves” world. Since his mother’s death, no one had given Davie anything. No affection, no love or caring, nothing at all other than the time it took to fuck him or assess his financial possibilities.

That was, of course, until tonight when, without knowing a thing about him, Brad had invited him to share his food. Sure, Brad had been a bit cautious at first, figured him for a runaway, but at least Brad had given him a chance to prove he meant him no harm, and that meant a lot to Davie.

He found himself wondering what it would be like to have a friend like Brad, someone to whom trust and respect were as natural as breathing. Someone you could trust not to go through your stuff while you were sleeping and leave you with bare feet and a bare ass. Not that he was ever likely to find out. Drifters were loners cuz they couldn’t afford to take stupid chances on anyone or anything, not if they wanted to keep living. This time tomorrow, Brad would be home in his warm bed, and he’d be looking for another hollow tree, and the chances of them ever meeting again... Davie knew that wasn’t never ever gonna happen.

He gazed up at the night sky and focused on a star that seemed bigger than the others.

If you wish upon a star...

Damn! Davie’s vision blurred and he rubbed at his eyes with the hem of his shirt. His mom used to sing that to him. She’d said if a body wished hard enough and long enough, it was bound to come true. Davie didn’t know if it did or not cuz he figured he only had one wish, and he needed to save it for something really important.

Such as wishing for a real friend? Someone nice like Brad. Someone I could share my blanket with and wouldn’t mind picking

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the bugs out of whatever food we found.

To his complete shock, Davie felt Brad's big, warm hand cover his, and he knew for sure that making Brad talk had been the right thing to do. A delicious, previously unknown feeling of acceptance stole through his body. "You okay?" Davie wondered aloud.

"I will be." Brad gave Davie's hand a quick squeeze, then he released it and stood up. "But thanks for understanding. I appreciate it more than you'll ever know. If you want to doss down by the fire, please, be my guest. The weather forecaster said the temperature is expected to dip during the night."

"Thanks. Sounds like a good idea."

* * *

Long after Davie had wrapped himself in his blanket and presumably fallen asleep, Brad continued to stare into the dying embers of the fire, wondering if, like Davie, he should take to the road for a spell. With Rob gone, he no longer had a personal life, and after the review board met on Monday, he probably wouldn't have a job either.

He should have told his superior officer he'd just lost a close friend, instead of going on something as tricky as an undercover detail of all things with his mind not properly on the job and trying to tough it out. Better still, he could have called in sick and saved himself a whole bunch of embarrassing explanations, bearing in mind the attitude of most of his fellow officers toward gays. Not that either option would have made a scrap of difference to the eventual outcome.

Even if he hadn't been mourning Rob, even if he'd been one hundred percent bright-eyed and bushy-tailed that night, he'd

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never have suspected the security guard was cutting the phone line and turning off the fucking alarm, instead of doing what he was supposed be doing, which was checking to make sure it was on. His partner hadn't thought anything of it either. Security guards went around checking things like that all the time. The guy looked like the real thing, therefore he must be, which had been the real beauty of the thief's plan.

Brad and his partner Des' assignment had been to stake out the jewelry store on Main Street and watch for any unusual activity. The police had received a tip that the owner was expecting a large shipment of uncut diamonds sometime after he closed on Friday night, and there was a good chance the shipment would be intercepted at some point. Intercepting an armored car wasn't quite as easy as it was made to look on TV or in the movies, so Brad's superiors had figured if there was a heist planned, it would take place at the moment of delivery or immediately thereafter.

For this reason, Brad and Des had set up their surveillance in an empty storefront across the street, while several manned police cruisers were waiting in nearby alleys and side streets. The armored truck turned up a little after ten, and the delivery went down exactly as expected. Shortly after the truck left, the shop lights went out. The owner had been told, if nothing untoward happened, to convey this by turning out the lights, slowly counting to ten, and then quickly turning them on and off again.

The signal didn't come, but a few minutes later the owner came out, got into his car and drove away. Although they hadn't actually discussed it, both he and Des assumed the man had been nervous, waiting for something bad to happen, and when nothing did, he was so relieved he just forgot. That's why they'd given the all clear and gone back to the station.

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Still, the fact remained a man had died and it was their fault. At least morally. Both he and Des were both experienced officers who knew never to assume anything...ever. At night, perceptions changed and what looked like one thing could turn out to be something quite different. When they didn't get the pre-arranged signal, they should have gone over to the store and checked regardless. If they had, they would have found the owner and untied him. The man would probably still be alive, and the thief, who was wearing his clothes and took off in his car, wouldn't be still out there, enjoying the fruits of his labors.

As it was, one of the employees had found the owner the following morning when he arrived for work. The official verdict ended up being the poor bastard had suffered a fatal heart attack while trying to get free of the ropes with which he'd been bound to his chair.

Brad knew he couldn't continue to blame his part in what had happened on Rob's death and his own ensuing grief. Des had had no such excuse. The truth was the pair of them had been sloppy and instead of following procedure, they'd taken a shortcut. If they'd taken those few steps across the street and made quite sure everything was good, instead of just assuming, the diamonds might be long gone, but he was pretty sure the owner would still be alive and breathing.

"Can't sleep?" a soft voice enquired from behind.

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was, for a while. Something wrong?"

"Nah." Brad shook his head. "Must've eaten too much supper, or maybe it was that extra cup of coffee."

While the department looked into the circumstances surrounding what had happened, he and Des had been on

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suspension. The waiting had been a killer, and Brad had barely slept, wondering if he would still have a job. Now that part of it was over. Yesterday, he'd received official notification the department had concluded its internal investigation, and tomorrow, he and Des would find out what their superiors had decided.

"My mom always used to say the only thing to keep a person awake was fear or a guilty conscience. You got either one of those?" As he spoke, Davie's fingers began to work on the tightly bunched muscles across Brad's shoulders. "I know some people can't sleep outside like this cuz they figure a bear might come along and eat 'em up."

Although Davie had hit it squarely on the head with his diagnosis of fear and a guilty conscience, Brad wasn't about to tell him he was right. Instead, he smiled his thanks for Davie's lighthearted attempt to help. "Actually, I'm more worried about the bunnies and the chipmunks. I've heard tell those little suckers'll eat just about anything if they're desperate enough, even a tough old bird like me."

"You're not that old, are you?"

"A few more years and I'll be thirty."

"Wow! Couple more years after that and I suppose you'll be collecting your pension and checking out wheelchairs," Davie teased, moving his fingers down Brad's back to another set of muscles that needed loosening just north of his waistline. "Or maybe one of them fancy motorized scooter things they have nowadays."

Despite everything, Brad roared with laughter at the mind picture he had of himself, driving along the sidewalk some morning, drinking take-out coffee and spinning tall stories, along with all the other old coots. "That's not funny."

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“No? Then why are you laughing?”

“Because—” The truth was Davie’s amazingly efficient massage technique had been exactly what Brad needed. The tension that had had him tied in knots for weeks was just about gone. He felt ten years younger, loose and relaxed, ready for anything, especially a good night’s sleep. “Because you’re good company, and you’ve got a great attitude. I may have lost someone I loved, but my troubles are nothing compared to what you’ve been through.”

“I’ve met lots who’ve had it worse than me,” Davie said. “I believe what don’t kill a person usually makes them stronger. At least it has me. After my dad sold me to a guy who used to rent me out, I swore if I ever got away from him, I’d never let anything bad happen to me again. There, that feel better?” he asked as he finished what he was doing and sat down beside Brad.

“It does indeed. Thank you. You said your dad sold you? How old were you?”

“I’m not sure. I must’ve been about fifteen or sixteen, I guess, and being small made some folks think I was a whole lot younger. Anyway, seems one of the neighbor ladies reported him for not sending me to school after my mom died. When the welfare people turned up for the hundredth time wanting to know why, instead of saying I’d been sick like he usually did, he told them it was because he was sick, and I was going up north to live with my uncle and his family for a while. Of course, the real reason he wouldn’t let me go back to school was because he was scared I’d take off.”

“So you’ve had no schooling?”

“I’ve had some here and there. Enough so’s I can read, write and add up numbers. I’m not stupid.”

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“How do you know your dad sold you?”

“I didn’t have any other family I’d ever heard about apart from him, and when I came downstairs after packing my stuff like he told me to, I saw this other guy there and Dad pocketing this big wad of cash. At the time, I thought the guy was just being nice, you know, helping my dad out. Then we got in his truck and drove for about an hour or more to this big old house where he lived. The moment we got inside, he showed me to a room with a bed and lots of books and told me to put my stuff away. When he left the room, I heard him lock the door, so I knew something wasn’t right.

“After that, the only time that door was opened was when he brought me food or the room needed cleaning or whatever, and when one of his customers came to visit with me. At least, I had all those books to read—lots of them had pictures and stories about faraway places. I may not have gone to school regularly like most other kids, but I bet I learned a whole lot more about the world than them.”

This wasn’t the first time Brad had heard a story like Davie’s. He also suspected Davie was giving him just a bare bones, highly sanitized version of what had really happened. “How long were you there?”

“I’d say about two years. Just as well that by then I knew for sure I was gay, otherwise, I couldn’t have taken it. I didn’t have a radio or a TV, just the books, so I didn’t know what month or even what day it was. I didn’t much care either because I was sure I’d never ever get out. Then one day I didn’t get any breakfast, and the house was so quiet, no noises or voices like usual, and I knew something must’ve happened.

“I figured the guy who owned the place was sick or maybe he’d had an accident, but he never told me his name, so I never did find

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out. All I know is around noontime this other guy came by and unlocked the door to my room. He handed me a bag with some chocolate bars and stuff in it, gave me a few bucks and told me to get the hell out of there. He said if I knew what was good for me, I'd keep my mouth shut."

"It didn't occur to you to go to the police?" Brad asked.

Davie shot Brad a disparaging look. "You crazy? And risk getting put in one of those homes for runaways or worse? No way. Anyway, like I said, I didn't know the name of the guy who'd kept me locked up. I didn't know the name of the street or even the town. I didn't have the first clue where I was, and I didn't stop to check and find out. As soon as the second guy let me go, I was so glad to be outta there I just kept running, in case he changed his mind."

"What did you do after that?"

"I lived on the streets, making out best way I could. Summertime was okay, and when it got cold, I'd find a place to spend the night. Sometimes it was a bed at the mission or maybe a corner of an abandoned building. Then one night around Christmas it was real cold and these two do-gooders showed up offering warm beds, food and clothing for anyone interested. One of them said he was a social worker and the other claimed he was an ex-cop and they ran this home where they'd give any of us who wanted it a second chance. They said I'd have to share a room with maybe one or two other boys, and they could guarantee finding us work."

"You believed them?"

"A couple of the other kids jumped at the chance, but not me. Not at first. But the next morning, it was so damn cold, I decided to ask someone I knew who worked at the mission if knew

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anything about these guys and their second chances. He said as far as he knew they were on the level. Leastways, he hadn't heard any complaints, and I didn't have much choice. I was freezing cold, I hadn't eaten in a coupla days, and someone had stolen my shoes while I was sleeping, for the second time that week. Later in the day they came back, and I figured anything was better than freezing to death, so I said yes."

"And was it better?" Brad wondered aloud, experience telling him it couldn't have been anything very good.

"Actually, it was. They didn't beat or abuse us in any way, and what they'd said about a bed, food and clean clothes was true. What they hadn't said was that the guarantee of work meant we had to take part in these live sex shows they put on every night. Explicit sex aimed at perverts and dirty old men, complete with all the toys—leather, handcuffs, whips, and audience participation if the price was right. There were six boys and two girls while I was there, and they kept us locked up most of the time."

"How did you get out of there?"

"One night, as we were leaving the stage, I managed to slip away and hide in a storage cupboard. Later, when everyone was in bed, I found a few dollars in a drawer in the office and got out through the back door that someone had forgotten to lock. Since then, I've been drifting from town to town, never staying too long in one place, just working odd jobs and doing whatever it takes to stay alive. But with winter coming on, I need to get my shit together. Find myself a job and a place to stay."

Feeling a bit cramped from sitting on the hard ground, Brad stretched out his legs and leaned back on his arms. "So where do you plan on going from here?"

Davie shrugged. "A farm a couple of miles back wanted fruit

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pickers, but by the time I got there, they already had enough. The guy in charge said there's another place a few miles farther on along this road where they might need someone, but he didn't know for sure. Anyway, I figure it won't hurt to give it a try."

"I'll be leaving early tomorrow morning, so I can save you the walk if you'd like."

"Thanks." Davie smiled. "I'd really appreciate that."

"Fire's almost out, so we'd better get to bed." Brad said. "You feeling sleepy?"

"Not particularly. Despite what that forecaster of yours said, it's a nice warm night, and it feels good, just sitting here and talking with you like this."

"Yeah, me, too. You're great company, kid."

"I keep telling you, I'm not a kid. I'm a man. But since you don't believe me, maybe I'd better show you." Davie reached out a hand and laid it lightly against the front of Brad's jeans. When Brad made like he hadn't noticed, Davie began to stroke Brad's cock and gradually increase the pressure.

Embarrassed by the thought Davie might think he "owed" him for dinner, yet unsure how to stop what was happening without hurting Davie's feelings, Brad tensed his muscles and held his breath. Trying to ignore what Davie was doing was useless. No power on earth could stop him from getting hard or wanting what nature intended should happen next. But he did not have to take advantage of a man whose lifelong pattern of abuse made him think it was normal and expected. To just keep silent and accept what Davie was offering without a word would put him in the same bag as Davie's father and all the other abusers who'd just taken and taken, and no way would Brad do that.

He stilled the stroking by wrapping a hand around Davie's

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wrist. "You don't have to do this."

"You mean you don't want me to?"

"I do, but—"

"Why not?" Davie sounded confused. "You were nice to me, sharing your dinner, and I'm just trying to be nice back. We're grown men with men's needs. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, it's..." As Davie said, they were grown men with men's needs, except Brad had been so busy wallowing in his grief and his pain, he hadn't realized until now quite how much he needed what Davie was offering. He actually needed the physical closeness and comfort of another man, along with the warmth and reassurance of knowing someone cared, even if it lasted for only a few minutes. "I just don't want you to think I expect something in return for a couple of lousy bits of chicken because I don't. From what you've told me, your life has been full of users and abusers, and I have no interest in joining the list, okay? That's not the kind of man I am."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Good. That's understood then." To Brad's surprise, as he released his grip on Davie's wrist, Davie resumed the stroking.

"This has nothing to do with the people I told you about," Davie murmured softly, "This is because I want to and for no other reason."

"But I can't let you—"

"Yes, you can." Davie drew down Brad's zipper and slipped his hand inside. "Can't we be nice to one another without making a big deal about it? Call it my way of saying thanks for dinner, if it makes you feel better."

"You mean like bringing a bottle of wine, or sending flowers the next day as a thank you?"

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“I guess.”

“I wasn’t expecting anything. Certainly not this.”

“I know that. All the more reason why you should just go with the flow and enjoy.”

What Davie was doing felt so fucking good Brad would have been a liar to pretend any different. In one way, even though he hadn’t gone looking for sex or even initiated what was happening to him now, he was ashamed of himself for taking advantage of Davie and being disloyal to Rob’s memory. In another, it felt like Rob was there beside him telling him he understood, that Davie needed him as much as he needed Davie, and for that reason it was okay. Life had to go on.

Release came quickly, leaving Brad relaxed and feeling more centered than he had in weeks, but he still felt guilty as hell. Guilty for taking advantage of a defenseless kid who had nothing but the clothes on his back and the questionable security of a twenty stuck in his shoe, and guilty for betraying Rob’s memory. As Davie turned away, and Brad realized Davie was cleaning his hands on the grass, he felt a wave of embarrassment for even allowing it to happen. “You okay?”

Davie laughed and stood up. “Better’n okay. Probably too dark for you to see, but I got us both off together. Neat trick, huh? Anyway—”

“Anyway, what?” Brad wanted to know.

“Anyway no big deal.”

Brad had a nasty feeling Davie had been about to say something very different, and he wanted to know exactly what it was. “It really was no big deal? Or were you about to say it was because I probably wouldn’t want to touch a drifter with my bare hands?”

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Davie got down on his haunches, his anger palpable and his face a scant inch or two from Brad's. "Well, would you? Everyone knows drifters and street people don't wash and they all have AIDS or at the very least a ton of STDs. In fact, even though you saw me wash my hands in the lake after we ate, I'm amazed you even let me touch you, never mind get you off."

Brad felt a surge of heat rise up his neck and flood his face. "Don't be ridiculous. I know damn well that not all people in your position live in filth and walk around spreading disease. Your clothes look clean and so do you, and for your information, for anything more than what just happened, whether it was with you or anyone else, I'd have insisted on using a condom. Satisfied?"

"Okay, I'm sorry. Touchy subject." Davie sighed and sat down again. "My last trick didn't believe I don't have AIDS or whatever, or that I have the brains to go to a clinic regularly and get checked out. He said turning tricks made me a guaranteed health hazard. A condom wasn't enough for him. He also insisted on me wearing rubber gloves like they have in the hospital. Can you believe that? I know, he was right to be careful, but I'm the least careless guy I know, and he made me feel like dirt. I'm not a drunk or a drug addict, and I don't live this way from choice. If I hadn't needed the money, I'd have told him to get lost."

"Look, I know getting off the streets isn't easy," Brad said, hoping he wouldn't get his head bitten off for trying to help. "However, you sound as if you want to, and I know someone who can maybe help."

"Who's that?"

"There's this man I know who runs a small mission in town. For the most part, he just provides regular mission service, a bed for the night for those in need, along with a bowl of soup or

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whatever's available. The odd time, though, he'll let a guy stay longer than one night if he's prepared to try to straighten out his life."

"How can he be sure the guy's not putting on an act? Amazing what folks'll say when they're desperate."

"He only takes them if they've been recommended by someone he knows, like a cop or a social worker. Anyone who thinks it's a free ride and doesn't make the effort gets booted out, fast. You interested?"

"He a member of the God squad?"

"No. Mac runs things on a small government grant and a few private donations. He really needs part-time help, but the money just won't stretch that far. So, in return for the help he needs to keep the place running, he'd feed you and give you a bed while you find yourself a job and get on your feet financially."

"He doesn't have anyone doing that for him now?"

"He did, but from what I hear, the guy accomplished the first two steps of his dream of a new life by finding a job and a place to live, so he moved out a few days ago."

"Sounds good, but then so did what those other guys promised. The ones with the sex shows."

"Why don't you sleep on the idea?" Brad suggested. "See how you feel in the morning. If you're interested, I'll take you over there, and you can check it out for yourself."

* * *

Using his backpack for a pillow, Davie wrapped himself in his old blanket, and stared up at the moon, watching it play peek-a-boo with the occasional cloud. He had dreams, too. All he needed was

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a little luck and the right opportunity.

What Brad was suggesting sounded good. Then again, so had finding out he was going to live with that *uncle* in a big house in the country, and so had that pair of clowns with the sex shows. They'd sounded as if they'd been personally appointed by God to save him from the evils of living on the street. Exploiting desperate kids wasn't right, but Davie knew if he'd said no to them, the need to stay alive would almost certainly have forced him into doing something a whole lot worse than fucking people in public. Anyway, it hadn't been all bad. He'd been given clothes, food, a bed to himself, and he'd even been checked out by a doctor, so he supposed, in a way, they had saved him.

Although exactly what they'd saved him *for* was anyone's guess. All he really wanted was to be like the clouds up there in the sky—free to do whatever he wanted, and to come and go as he pleased. His biggest dream of all was to one day travel the world and see the sights, and, like people said, if he could dream it, he could do it. Davie knew the first step to realizing even the smallest of his dreams would be the hardest—finding a way to turn his life around.

He didn't need charity or well-intentioned *help*. He didn't need anything except for someone to give him a chance to prove himself, or point him in the right direction. The rest would be up to him.

A couple of guys he'd met in the last town had mentioned earning good money for picking fruit, and if they could do it, so could he. If he hired on at that other farm tomorrow and was able to work there for as long as the crops and the weather held, by the time the temperature dropped, he should have enough saved to find a cheap place to stay. Then, once he was settled, he could look for

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another job. Anything would do for starters...maybe sweeping floors, stacking shelves, or even washing cars; he wasn't fussy. Feeling a rush of excited anticipation, Davie smiled up at the moon and the clouds and snuggled deeper into the warmth afforded by his tattered old blanket.

After all, even presidents and CEOs had to start somewhere. Right?

* * *

Brad woke up the next morning just in time to catch Davie, dressed in jeans and with nothing on his feet, returning from the lake. He had a threadbare towel in one hand and, in the other, a plastic shopping bag Brad suspected contained whatever meager toiletries he possessed.

He yawned and unzipped his sleeping bag. "Been for a swim?" he inquired.

Davie smiled, a warm, engaging grin that melted the ice forming around Brad's heart since Rob's death. "A swim and a shave. Got to look good if I hope to get a job at that farm." He came closer and then hesitated. "Do I look okay? My razor's kinda had it."

"What did you do? Try shaving without soap?"

"I only had a tiny sliver left and it got lost in the lake."

Last night, in the semi-darkness, Davie hadn't looked old enough to shave. This morning he did. Between a couple of nicks, a few red patches, and a lot of missed whiskers, it looked to Brad as if Davie had tried doing the job with a blunt kitchen knife.

"Since there's no electricity out here, and my shaver's getting too old to hold a proper charge, I brought along a few of these." He

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reached into his bag and produced a couple of cheap disposable razors that he handed to Davie. "Here, try these."

"Thanks. But what about you?"

"No problem, I have a bunch more."

As Davie took the razors and added them to whatever else was in the shopping bag, Brad remembered he couldn't use them without soap. "Here, you want a shot of this?" he asked, holding out his can of shaving foam. "You can give it me back when you're through."

Davie's mouth tightened, and Brad knew at once he'd said the wrong thing. Street people were always so damn touchy, always thinking they were being accused of stealing or something, even though he was the first to admit they probably had plenty of cause.

"If you'd rather have regular soap..." Brad put the can on the ground, rustled around in the bottom of his sportsbag and came up with a handful of the tiny soaps he'd picked up in different hotels. "These you can keep. I must have a ton more at home."

"Are you always this nice to everyone?" Davie asked.

Brad looked up. Davie's voice had sounded flat, sarcastic almost, his body language had gone into defensive mode, and his smile was long gone. Brad knew he'd done the wrong thing again. He wasn't sure if Davie felt insulted by his offer of help, or thought he was being patronized or offered charity. In any event, whatever he said next, Brad realized he'd have to choose his words very carefully.

"I don't go out of my way to be nasty if that's what you're asking. But you're going job-hunting this morning, and I know you want to look your best. I just want to help that's all."

"So long as you understand I don't steal people's stuff. Not yours, and not anyone else's. If I borrow something, I always give

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it back.”

“I know that. Like I said, I was just trying to help.”

Davie seemed to relax a tad, but his blue eyes looked overly bright, like a kid who was hurting, but too proud to admit he was in pain. Without even stopping to think about the possible consequences, Brad stepped forward, wrapped his arms around Davie’s pathetically thin frame, and gave him a hug. “Anyway, I thought we were friends.”

A shiver ran through Davie’s body, and he pressed his face against Brad’s chest.

“Are cops allowed to be friends with drifters?”

“Why in hell not? We’re all people.”

Davie gave a tremulous chuckle. “Just wondering.”

“Well, wonder no more, my man. We’re definitely friends. Now, what say we fix ourselves some breakfast? You hungry?”

“A bit. Any horses in that bag?”

“Sorry. I just have eggs, bacon and some bread. Coffee, too, of course.”

* * *

When they reached the other fruit farm a short time later, the first thing they both saw was the notice at the entrance: *No more pickers needed.*

Davie’s disappointment showed on his face and in the dejected droop of his body as he slumped down in his seat. Brad knew Davie had been counting on being hired as a picker as the way to solve all his troubles, and perhaps, for him, it would have been. However, in Brad’s experience, life rarely worked out the way a person hoped or even expected.

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“Hey, cheer up,” Brad said, as he reversed his vehicle in the farm driveway and headed back the way they’d come. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“It is for me,” Dave said sadly. “I was told there was just this one other place where I might get taken on and that was it.”

“There’s still my friend, Mac.”

“You mean that guy you told me about at the mission? Sorry, I don’t take charity, and I don’t fancy getting myself locked up again, so thanks, but no thanks.” Keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead, Davie moved a little higher in his seat and pulled back his shoulders. “Something else’ll turn up...it usually does. So, if you’d be kind enough to drop me in the next town that would be good.”

Brad knew there was no arguing with stubborn pride and he wasn’t about to try. Even so, he wasn’t about to drop Davie off at the first street corner they came to and hope he made out okay. He needed to know he’d be okay for sure.

“Anywhere along here will do,” Davie said as they left the highway and entered the town.

The traffic light had just turned to green, so Brad kept driving. “Might as well take you all the way downtown as I’m going that way,” Brad said. “Otherwise, it’s quite a walk from here.”

“I’m used to walking.”

“Yeah, I know. But riding’s good, too, huh? You want to get wheels of your own someday?”

“Might be nice,” David said, sighing. “Especially on cold and rainy days. ’Course cars cost an awful lot of money.”

“Once you’re working, you can save up,” Brad said. For the next several blocks, he kept Davie distracted with small talk, but as they approached the destination he had in mind and he drew into the curb, he said, “Will you do me a small favor, Davie?”

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“Sure. If I can.”

He pointed to what appeared to be a small, two-story office block on the next corner. “That’s the mission my friend runs. I want you to talk to Mac. Listen to what he’s offering. I’ll come in with you, and that way you’ll have me as a witness to whatever he says. Will you do that for me?”

Davie hesitated. “I suppose I could look, but you have to understand I’m only doing it to please you. I’m not making any promises.”

“In that case, let’s go.” Brad turned off the engine and got out of the car.

They found Mac in his office just inside the front door, talking on the phone. The moment he saw Brad and Davie, he waved them to a couple of folding chairs in front of his desk.

Although Mac was a good ten years or more older, Brad had known the man for most of his life. First, as the terror of the neighborhood, chasing all the girls and racing his souped-up jalopy up and down the streets after dark. Then, later, getting into just about every kind of trouble possible with the law, including several stints in jail, before he finally managed to straighten himself out and become a model citizen and he’d been that way ever since.

“So, what can I do for you gentlemen?” Mac asked as he put down the phone. “Or are you here to do something for me?”

“That depends on whether or not you’re still looking for help,” Brad said with a smile.

“Always looking for that, my friend,” Mac admitted wryly. “Especially now that Sammy’s found himself a job and a place to live. Problem is everyone wants the free bed and the free food. They just don’t want to soil their hands by picking up a broom or washing a few dishes. As for going job hunting or making any

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attempt to put their lives in order..." He sighed deeply. "You can forget that part. Suggest anything that might require them to shift their lazy butts and they take it as a personal insult."

"That's too bad because my friend, Davie—"

"Can speak for himself," Davie interrupted, pushing his knee hard against Brad's leg to show there were no hard feelings. "Want to tell me exactly what the deal is here, Mr. Mac?"

"Name's Mac, son, and the deal is, if you want to turn your life around, I can help you with a bed, free food and a couple of dollars spending money. In return, you'll help me keep this place running. That means you take a share of cleaning the rooms, doing laundry, washing dishes, and whatever else is needed to keep the bugs out and the place in some kind of reasonable condition. Don't want our guests to start complaining about poor housekeeping. Allow that to happen and the city'll shut us down, and we'll both be out of luck."

Dave gave Mac a considering look. "Will I be locked in my room between chores?"

Mac frowned, appearing a little surprised by Davie's question. "No, son. Don't know why I'd want to do that. This is a mission, not the jail. However, if you decide to take the job, I suggest you lock your room any time you're not in it, otherwise, whatever you might have is likely to disappear, fast."

"Anything else I need to know?" Davie asked.

Mac grinned. "Fail to do your share of the work or cause me trouble of any kind, and you're gone. No second chances. Other than that..."

"Brad said something about me having to find a regular, paying job. That's what I want—a job and a place of my own."

"By staying here with me, you'll have every opportunity to achieve all that. You'll have an address and a phone number where

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potential employers can get in touch. You'll also have toilet and laundry facilities so you can go out on interviews looking as smart as anyone else. You can use your spare time to check around to see what's available. If I hear of anything interesting, I'll let you know."

Davie frowned. "Sounds great, but what if I get asked for references? All I've ever done is odd jobs or worked at places that don't give them."

"Provided you keep your part of the bargain with me, I'd be prepared to give any potential employer a reference. Can't say fairer than that, now can I?"

"Guess not," Davie said.

"So, when do you want to start?"

Davie's face lit up with a huge grin. "What's wrong with right now?"

* * *

After giving Davie his home phone number and asking him to keep in touch and let him know how he was doing, Brad left the mission and drove to a house located just a few blocks away. The same house he'd once shared with Rob.

Just about everyone he knew, including family and friends, had told him it could take weeks, maybe months, before he got his head around losing Rob. What no one had said, but Brad suspected, was that he might never get over the loss, at least not completely. In fact, as he opened the front door, the temptation to call Rob's name was so incredibly strong he bit down hard on his bottom lip until he tasted blood. He could still smell Rob's cologne, hear his voice and feel his presence in every room in the damn house. The pain

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was actually so intense it seemed to get worse rather than better.

And it has to stop! Somehow, I have to make the pain stop.

Brad knew he was being unreasonable. Rob had been his life, his love, and his entire world. He couldn't just snap his fingers and expect to put it all behind him like it never happened. He didn't even want to do that. It was just living in a house with someone who was there in spirit but not in fact was about the hardest thing he'd ever done, but that was okay. Somehow, he had to find the patience to slow down and take it a day at a time because the only alternative was to get rid of the house and everything in it, and no way was he ready for that.

Dropping his bag in the hall, Brad closed the door and headed for the kitchen. Spending the night out by the lake and meeting Davie had done Brad far more good than he could ever have imagined. He felt rested, relaxed, and confident that whatever his superiors had decided and Fate had in store, he'd be able to deal with it. If he lost his job with the department, so be it. He had a roof over his head and money in the bank, so he wouldn't have to rush into just anything. He could take his time to look around and see what caught his eye.

He checked the time by the clock on the wall. He had just enough time to shower, change and make it downtown for the time appointed for the meeting with his boss. This was one time he dare not be late.

However, as it turned out, most of the worrying and wondering had been for nothing. The official hearing had determined the store owner had died much earlier in the evening as the result of a massive heart attack, and it was highly unlikely Brad and his partner or anyone else could have saved the man, even supposing they'd arrived in time.

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After being given severe reprimands for assuming rather than following established procedure, both Brad and Des were reinstated as active officers and told they'd been assigned to the Cold Case Unit for the next several weeks, where it was virtually impossible for them to cause any trouble. The deputy chief delivering the news added that he hoped the next time either of them was ever tempted to *assume* anything, they would stop and consider the very real and possible dangers involved.

* * *

One night a few weeks after being reinstated in his job as a police officer, Brad arrived home to find a voice mail from Davie. Just a short message to the effect Davie had found a part-time job with a demolition company that could turn out to be full-time. In the meantime, he was still staying with Mac. If Brad wanted to call, he'd love to hear from him.

Brad had tried returning the call, just to say a quick, "Hi, how are you?" and to wish Davie luck, but the line was busy, and he hadn't bothered a second time. Davie was young and determined, and one way or another, Brad knew, with Mac giving him his full support, he was bound to succeed. He didn't need a cop checking up on him.

In the meantime, much to his surprise, Brad found he enjoyed working cold cases. Even more surprising, Des did, too. So much so they were considering applying for permanent transfers to the unit.

For Brad, a bona fide mystery fan, trying to solve a cold case was a lot like reading one of his favorite whodunits and attempting to work out who, among the suspects, had the most to offer in the

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way of motive, means and opportunity. Of course, there were cases where there wasn't a single suspect or even a solid clue, and these were the cases Brad liked the best. As long as the circumstances kept simmering in his head, he didn't have time to think about other stuff, such as how much he still missed Rob and how bleak the future looked without him. Of course, he still missed Rob, and the future still stretched ahead like an empty ribbon of highway going nowhere. Even so, as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, the pain gradually decreased to a dull but bearable ache, and, since he had no plans for the future, he didn't waste much time worrying about it.

However, a little more than a year later, Brad was in the downtown area on his day off when he noticed the building where he'd gone for ice cream sodas as a kid was in the process of being torn down. A sidewalk superintendent at heart, he crossed the street for a closer look. He hadn't been standing there for more than a minute or so before he felt someone take the spot next to him, and a soft voice said, "Hey, this is a surprise. You checking up on me?"

Brad turned around quickly, his heart in his mouth. There was something so familiar about the voice, a certain something he'd never quite forgotten. Yet... For a moment, he wasn't sure, but the smile and the twinkle in the bright blue eyes were really all the proof he needed. Gone was the gangly, underfed boy-man in the shabby clothes of a year ago. In his place was all man—a handsome, bare-chested, broad-shouldered young man, sporting a golden tan and wearing a hard hat, ripped jeans, and work boots. The five o'clock shadow wasn't a bad addition either. It added a certain sexy touch that made Brad lick his lips without thinking of the significance of what he was doing.

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“Davie? Jeez, man, I hardly recognized you.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ve changed a bit. You can blame the weight gain on Mac’s good cooking. He’s always shoving food in my mouth.”

“You working here?” Brad asked.

“Sure am. I started with the company part-time, shifting loads of rubble, soon after you got me in with Mac. Then one of their full-timers left, and I got his job. Anyway, how have you been? You’re looking pretty good.”

“Fine. You’re still with Mac?”

“Yes and no. I have my own place now, but we couldn’t find anyone to take over from me, and since Mac can always use any extra help that’s available, I still give him a hand. What about you? You still a cop? Or did you get fired on account of that screw-up you told me about?”

“Nah. I got lucky, so I’m still on the force. Umm...” Brad shuffled his feet, feeling a tad uncomfortable. Davie had to be wondering why, one minute, he’d showed all that interest in his future, and the next he’d just cut him off. “I did try to return your call, but the line was busy. Then I guess I forgot. You know how it goes.”

“That’s okay.” Davie briefly touched Brad’s arm. “I figured you maybe thought we should leave well enough alone. We were both hurting pretty bad that night, and we both did a great job of spilling our guts. Not really the kind of thing a guy wants to be reminded about.”

“I don’t know about that.” Brad looked up quickly and managed to snag Davie’s gaze. “Maybe it’s the kind of stuff we should remember. Looking back now, I know you saved my sanity that night, and in case I never said thanks, I do now.”

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“That’s okay because you saved my sanity, my ass, and everything else, too. Not just because you introduced me to Mac, but because I remember I was so damn hungry and the smell of that chicken roasting over the fire just about drove me nuts. I couldn’t wait to wrap my mouth around one of those drumsticks.”

“Yeah, I guess we were both in need of a bit of TLC that night.” Brad hesitated.

Running into Davie again like this had not only filled his head with the type of thoughts he hadn’t had since Rob died—hot, sexy thoughts that involved sweaty bodies locked together in a bunch of tangled sheets— but he had the biggest, instant hard-on since he couldn’t remember when. Maybe it was the shock of seeing Davie again and remembering what had happened between them that night. Or was someone upstairs finally giving him a much needed push to tuck the past away in a corner of his heart, along with a reminder it was time for him to move on?

Whatever the cause, he hoped like hell what he was about to say wouldn’t put something in motion he might later regret. “What time do you get off work?”

“I finished a couple of minutes ago,” Davie replied, pointing to the lunch pail on the ground near his feet. “Why? You want to grab a drink or something? If so, it’ll have to be a quick one because Mac fell down the basement stairs yesterday. He won’t go to the hospital, but I know he’s hurting pretty bad, so he needs me to cook dinner for everyone tonight.”

“Really?” Brad hesitated for barely a second. “Sounds to me like you guys could use some extra help. Anything I can do?”

Mischief danced in Davie’s eyes as he smiled and picked up his lunch pail. “Absolutely. There’s lots you can do. Your first job, as the new recruit, will be to peel the potatoes. You okay with that?”

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Brad laughed, feeling his initial tension at the unexpected encounter disappear. “You’re not going to ask me to clean the toilets?”

Davie’s smile grew wider and included a hint of challenge. “Would you if I did?”

“Sure. Someone has to do the dirty jobs. Why not me?”

“Don’t worry. One of our regular volunteers is taking care of the toilets and the showers for the time being.”

“You have regular volunteers?”

“We couldn’t get anyone to take over from me, leastways no one Mac wanted. So, I talked to some of our regular clients and told them if they wanted a guaranteed spot on a real bad night, it was gonna cost them something in return.”

“Smart thinking.”

“The good thing is they went along with it, and it works. Most of the time anyway. Now, we gonna walk? Or do you have wheels?”

* * *

From then on, helping Davie help Mac became a regular feature of Brad’s day off. When they finished their chores, since any type of alcohol was forbidden inside the mission, he and Davie would go out for a drink, even though Davie still never touched alcohol, and something to eat. Sometimes they’d spend the entire evening in a bar, and sometimes they’d go back and play cards with Mac.

Brad knew that during these weekly get-togethers, he and Davie—or Dave as he was now called by his workmates—had gradually grown a whole lot closer. It was the kind of closeness

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that allowed for shared confidences, the odd favor to be asked, along with the knowledge there wasn't anything they wouldn't do for one another. There was also a slight building of tension between them because, even though the next step seemed painfully obvious to Brad, neither of them had found whatever it took to do anything about it.

In Brad's case, it involved Davie's past history. He didn't want to take advantage and he didn't want to scare him off. He'd also learned his lesson about making assumptions. Despite what had happened the night they first met, it didn't necessarily mean Davie wanted a repeat performance. If he did, and their friendship was to deepen, then it would be up to Davie to give him a sign, or perhaps even take the lead.

Then, as sometimes happens, the next step took care of itself. Early one winter's evening, Brad hurried into the mission to get out of the biting cold wind, hit a patch of newly washed floor and slid smack-bang, straight into Davie's welcoming arms. It probably wouldn't have happened if he'd been wearing something other than his brand new, leather-soled boots or if he'd been watching where he was going. Still he had been wearing them and he'd been looking at Davie's delectable ass, not at the floor...and he wasn't even one tiny bit sorry.

"Wow!" Davie murmured, running his hands down Brad's back and squeezing his butt. "I didn't know you cared."

Brad experienced a heady feeling of anticipation. "Wow, yourself. And quit with the I-didn't-know line because I'm damn sure you did and you do. Right?"

As he was speaking, Davie steered Brad around the corner, out of sight of anyone coming in, and into a large but empty storage cupboard at the end of the hallway.

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Their mouths met, tongues tangled, and Brad felt the hard, insistent pressure of Davie's arousal against his lower belly. It took what had to be less than a second to get that way himself once Davie pulled the door shut, enclosing them in the warm, musty-smelling darkness.

The heat of Davie's body and the velvety touch of his lips drove Brad wild with the need for closer, more intimate contact. He wanted to touch and taste Davie, make what he'd only imagined to this point into hard, driving reality. A storage cupboard just off the main lobby that anyone could open without warning was a damn risky place to be doing it, but...

To Brad's surprise, instead of making him nervous, the possibility of discovery just added even more excitement, an extra dimension, an extra thrill to what was about to happen. His blood was pumping through his veins at record speed, making his heart beat faster. His hands were shaking as he fumbled with the snap on Davie's jeans. He wanted Davie with an urgency he'd never known before, not even with Rob, and it had to be now.

The instant Davie's cock sprang free of confinement, Brad was down on his knees, about to take him in his mouth, until he vaguely heard Davie say something about holding it while he found his wallet, then pushing a small package into his hand. Glad one of them had remembered to be sensible, Brad quickly extracted the condom and sheathed Davie's rampant shaft. His hands were shaking with need and his face was wet with perspiration. He was still imagining someone ripping open the door and catching them *in flagrante*. In fact, he could see the look on the chief's face right now. No way would he get off with a reprimand or a caution. They'd kick his sorry ass off the force so damn fast and so far he'd be lucky if he lived to tell the tale.

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Did he care?

No way!

However, much as Brad might have wanted to take things slowly, there was no time for savoring the moment. Between the edge-of-the-seat thrill of pushing the envelope in a way he'd never done before and white hot need, it felt like flying to the moon on a one-way ticket. Davie's dick was halfway down his throat, and Brad began to suck him harder. With his free hand, he opened his pants and began to rub his own inflamed shaft. The harder he sucked on Davie, the faster his fingers moved on his own flesh, until relief finally came in a sudden explosion that reduced the two of them into a hard-breathing, quivering heap.

Davie's breath tickled Brad's ear. "Hey, was that worth waiting for or what?"

"Absolutely and definitely. But can we lock the door next time?"

Davie laughed. "It *is* locked. You didn't think I'd take a dumb chance on anyone walking in on us, did you?"

"Where's Mac?"

"Out buying groceries."

"When will he be back?"

"Who knows? Depends whether he simply buys what's on the list and hurries right back or if he stops off somewhere."

In between words, Davie had managed to get Brad's libido up and running again. How, Brad wasn't sure. He never ever got it up again this fast. Perhaps it was because Davie was casually investigating his ear with the tip of his tongue. An erotic onslaught that made Brad catch his breath and wonder if his heart could take the strain. Davie had also pulled Brad's pants down around his ankles.

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“There that’s better,” Davie whispered as he ran a finger slowly down Brad’s crack and teased his hole.

Knowing the door was locked should have made Brad relax. Instead, as Davie inserted a finger in his anus, his nerves wound even tighter. “What if Mac comes back, hears a noise and unlocks the door?”

“Don’t worry. Won’t happen.”

“How do you know that?”

Davie stretched Brad’s muscle enough to allow, with the help of a little spit, the addition of a second finger. “Because, one, I have the key. And two, the reason this cupboard is empty is because we had mice in here and nothing we did got rid of them. If Mac hears anything, he’ll just think the mice are back.”

“Oh, shit!” The erotic slide of Davie’s fingers deep inside him made Brad want to scream the words aloud, but he managed to keep it down to a soft groan.

“Does that mean you’re scared of mice, or you love what I’m doing?”

Brad sighed. Unable to put his feelings into words, he compromised with, “Arrrgghhh...”

“Hah, you love what I’m doing. I thought you might.” Arranging Brad on his knees, Davie knelt and replaced his fingers with his tongue. “Now, just hold the position while I see if I have another condom in my wallet,” he instructed as he withdrew, and Brad heard the rustle of another package opening.

“I hope it’s lubed. Otherwise, you’ll have to come up with a bucketful of spit.”

“It’s lubed. I have spit, and...” Davie reached around and spent a few moments milking Brad’s dick. “Now, hang on tight, cuz we’re going to the moon, lover.”

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When Davie spread Brad's ass cheeks and inserted the head of his cock, it felt so fucking good Brad almost lost it then and there. However, Davie was one step ahead of him. Grasping Brad's shaft and holding it firmly at the base with one hand, he caressed it with the other. Then he pushed forward, burying himself so deep Brad felt the brush of rough public hair against the sensitive skin of his butt.

Davie let go of Brad's prick and, wrapping one arm around Brad's waist, Davie used his other hand to fondle Brad's balls and to rub the exposed and sensitive head of Brad's cock. Then, as Brad indicated his impatience by pushing against him, Davie began to move. Gently at first, but all the time increasing the speed and depth of his strokes until, with one final push, he took them to that one magical place they both wanted to go.

* * *

For the next week, Davie walked around in a daze, not quite sure if the way he felt about Brad meant that he really loved him—the forever and ever kind of love people were always raving about. Or was it just a case of him wanting something more than he'd ever wanted anything before, made worse by being afraid it was the one thing he couldn't have? Brad was a friend who'd been good to him, and the two of them got along super well. For the most part, they liked the same music and TV shows and a whole bunch of other things, but beyond that?

Davie wasn't even sure he knew what love was. Everyone said you knew it the moment it happened, but was it really that easy? Love was a word people threw around all the time—I love the warmer weather, I'd love a coffee, I'd love to kill the sonofabitch

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right now. And what about I thought I loved him, but now I know it was nothing more than infatuation?

The only kind of love Davie knew about was the warm, fuzzy kind he'd once shared with his mom and the dog they'd had, and also the raggedy old teddy bear someone gave him when he was small.

Since their encounter in the storage cupboard, what Davie felt for Brad was a whole lot different from that. For one thing, sex was involved. Brad only had to smile or look at him in that funny, cock-eyed way of his, and it was, Oh, yeah, man, let's get naked. Still, it wasn't just the sex, and the always wanting to be close. It was all the other special feelings such as caring, sharing, and the need to please and protect. The certain knowledge there was nothing he wouldn't do for Brad provided it was within his power to do or to give—a feeling that had started the night they met and remained constant—that made him think it must be love. But was it real true love, the kind that broke your heart when it went wrong, or just one helluva big crush? And exactly how did Brad feel about him?

The one thing Davie did know for absolutely, positively sure was that he didn't intend to drive himself crazy by continuously wondering. Tonight, after work, he and Brad were planning to see the new movie everyone was raving about. First, though, as it was Brad's day off, they were having dinner at Brad's place, and that gave Davie an idea.

After work, he stopped at Jackson Square and bought himself new jeans, a new sweatshirt, and new boots. On the way out of the mall, he stopped at one other store and made another smaller purchase.

"Big date tonight?" the middle-aged store clerk inquired with a

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smile as she handed him the long, thin, plastic-wrapped package and glanced at the collection of shopping bags near his feet.

"I guess you could say that." As Davie returned the woman's smile, he felt a rush of anticipation and heat, along with a dash of trepidation, sweep through his body. What if Brad laughed in his face? What if— "Wish me luck, yeah?"

"I certainly do." She laughed and touched him lightly on the shoulder as she followed him to the door. "Although I doubt you'll need it. I can't imagine anyone but a complete fool saying no to a handsome young man like you."

By the time Davie arrived at his apartment, then showered, shaved, and changed into his new clothes, he was a bag of nerves and indecision. The thought of Brad laughing at him was not only making him cringe, he was already wondering if he should forget his brilliant plan and just change back into the clothes he would have worn if he hadn't bought the new ones.

He paced back and forth the length of his living room a couple of times. If he didn't go through with it now, then when would he? Did he really want to spend another week of sleepless nights, and the same number of days risking his life because his mind wasn't on the job?

On the other hand, did he want to risk losing Brad's friendship?

Taking his leather jacket out of the closet, he put it on and picked up the plastic-wrapped package he'd left on the table by the door.

As he walked the short distance to Brad's house, Davie reminded himself that faint hearts never won shit. Whether his brilliant plan blew up in his face or worked out exactly the way he hoped, this was something he had to do.

He rang Brad's doorbell, sucked in a deep breath, and waited

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on the step.

The hall light flicked on, the door opened, and the next thing Davie knew was that he was in Brad's arms as Brad pulled him inside and pushed the door shut with his foot.

"This has been the longest week of my whole fucking life," Brad muttered as his mouth found Davie's and he eased Davie's lips apart.

Davie closed his eyes, loving the way Brad tried to suck his tongue, followed by a slippery game of hide and go chase. Even if things didn't work out the way he hoped, even if— *No!* He was pretty sure he now knew what love was and what it wasn't. Love meant stepping through a door into a kiss and a hug, and knowing you'd been missed. Unless he was very much mistaken, what he and Brad had found together was definitely the real thing.

As they came up for air and broke apart, Davie remembered the plastic-wrapped package in his hand. Amazingly, it was still intact.

He handed it to Brad. "Here, this is for you."

"A gift for me?" Brad frowned a bit as he started to unwrap the gift, but the moment he pulled back the paper to reveal the single, perfect red rose, his frown changed to a smile, and Davie noticed a suspicious glint in his beautiful dark eyes. Brad lifted the flower to his mouth and brushed his lips against the petals. "Does this mean what I hope it means?"

"It means I love you. I love you with all my heart and all my soul." He wrapped his arms around Brad's body and pulled him close. "Unless, of course, you have a problem with that."

"No, no problem at all. I love you, too. To tell the truth, I love you like crazy. But can I just ask one small favor?"

"And that is?"

"Next time we get it on, can we please do it in a nice

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comfortable bed rather than that god-awful storage cupboard? I've been having the absolute worst nightmares about tiny little grey mice doing— Never mind."

"Doing what?"

"Like I said, never mind. You really wouldn't want to know."

Davie laughed and nipped Brad's neck with his teeth. "Maybe I already do. Remember those sex shows I told you about? They had us doing all kinds of really weird stuff. I know you're a cop, so I'm pretty sure you know a whole lot more about things like that than the average guy. Even so, you wouldn't believe some of the things they wanted us to do, even if I told you. I'm not just talking about the usual stuff like the whips and the chains. I'm talking about the really way out, freaky things."

"You mean the kind of thing some guys need because they can't get it up?"

"Fortunately, we don't have that problem."

"No, we don't." Brad rubbed his aroused cock against Davie's equally interested member as he undid Davie's belt and unbuttoned his jeans. "I hope we never do. Still, that other stuff sounds interesting, so you could always show me. Of course, that's if you'd like to."

Davie growled deep in his throat. "I wouldn't like it, and you probably wouldn't either. Anyway, I don't keep a bunch of tiny wee mice handy."

Brad shivered and gave an exaggerated sigh. "Exactly how small are they?"

"Very, very small."

"Jeez, I'm not sure if I should be relieved or disappointed."

"I'd go with relieved if I were you. They may be small, but those nasty little fuckers have extremely sharp teeth." Davie

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chuckled softly and nipped Brad's neck again.

"Ouch! You mean sharper than yours?"

Brad now had Davie's new jeans around his ankles and was doing some very interesting things to his cock.

"Way, way sharper. Now, can you please forget about the damn mice and concentrate on what you're supposed to be doing?"

"You mean this?" Brad inquired as slipped down to his knees and slowly took every inch of Davie's aching cock into his mouth.

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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