



Somebody To Love

Carolina Valdez

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

...They tore off their clothes and clung together, chest to chest, belly to belly, cock to cock. With trembling hands, Kevin stepped away to fumble in the pocket of his khakis for two foil packets, at last pulling them free. He held them up. "Grape or strawberry?"

"I don't care. Just hurry before I cover you with cum."

Kevin knelt, and Nate groaned softly from low in his throat as Kevin's breath bathed his swollen dick. The groan resonated in Kevin's belly and desire coiled tight in his core. Kevin unrolled a purple condom over the damp cock jutting toward his face. He denied Nate the pleasure of suiting him up because he knew he'd erupt the minute Nate's hands were on him.

Standing, Kevin whispered against his lover's ear just before he blew softly on it and then plunged his tongue deep inside. "I hope you like strawberry."

"I want my mouth on you—any time, any flavor at all," Nate responded.

The couch was too narrow, and they didn't make it to the bed. Halfway there, they dropped to the floor, and when Nate's hot mouth closed over what filled the red condom, it was Kevin who groaned.

He stroked Nate first, wanting to feel the fullness as he remembered how velvety it had felt when latex wasn't covering it. He savored grape as he nibbled at the head just beyond the loose purple tip and he took his time as he licked and sucked his way up until his mouth filled with the essence of his lover. His hands roamed over the powerful body until he reached the soft, marbled sac and caressed it. As he felt Nate's passion build, he closed his fingers around the base of his dick and squeezed firmly, just on the edge of hurting him...

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BY

CAROLINA VALDEZ

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SOMEBODY TO LOVE
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CHAPTER 1

When the first scantily clad woman approached the pole to dance, Nate shook his head in amusement. Apparently, while he'd been working in isolation in the thick, fragrant forests of Canada and the Pacific Northwest, pre-wedding bachelor and bachelorette parties had fused into co-educational. Now he watched as the last performer, Cotton Candy, her butt cheeks prominently displayed, finished her dance by shimmying down the nightclub's gleaming pole, immediately going into a back walk-over that came a hair's breadth from exposing her clit and dropped into splits, arms raised.

Drum roll.

Cheers, whistles and stomps broke out, and he joined in. The women clapped for her nerve and, no doubt, because they secretly envied her lack of inhibition. The men, Nate knew, responded

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

because she'd stirred their pricks and they'd envisioned sleek, hot sex. Nate put his fingers to his lips and whistled because as a male it was expected of him, but not because the performances had aroused him or conjured up any sensual images.

The other exotic dancers joined Cotton Candy and they spread through the group planting kisses on the mouths of some of the men, even shocking an occasional woman with one, before they exited the stage.

Four bare-chested men dressed in seam-splitting black leather pants burst onto the dance floor, and an electric buzz sizzled through Nate. A fine layer of dark hair covered Nate's broad chest and belly, but any pelt these men might've had had been denuded to reveal tanned, ripped muscles and hard sinew. Their trade dress of white tuxedo collars with black bow ties and snowy cuffs gleamed under the lights, a formality that was tongue-in-cheek to the nature of their dance moves.

Nate had seen Chippendales before and this was, after all, Las Vegas, and the bride's father apparently had the big bucks to hire them and reserve this club, but he'd never seen them wear narrow, black silk masks across their eyes. It drew attention from magnificent physiques and narrow hips to the eyes revealed in the slits of the ribbon.

Intriguing, he thought. Someone must need to hide his identity. He wondered who. He wondered why.

To the hot, pulsing beat of rock guitar, man-hips gyrated, their packages thrusting forward and back.

Blatant sex—raunch, despite the formal trade dress. Nate held back a soft laugh.

From across the room, Jack Sonderson caught his eye and gave him a secret thumbs up. Only Jack, his friend and the groom,

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

understood *The Girls Night Out! Experience*, advertised to fulfill a wide range of female fantasies in a *disarmingly sexy but tasteful way*, was a night out for *him*. Jack knew Nate would enjoy watching the women, who were boob-heavy, round-assed and skillful, but it would be the erotic moves as the men teased and seduced with young, hard bodies that would draw his friend.

A sigh went through the ladies in the crowd. There was no other group quite like the Chippendales anywhere in the world. Women moaned and squealed and hands reached into purses for dollar bills. Women might fling their panties on stage for rock stars and singers, but these men stepped close enough for money to be stuffed into the distended fronts of their thongs. Nate smiled at the fun of it.

As the dancing began, his crotch tightened pleasurably at the sight of the physically perfect men with the bulging biceps. Their pecs almost rivaled the size of the breasts of some of the women, but they'd be solid and masculine to the touch instead of soft and fluid like a boob. His breath quickened at the sight of their spectacular biceps and abs. Even their love handle muscles were firm and sensuous. Beginning at one hip, they tantalized as they cascaded down to where the low-slung leather trousers hid thatches of curls cushioning dicks, then rose in a "u" to the opposite hip.

As the performance progressed, what had been mere pleasure became a deep sensual hunger rolling through Nate, catching him off guard. It was a hunger that hadn't been satisfied for a long, long time. Not even with his hand.

Aroused now, Nate's body hummed and dampened as it tingled with heat. He slipped a hand in his pocket discreetly to push down the unruly dick threatening to fill his slacks.

One sharp yank and the sound of the Chippendales ripping

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

away their leathers drew his attention. Black, sequined thongs shimmered over bulging packages. Hands locked behind their necks, elbows out, the men bumped and humped while they turned to show off bare, tight butts.

Selected no doubt for the size of their dicks and balls as much for their muscles, Nate thought. Dancing ability had probably been at the bottom of the list, but, still, he had to look away from the fluid, sexy moves under the hot lights. It was no longer just a night out for him—the tingling of his tongue and the loading of his wet cock warned him it was time to stop watching. And hurting.

With an effort, he switched his thoughts to tomorrow's wedding and the happiness on Jack's face when he looked at pretty Janet Engvald, his bride-to-be. Slowly, Nate's cock subsided until it was just a penis and no longer a lightning rod for pleasure.

The music faded. Screams and stomps began. Looking up again, he clapped as the buff dancers moved through the crowd and planted quick kisses on women who stuffed bills into thongs. The men neared his row and, suddenly, a hand cradled the back of his head, and a mouth—warm and hard—captured his lips and a tongue tasted. Then he was released. Caught by surprise, Nate didn't take in the stranger's full face, only the cognac-colored eyes in the black mask and then his back as the dancer sauntered away, the leather pants slung casually over one shoulder half-hiding a bare ass that shifted in invitation with each step.

Nate ran his tongue over his lips and the rich aftertaste of single malt scotch whisky the stranger must have downed lingered. He was sure Jack had set this up. Yet he couldn't have guessed at the confusion of feelings flooding Nate's senses and mind, taking him away from this moment to a memory repressed long ago.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

* * *

Their freshman year in college, he and Jack had joined the rest of the guys pledging Alpha Omega Chi fraternity. The two seventeen-year-olds, wearing small pledge ribbons in the frat's maroon-and-navy colors pinned to their sweaters, stood in the house they hoped to call home from now until graduation and listened to the club president.

"You are nothing. Understand? You're pieces of crap not worth the ground you walk on. You will submit to whatever a pinned brother orders you to do and pass every test we set you to without bitching. Fuck up, and you'll be blackballed. It only takes one black ball to lock you out of this brotherhood forever."

He held up a rack of glistening white marbles and an equal number of balls as black as vampires' cloaks. There was one of each for every brother, and they clicked ominously in the rack. With the other hand, he held up an elegantly carved wooden box with a hole on top. *Vote* appeared in frat colors on the side.

The phrase "blackballed" took on a whole new meaning for Nate, one fraught with anxiety.

During pledge week, wanting badly to belong and to prove himself acceptable after half a lifetime of feeling he wasn't because he feared he was something despicable, something he didn't want to be, Nate had kissed the dirt in front of one of the pinned members, followed one to dinner while crawling on his knees and barking like a dog. He'd even cleaned dog shit off the training shoes of another.

One moonless night, all the pledges were blindfolded, driven away from campus and dropped off in the middle of the woods. Ordered not to remove the blindfolds until they couldn't hear the

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

cars anymore, they listened as the “Men of Alpha Omega Chi” drove away, leaving them stranded.

“Holy crap,” Jack said. “How’re we supposed to find our way back there from here? Anyone even know where we are? Where the house is?”

“I think I may know,” Nate answered in a quiet voice. “This way.”

Having no choice, they’d followed him, watching him stop at times to study the sky.

Jack almost plowed into Nate when he’d stopped without warning to scan the midnight sky again. “What’re you doing?”

“I worked for the forestry service last summer. I’m following the stars.”

“Yeah, sure. Navigating by the stars,” the guys grumbled.

Jack growled at them. “Have you got a better idea? I’m freezing my nuts out here in the dark. If anybody’s got a good alternative, I’m all for it. Otherwise, I’ll trust Nate.” He tromped after him, and everyone followed.

An hour later, Chuck Hillerman pointed and said, “I don’t believe it. There’s the frat house!”

They cheered and clapped Nate on the back.

Ever after that night, Nate sensed those who’d pledged with him respected him. Liked him. Maybe he belonged after all.

The final test on the last night of pledge week sent fear streaming through Nate. They stood in the frat house meeting room clothed in navy faille choir robes borrowed from the wardrobe of the college theatre department. The president nodded to the coordinator of pledging. As he and the other brothers blindfolded the pledges, the pres said, “Your task is to kiss another man.”

“That’s disgusting,” Hillerman said.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Through an otherwise stunned silence, the president added, “Be assured, men, it won’t be anyone you know. They’re seniors from another house. They won’t recognize you in blindfolds and robes.”

Nate’s blindfold wasn’t in place yet, and he saw the drama as it unfolded.

Chuck ripped off his blindfold and vestment and slammed them to the ground. “That’s it for me. I’ve had enough of this childish crap. Making us bark like dogs, stranding us in the woods at night. *Men* of Alpha Omega Chi, like hell.” He kicked the clothing aside and stomped out of the frat house.

Nate felt his blindfold slide into place and be tied.

No one spoke. Chuck was right about hazing being childish and sometimes even dangerous. Nate wanted to run, too. To tear off the stifling robe and the blindfold and escape into the cool woods under the stars where he could be himself without criticism, challenge, or fear for his life.

But before he could act, a hand took his arm and a voice said, “Come with me.”

Too late to escape, the need to belong, to be confirmed as acceptable and accepted, surged over his fear and buried it. Nate let himself be led away.

“This is far enough,” the voice spoke again.

Nate thought he was somewhere in the back hall. Two strong hands took him by the shoulders and pressed him against a wall. The expensive musk of the stranger’s cologne enveloped Nate. A hot mouth lingered over the hammering pulse below his ear and kissed. Nate stiffened against the intimacy just as teeth sank into his neck without cutting his skin. A love bite. An erotic rush went straight to his crotch.

Not knowing what might come next, he tensed, schooling

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

himself to hold still until it was over and not give himself away. Fingers slid under his chin and tipped it up. A thumb lightly traced his face from cheekbone down to and across his mouth beneath the blindfold. Lips pressed against his and rocked. Full, soft, masculine lips. Nate kissed back quickly, but kept his mouth shut. He needed to end this before he gave in to the sexual urges flickering inside him like new kindling set to a match.

The tongue, moist and warm, caressed the corners of his mouth and then the lips kissed those corners and roved back to capture his mouth fully, hotly. The tongue pressed to enter. Nate fought the urge to return the kiss again, to lean in and open so the stranger could taste and feel the wetness of his mouth while he sucked the tongue in deeper. When the man's body, adult in every way and matching his in size, pressed its length against his and pinioned him to the wall, he ached to rub groin to groin, to take the stranger's hand and guide it to his cock, where it would bring the most pleasure and release.

Instead, he stood as immobile as a wooden soldier and pictured a giant black marble dropping with a hollow thud into that wooden box marked *Vote*.

His lack of response apparently noted, the kisser laughed softly and released him. "Stay here until they come for you. I'll tell them you passed, new 'Man of Alpha Omega Chi.'" He ran a thumb once more across Nate's lips and then his steps retreated down the hall.

Nate's knees threatened to give way at the relief he felt, and he leaned back against the wall until he'd recovered. The votes were tallied and waiting by the time a member led him back to the meeting room and removed his blindfold and robe. When everyone, absent Chuck, had reassembled, the president fastened a

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

gold pin enameled with the fraternity's Greek letters in navy-and-maroon on their shirts and sweaters.

He was now officially *Brother* Nathaniel "Nate" Marquette.

That night a wall crumbled inside him. The wall he'd built to hide from what he'd feared to be true—new Alpha Omega Chi man? Yes. *Gay* Alpha Omega Chi man? Oh, yes.

Chuck had freed himself. Nate was *set* free by the kisses and caresses of a stranger who'd forced him to admit his deep sexual feelings for men.

* * *

Not long after he'd been pinned and celebrated his birthday, Nate was studying in the library when a quiet, familiar voice, raw and husky, said, "I recognize those cheekbones, that sensual mouth."

Cologne, expensive and musky, drifted toward him, and Nate felt his face flush with embarrassment as a handsome senior with long blond locks and piercing green eyes moved a chair close and sat, stretching his long legs out under the heavy oak table and looking straight into Nate's eyes.

Nate nodded at the guy he was sure had kissed him that final night of pledging. "I'm Nate."

"Airon Downing here."

Soon a long leg glided down the length of Nate's, warm and sleek. A hand rubbed and squeezed his thigh, moving steadily toward his crotch. The message Airon sent was unmistakable.

Nate inhaled sharply and for once let the sensual feelings swell undenied and unchecked. He reminded himself he was eighteen now, an adult who could make his own decisions. He gathered his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

books and holding them over his crotch to hide his engorged cock, stood and looked into those green depths. “Where?”

“My place? I don’t have a roommate.”

In an apartment dimmed by blinds closed earlier against the heat and airless from being shut all day, Airon took Nate’s books from his hands and tossed them on a marble-topped table in the entry hall. He pulled Nate close and kissed his hair.

Trembling with anticipation and worry despite Airon’s strong arms around him, Nate whispered, “I’ve never...”

“I know,” Airon said, his voice hoarse and low, his breath washing over Nate’s cheek in hot waves. “Let me teach you.”

Awash in heat that lifted him like a rising tide toward desire and fulfillment, Nate touched every place he’d hungered and feared to touch on a guy, licked and mouthed them all, while Airon pushed him to his back and plundered him with tongue and stroking hands. Then he’d entered him with a wet, thrusting cock, finally splintering desire and need into pulsing waves of release.

Their passion was hot, hard and devouring. For a time they could barely keep their hands off each other whenever they were together. They went out for several months—until the day Nate walked in on Airon grunting and pumping into a co-ed’s ass. Blinded by the pain of betrayal, he stumbled out and refused to see or respond to Airon’s entreaties to resume their relationship.

“I’m not into ménage. And no longer into you,” was his bitter response.

Two weeks later, Jack asked, “What’s up with you? You’ve lost weight, and you don’t seem interested in the frat or college anymore.” He touched Nate’s shoulder. “I’m worried about you, man. Are you sick? If you are, tell me.”

Sensing his secret was safe with Jack, Nate confided about

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Airon.

“I thought it might be something like that. Broken love affairs, especially a first one, always hurt like shit for the person who isn’t ready for it to end, but you can’t let a cruising bastard like that muddy up your life. He’s gonna finish school soon and move away.”

Nate hadn’t laughed in all those weeks after the betrayal, but now he threw back his head and roared. “Oh, Jack, I’m lolling in self-pity and pain, but I can count on you to always be so damned practical.”

Jack was not only practical, he was right. Airon graduated and disappeared from Nate’s life. What Nate didn’t confide to Jack was that in his wake he’d reinforced what Nate had always understood—some people were lovable and others were not. Nate fell in the latter category.

* * *

Tonight, the kiss of another stranger had evoked those long-buried memories. Pulling his thoughts back to the present, Nate smiled. He was very sure the Chippendale with the cognac eyes and the hot, hot bod hadn’t been Airon.

Beside him, Sheila Lambert, a tall, slender friend of Janet’s, the bride-to-be, stood a little unsteadily. “Party’s breaking up. It was great fun. Glad I didn’t get kissed by a pole dancer, but the Chippendale who bussed you shoulda kissed me. Ugh for you, huh?”

The hint of the dancer’s scotch lingered pleasantly on his lips. Nate’s smile was broad as he stood and stretched. “Too bad about that. We’ve all had a little too much to drink, and I’m sure he

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

meant to kiss you and misjudged the distance. That's why the kiss was such a quickie. He was in shock when he realized I was a man."

Actually, he didn't believe that for a minute, but he put an arm around her shoulder to steady her and guided her toward the door. "Come along, good-looking. We need our beauty rest before the big day tomorrow. You're maid of honor, and I'm going to be best man to my best friend when Jack marries the love of his life."

"Love of his life. Wish I had one—somebody big and broad like you. How about it—you and me a couple?" Sheila put her arm around his waist and leaned into him.

"You aren't coming on to me, are you, Miz Lambert?" he teased. "I don't have much time to think about things like hooking up. Helicopter logging's exhausting work, and it's hard to meet people in a forest."

"You betcha," she said, and winked.

He steadied her as they exited the club and climbed into one of the limos waiting to take them to the new magnificent M Resort Spa Casino just outside Vegas in Henderson.

Sheila pecked him on the cheek before she left the elevator on her floor. "Y'er a nice guy, Nath...aniel Marquette. Know that?"

"And you're a nice woman. Goodnight, Sheila." He hoped she wouldn't be hung over for the wedding.

As he exited on his floor, he heard, "Brother Nate!" and found himself enveloped in a strong hug.

"Matthew! How are you? I didn't know you were going to be here. It's great to see you."

And it *was* great. Matthew had joined Alpha Omega Chi when Nate was a junior and, because Nate had been way too serious in those days, he'd especially enjoyed the skinny guy's sense of

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

humor.

“You’ve filled out. It looks good on you,” Nate said.

“God, just look at you. All muscle and sinew.” Matthew turned to the tiny brunette accompanying him. He glanced down as he threaded his larger fingers through her smaller ones. His eyes were only for her, and she looked up at him with adoration and love. “Lorna, I’d like you to meet Nate Marquette, a frat brother. Nate, this is Lorna Durand, my honey.”

Nate hesitated as a wave of longing for someone with whom he could share that kind of look and touch rolled through him. He shook her hand, and as they walked to their rooms, he and Matthew caught up on their news.

“What in hell does a heli-logger do?” Matthew asked.

“I fly over densely forested areas where they can’t retrieve the logs they’ve cut any other way. A grappling hook on the end of a long line dangles from the helicopter and the men on the ground guide it to the waiting logs. I tighten the hook on the logs, then lift and fly them to the receiving grounds where I release the timbers. From there, they go by truck or river to the planing mills.”

“I teach high school drama, and you work in the woods. That’s not surprising.” He looked down at Lorna. “Nate was famous for guiding his group of pledges who were dropped off at night in the woods during hazing by using the stars as a compass back to the frat house.”

Nate felt himself blush. “I hope I’m more famous for eliminating that kind of dangerous stunt. In the dark, over uneven ground, anyone could be seriously hurt.”

“It’s good to see you again,” Matthew said. He and Lorna walked down to their rooms.

Inside the understated elegance of his room, Nate pulled off his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

clothes and stepped into a hot shower in a stall thankfully roomy enough for him to move. In less expensive hotels, they were often too small for comfort. He soaped up with some flowery-smelling stuff provided by the hotel. A woman would love it. He endured it.

As he scrubbed and shampooed his black hair, he puzzled once more over the masks on the Chippendales. Then his dick began to swell as his thoughts wandered once more to the saucy sway of a man's ass and the feel of that warm mouth on his lips when he'd been kissed. The ache in his long, thick cock was so urgent for release he thought he'd be dating himself tonight.

That Jack. He'd set the guy up to kiss him. Nate was still certain of it.

Clean and dry, he brushed and flossed his teeth and then stared at his face in the mirror. In the deep woods, he wore a full beard and mustache against the chill. He'd shaved for this event, and it didn't seem like his face because it had been so long since it was bare, but he looked clean and presentable.

Compared to the icy chill of oncoming winter in the Pacific Northwest, Las Vegas felt hot. In fact, too hot to sleep even in boxers. He crawled naked under the covers, ready to fall asleep with the memory and taste of that mouth on his, of the sudden liquid heat it brought. Then his hand found himself as it had had to do so often in the last two years.

* * *

It'd been foolish and risky, that kiss, the Chippendale thought. But a kick, too. Observing the audience from backstage while the women danced, he'd been drawn to the man dressed in black slacks and a white shirt, both made of silk, whose dark hair framed

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

an intelligent face with natural waves of curl. For all his quietness, the guest had given off a sense of latent strength and absolute maleness. One could imagine sinew and thick muscles rippling beneath the white silk when he moved.

He'd shown polite interest in the exotic dancers, but when the Chippendales ripped off their leathers and flaunted their packages, glints of gold had fired in brown eyes that flared briefly with sensuality and then dropped their gaze as if to guard against too much stimulation.

In that moment, the idea to taste him, to press and slide across those inviting lips had been born. The brief kiss had fulfilled its every promise.

Oh, yes, this man interested him very much.

CHAPTER 2

Cheer was the mood of the day as the members of the wedding party toured hotels and bet in some incredible casinos on the famous, four-mile stretch of Las Vegas Boulevard South known as The Strip. Nate enjoyed meeting new friends and reconnecting with old ones. Even Chuck Hillerman had arrived to be a groomsman. He was a nice guy and refusing to go Greek hadn't ruined any of his friendships.

"The dancing fountains in front of the Bellagio are unbelievable, aren't they?" Sheila said.

"Rising out of a blue lagoon into the hot desert air, just looking at them cools you off," Lorna added. "Matthew bought tickets for us to see *O, Cirque du Soleil's* show in the Bellagio. We can hardly wait. What about you, Nate?"

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Nate was leaving the cashier's window in the current casino. Answering Lorna's question, he waved dollar bills in the air and said, "I just won four-hundred dollars at blackjack. I'll buy lunch."

Over the squeals of the gals, Chuck said, "Keep your money. Someone's picking up the tab for all of us."

"Who?"

"Janet's parents, I guess. I don't really know. Jack signs the tabs."

"Then I guess we'd better pick a good place to eat. I don't mind walking away with my winnings," Nate said.

As everyone cheered at his good fortune, he realized how much he'd missed this kind of camaraderie among friends who shared his background. The all-too-familiar wave of loneliness swept through him, uninvited and unwelcome.

Working in the forests had its strong points and it suited him, but loggers could be a crude bunch of guys and he took a lot of ribbing whenever a new crew discovered he had a college degree. Sometimes the ribbing bordered on vicious, but physically he held his own if challenged. He'd won his share of arm wrestling bouts, kicked back shots of Jack Daniels with the roughest of them—always stopping before he had a buzz—and carried his share of work on the ground when necessary. It didn't take long for them to realize they didn't have jobs if the trees they cut didn't make it to market, and Nate Marquette air-lifted more logs in a day than any other pilot working. His helicopter skills earned their respect and the jibes dropped away.

However, if they'd learned or even suspected he was gay, he knew it could turn dangerous in an instant. He owned his heli business, and since this and his college background tended to separate him from the others, no one questioned why he didn't

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

form close relationships with anyone. Never one to be garrulous, he was friendly, but avoided redneck discussions about other races or “queers.” Only in the air did he feel completely safe and free.

Now the coconut smell of the sunscreen lavished over Sheila’s long, neatly proportioned body in its bikini drifted from her poolside *chaise longue* to his. He was glad she didn’t seem to be suffering the effects of over-imbibing last night.

“I hate weddings,” he confessed. His James Bond style boy-cut swimsuit had already dried in the desert air, but not before Sheila took an uninhibited and lengthy look at his crotch that made him uncomfortable.

Sheila turned on her side to face him, propping her head up with an arm bent at the elbow, her tangled, long blonde hair, which had dried rapidly in the heat, draped almost to the lounge. “You do? Oh, but they’re wonderful. Love is wonderful.”

“Love is wonderful, yes. Behind the scenes at a wedding isn’t. Each of my three sisters almost shattered into little pieces when she got married, and my mother was beside herself as they all worried something would go wrong—a corsage not ordered for a relative, the cake not there on time, the pianist arriving four-sheets-to-the-wind, the babysitter they’d forgotten to arrange for the children of those attending.”

Sheila was chuckling now. “I’d never thought of it in those terms.”

“I’ve never been part of one where it was clear sailing. I try to stick to receptions only if at all possible.” What he kept to himself was the thought that if you were gay and not living in one of the five states where same-sex marriage was legal, you didn’t have to worry about planning a wedding anyway. “Something’s wrong now. Watch Janet and Jack,” he said, nodding toward their friends.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Janet's face as she approached Jack was tightly drawn and her chin trembled. She was obviously fighting back tears.

Jack put an arm around her shoulder, leaned his head toward hers to listen, and then said something that made her smile. He hugged her.

Nate said, "See? Knowing Jack, I'm sure he said something practical to her, something that put the little dilemma into perspective."

Sheila sighed. "Janet's getting a great guy. He's getting a wonderful partner." She brightened. "Someday we will, too."

Wrong, Nate thought. Someday would never come for him. Seeing their happiness sent another unwanted pang of longing through him. If he let it, it could spoil his day, and he wasn't going to let it ruin something this important for him. He smiled at her.

"Look, the wedding planner and her crew are here. Doesn't that woman make you just cringe?" Sheila nodded toward the opposite side of the pool.

"Conference time, everyone!" Sybil Bryant's shrill voice rang out as she waved a hand, with one-inch acrylic nails polished a deep, almost black purple, toward a room at poolside.

"Do you get the clue she wants us to join her?" Nate asked.

Sheila laughed. Nate stood, threw his towel over his shoulder and gave her a hand up.

As they walked over to merge with the other members of the wedding party, he pondered the odd thing about this event. It was scheduled for five o'clock, but this morning all of the wedding attire, cosmetics and hair care items had been collected from them to be carefully labeled as to owner and taken to an undisclosed destination where they would dress. The wedding ceremony would happen there.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

It was strangely hush-hush. Earlier this morning, when the clothes were being rounded up, Nate had quietly taken a poll among them and no one had a clue as to where they were going.

Now they crowded into a stiflingly hot room, and Ms. Bryant gave them their instructions for reaching the wedding site. They were to travel in individuals cars, not limousines, and leave at different times from different areas of the hotel. “The rehearsal will be at three o’clock sharp. That should give you plenty of time afterwards to dress for the service. If you need assistance because you’ve forgotten something, lost a button, popped a zipper, or anything, just sing out and one of my crew will help.”

Nate was busy counting heads. He leaned over to whisper to Sheila, “Six women attendants, but only five men. Someone’s missing.”

She nodded. “The sixth man is Janet’s cousin. I think he lives nearby and will meet us at the wedding site.”

The meeting concluded, and as they walked out of the room, Sheila said, “I hate to leave this wonderful sun, but it’s time for me to shower and get ready to leave. I guess we’re riding together.”

“It’s only fitting, don’t you think—maid of honor and best man? We’re also in the first car. Meet you at the west entrance?”

“I’ll see you there.”

While he scrubbed sunscreen and chlorinated pool water off his body in the roomy shower, Nate enjoyed puzzling out the mystery before him. Everyone had assumed the wedding would be here where they were staying—the M Resort Spa Casino in Henderson, about ten miles south of Las Vegas. Now it was “no limos” and “individual cars leaving at different times from different exits”? That reeked of a ruse to throw off paparazzi to him. Nothing was a bigger giveaway to reporters that a famous person was traveling

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

somewhere than limousines, black Mercedes or a cavalcade of cars.

If some famous person would be at this wedding, Jack hadn't said anything to him about it. Nate stepped out of the shower and toweled off. Dropping the wet towel to the floor, he reached for his comb and pulled it through his thick, dark locks as his mind toyed with options.

* * *

Away from the artificial hustle and bustle of the The Strip, the soft tans and golds of the desert stretched open and glorious in the early afternoon light. Nate preferred the rich scent of pine and cedar, the lush greens of trees and undergrowth in the clean, crisp air of the forests, but he also appreciated the desert's beauty. Sometimes delicate, often harsh and unyielding, the contrast to the places where he worked and lived was marked.

The driver of the car he and Sheila shared dropped them off in front of a sprawling, older resort surrounded by desert and drove off to pick up more guests. Sybil waved them in from the entrance and handed them room card keys. "The rehearsal will be in the chapel, but we'll wait here for the others and all go in together. Right now, be sure your clothes are in your rooms."

Eventually, the group assembled inside a modest-sized chapel adjoining the resort. They stood in front of the altar. The minister, dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, chatted with Janet and Jack's parents. Nate assumed they were waiting for the last groomsman.

Without warning, the front doors flew open and a man Nate's age, dressed in thigh-hugging jeans, shirt, tie, and sport coat strode

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

in. His highlighted brown hair was styled with a brush of bangs across his forehead. Smiling, casually confident and sure of his welcome, the upbeat atmosphere in the chapel shot up a notch or two the minute the new man stepped through the doors. He brought with him a vital energy that radiated to the people around him.

Nate's chest tightened at the sensual awareness the man ignited in him.

Janet squealed and flew up the aisle to him. He scooped her up and swung her around, then extended a hand to Jack as he set her down before turning to greet their parents. Her face shone with pride and her eyes were damp with happy tears.

"Everyone, meet my cousin, Kevin Connolly, a very special guy who drove up from L.A. for our wedding."

A murmur passed through the group as she introduced him to her attendants, some of whom acted giddy when he shook their hands. The other groomsmen stared in astonishment, mouths open.

Nate realized he was missing something and leaned in to Sheila. "Obviously, he's related to Janet and is Jack's sixth attendant, but who is this guy?"

"My God, you don't recognize him?"

"No. I don't."

"He's the big star of the hit TV drama, *The Detective*."

Nate crossed his arms, feeling seriously out of the loop. "We don't watch much television in the deep woods. Reception's a bitch."

"He's just been named TV's sexiest man of the year by *People* magazine."

Sexy? Oh, he's that all right—the complete package from head to toe. Nate pulled a breath deep into his lungs. "Sexiest man, huh?"

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

“Isn’t he scrumptious?”

“I guess.” *Oh, my, yes.* Nate shrugged in an effort to appear casual, but quelling the sensual rumblings in his chest and gut was proving difficult.

And then the new man was there in front of him, and Jack was saying, “Kevin, this is Nate Marquette, a fraternity brother and my best man.”

Nate extended his hand. And looked into eyes the color of warm cognac.

The earth stood still.

“Nice to meet you,” Kevin said. His gaze flicked over Nate’s body and his eyes sparkled as his mouth curved in a way that not only deepened the many smile lines around his mouth but failed to fully disguise the humor he was enjoying at Nate’s reaction.

No wonder they’d worn masks. Those narrow strips of ribbon disguised a TV star—its sexiest man, no less—who danced as a Chippendale last night and kissed me. Just wait, Brother Jack. I’m gonna get you for sure.

Nate chuckled at Jack’s joke on him as he returned the star’s smile, gripped his hand firmly as he met his gaze straight on and said, “Likewise, I’m sure.”

Kevin must have gotten the message that Nate recognized him because his laugh was soft and low as he followed Jack to meet the next person.

Nate observed how Kevin’s easy humor soothed nerves and kept them all on track as they rehearsed. His place was to Nate’s left, and Nate thought Kevin’s body heat radiated to him even through the man’s jeans and sport coat.

* * *

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

When they assembled in the dressing room just before they stepped out with Jack to the front of the chapel for the ceremony, Nate fought to calm the tumult of his heart at the sight of TV's sexiest man in full tuxedo. Nate hated dressing up in binding formal wear, but Kevin wore it with an unconscious style and elegance. He was as at ease in it as he'd been taunting and flaunting in Chippendale trade dress.

But then Nate reminded himself Kevin was an actor, wasn't he? TV's best. Their sexiest. His heart turned over.

When Kevin lined up behind him, an utterly male scent and the faint hint of a sultry men's cologne sent a tremor through Nate.

Nate turned his head to whisper, "The real deal becomes you. But I rather enjoyed the abbreviated version."

His reward was a squeeze on one shoulder and another low laugh as they followed the groom into a chapel resplendent with the faint golden glow of hundreds of candles.

At the exact moment it was needed in the ceremony, Nate slipped the bride's ring into Jack's trembling hand, and before he knew it, they were in the banquet hall to form the receiving line with the new Mr. and Mrs. John William Sonderson.

Jack and Nate exchanged hugs. Nate bent down and kissed Janet's cheek. "You're a beautiful bride. Thanks for marrying Jack. He's a great guy."

Her hands closed on his shoulders as she stood on tiptoe and returned his kiss with a light touch. Under the candlelight, her eyes softened with happiness. "We need to find *you* somebody to love, Nate. It's wonderful."

"I'm sure it is, Janet." Then he stepped forward to brush his lips across Sheila's cheek. "Great job managing the bride's train and bouquet, maid of honor."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Kevin caught his cousin up in a hug, and everyone assumed their places in the receiving line. If anyone recognized TV's sexiest man, everyone was polite enough not to ruin Janet and Jack's day by clamoring for an autograph, and Kevin did nothing to call attention to himself.

At dinner, Nate toasted the groom, and Kevin the bride. Waiters set dinner plates filled with succulent, fragrant gourmet food in front of each guest.

Janet had seated Nate not only between two single women, but across from one as well. They were pretty and wholesome young women without artifice or guile, but he squirmed when the topic turned to how he'd be perfect on *The Bachelor*. He changed the subject as fast as a speeding bullet shot from a gun.

The bridesmaid's dresses were cut low, and his eyes widened as the busty gal on his right leaned in so close to speak to him that her right tit almost knocked over his water glass. He reached with his left hand and moved the crystal tumbler.

He looked up to see Kevin studying him from another table, an amused hint of a smile on his face. He winked. Nate shrugged and lifted his eyebrows. No doubt, the famous Mr. Connolly was having his own problems with fawning women.

Out of the corner of his eye, he observed the man for a while. Watched as he smiled and spoke, clearly entertaining those who shared his table. He seemed to be a very likeable guy. Nate certainly liked what he saw of him.

When Nate ordered drinks for the ladies, Kevin appeared at his side at the bar, one hot hip easing up against Nate's. Nate should have moved to give him more room, but he didn't want to give up the feel of that hip and thigh against his.

"Jack should've warned you what a dedicated matchmaker his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

bride is,” Kevin said. “I’m used to it and I’d apologize for her, but it looks like you’re holding your own. If she knew you had a honey somewhere, she’d leave you alone.”

“No honey anywhere, but Janet’s agenda isn’t a problem. I have married sisters, and I’m well aware this is a stars-in-your-eyes kind of day for brides. They’re overflowing with love for everyone, wanting everyone to share in it. With a television star here, I’m surprised any other man gets any attention.”

Kevin’s laugh was light and full of fun. “Oh, I think you’re getting your share, Mister Ruggedly Handsome. The thing about me is, I’m pretty safe. I don’t live here.”

Nate treated himself to the pleasure of looking so deep into those cognac-colored eyes that he saw glints of gold and brown among the amber. He smiled. “Neither do I.”

“Oh? Where do you live?”

As Nate explained, he watched the bartender scoop ice into a short, heavy glass, tip it slightly and pour dark amber liquid into it from a bottle labeled The Glenlivet. He slid the drink and a cocktail napkin over to Kevin.

Single malt scotch whisky. I was right on the money.

He stared at Kevin’s mouth, and a sudden urge to kiss him, to experience the swift, hard pressure and taste the whisky remains once again, not to mention finding out how thick and long the dick now hidden in his trousers would feel when aroused, set Nate’s senses spinning. He glanced up to find Kevin studying him, so he looked away and, with difficulty, reeled in his feelings. “When the weather’s impossible for heli-logging in Canada, Oregon or Washington, as it is now, I work for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in the San Bernardino mountains as vacation relief. That still puts me pretty much out of reach of any

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

woman here. Unless I choose to bridge the gap.”

“Smart man.” Kevin clapped him on the back and lifted his glass in salute.

The wedding cake was cut, the bride and groom fed it to each other and shared pieces with their guests. People tired of dancing and left the hardwood floor. The evening was drawing to a close.

The single women gathered for the tossing of the bridal bouquet, and Sheila caught it. She whooped and lifted it high, catching Nate’s eye as if to share the little triumph. He just hoped his friendliness toward her in their time together hadn’t planted any ideas in her head. If she asked, he didn’t plan to give her his number or request hers.

When it was time for the bachelors to gather, Nate stood as far behind the other men as he could. Kevin sat down at a table to observe. The rest of the guys, long time friends and relatives, watched John remove Janet’s white satin pump and slowly slide a wispy blue garter off her somewhat roundish but shapely leg to cheers and whistles.

Even for Nate, the slow, sensual slide of that bit of lace off a bride’s leg and the thought of sex that night for his friends, teased his dick and flooded him with a rush of happiness and love for them. Never mind the emptiness because there was no somebody for him to love.

John stood, turned his back to the knot of men, then flung the garter high and hard behind him.

The women squealed in anticipation as it made its way over male heads and beyond the reach of flailing hands to settle on Nate’s dark waves and drape over one eye. Irritated by the frilly garter and what it meant, he yanked it off, just as Matthew’s hand zeroed in to clamp down on it. Instead, a finger found its way into

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Nate's left eye.

"Oh, gosh. Sorry, man. Are you okay?"

His eye watered from the pain, and Nate covered it with one hand and tossed the ridiculous scrap to Matthew with the other. "Well, there went my good eye." Then, at the horror that crossed Matthew's face, he said, "Just kidding. It's okay. I'm fine."

"That's not fair, Nate," Janet called out. "It landed on *you*. You're the one destined to marry next, not Matthew."

Nate felt his face flush. "That's the tradition, but I'd say Matthew's really the one it was intended for. It would be a pity to waste whatever mystical powers it wields, wouldn't it?"

Everyone laughed because they knew he referred to the lithe Lorna, who'd gone out with Matthew for two years and had clung to his arm for most of the wedding celebration. They'd peered into each other's eyes, eyes as filled with stars for each other as if the wedding were theirs.

People, including a convinced Janet, applauded Nate's choice, and Matthew spun the garter around his index finger and pulled Lorna to his side for a kiss.

Kevin appeared with a linen dinner napkin he'd dipped in ice water and wrung out.

"Thanks," Nate said as he pressed the soothing cloth to his eye. "That feels good."

Jack came up and pulled him aside to check his eye. "I'll have Kevin take you to the emergency room. I'm sorry."

Nate shook his head. "I'm fine. Jack, you need to tell Janet about me. You really do. She surrounded me with women as if one of them might be a candidate for the position of wife of Nathaniel Marquette."

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, she does that kind of thing. I'll tell her,

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

but I can't guarantee she won't start introducing you to eligible men."

Nate, still holding the cloth to his eye, lowered his voice. "Speaking of which, you really threw me when you sent Kevin Connolly over to kiss me last night. You owe me for that one."

"I had nothing to do with that. It surprised me, too." A slow smile spread across his face. "He wouldn't be such a bad pick for you, though, would he?"

"A television star and the sexiest man? I think not. Even if he were gay. And don't you dare give Janet any ideas." As Jack turned to leave, Nate stopped him. "Who do I thank for all of this? You? Janet's parents? I've never been in a wedding where our tuxedo rentals, food, transportation and room expenses were gratis."

Jack hesitated, then continued to speak so only Nate would hear. "Janet's folks don't have that kind of money. Kevin paid for everything—her dress and veil, the wedding planner, the caterer, the nightclub. Every last thing—except the cruise we're going on. That's on my dollar. Kevin's parents died when he was little, and the Engvalds took him in. He and Janet are more like brother and sister than cousins, and it's money he's earned on the show. Don't tell the others. He doesn't want anyone to know. Are you sure you don't want to have that eye checked?"

His eye still hurt like hell, but Nate gave him a little push. "Go make love to your bride, Jack. Have a wonderful time on your honeymoon."

CHAPTER 3

Where's the nearest emergency room? Nate wondered. His eye, still red and tearing, hurt so much he didn't think he'd be able to sleep. His tuxedo and the black patent leather slippers that had painfully pinched his toes all evening had been returned to the wedding planner, and he stood dressed in brown cargo pants, a short-sleeved shirt, and the blessed freedom of flip-flops. His hand was poised over the phone to punch in the concierge's number when someone knocked on his door.

Kevin's face appeared in the peephole.

Nate opened the door with a rush of pleasure and dread. Despite the pain in his eye, he wasn't sure he could trust himself to be alone with the man without jumping his bones. Or at the least kissing him. Especially tonight with thoughts of wedding bells and

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

hot, urgent sex on his mind.

“Grab your room key card. I’m taking you to a doctor.”

Nate leaned against the open door. “Oh, sure. I can see the headlines—‘Paparazzi Storm Las Vegas ER.’”

“No, my man. I’m taking you to see the family ophthalmologist. He’s agreed to meet us in his office. Let’s go.”

Because he was worried about his eye, Nate didn’t hesitate to go with Kevin. “You’re on.”

He followed him out through lushly landscaped gardens behind the hotel and climbed into a silver metallic Toyota Prius that looked new.

Soon a middle-aged doctor in sports clothes had numbed and bathed his eye in antibiotic drops with gentle, skillful hands. The doctor pushed the slit lamp to the side after his exam and rose to pull a gauze patch from a drawer. He fit it over Nate’s eye and taped it.

“You have a small scratch on your cornea that’ll heal in a few days. It may hurt again once the anesthetic drops wear off, but this patch will help. When your eyeball moves, it rubs your lid over the scratch and that causes the pain. The patch will restrict its movement. Still, moving your open eye will make the sore one move a little despite the patch, so keep both eyes closed as much as possible tonight.” He pressed extra patches and a bottle of antibiotic eye drops into Nate’s hand.

“I really appreciate this, Doctor Andrews. I wasn’t sure I could get through the night.”

With only one good eye, he discovered his depth perception had changed and he had to think how to maneuver his body into the Prius. Inside, he closed his eyes and laid back against the headrest, reveling in the absence of pain. Just as he realized he

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

hadn't fastened the seat belt, Kevin leaned in, pulled it across his hipbones just above his dick and clicked it into the lock. The back of Kevin's fingers brushed across his belly as they held the metal end of the strap. Nate looked down on Kevin's head, enjoying the golden highlights in his brown hair as the fresh scent of his shampoo filtered up to him.

"Thanks," he said, closing his eyes again and enjoying what he'd felt, seen and smelled of this beautiful guy.

It wasn't long before he felt the car stop, and it wasn't for a street light. Kevin stepped out of the car and opened Nate's door before he could even reach for the handle. Reaching across Nate, he released the lap belt. Nate felt disappointed there was no stimulating brush of fingers this time, nothing to stir his sensual awareness.

"This isn't the M," Nate said as he looked around.

"It's my place."

"But—"

"Janet and Jack would be very unhappy if I left you alone in a hotel room tonight. Remember, you're the guest wounded at their wedding. What would you do if your eye took a turn for the worse and you needed to see the doctor again? No, you're staying with me."

Low garden lights lined the walkway to the double front doors of an older home. Nate recognized the sweet scent of night blooming jasmine coming from some low growing shrubs. Kevin inserted his key in the front lock before Nate could protest and held the door open while he disarmed the alarm.

Inside, he said, "If you'd like to wash up, the guest room and bath are at the end of this hall. I keep nightwear, swimsuits, aspirin, Tums and toiletries there."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Trying not to move his eyes too much, Nate walked down the hall and emptied his straining bladder. As a hedge against the possible return of pain, he gratefully popped two aspirins he found in the medicine cabinet and washed them down with a glass of water. As he started back, Kevin waved to him from the family room. Nate sank into an overstuffed chair upholstered in butter-soft brown leather and closed his eyes. "I think you just saved my life."

Kevin's laughter rolled over him, familiar and playful. "What would you like to drink?"

He selected wine, and Kevin brought a plate of small crackers and cheeses.

Between sips, Nate said, "I have to confess I had no idea who you were when you burst into the chapel this afternoon. The girls were practically passing out over you, the guys were staring with their mouths open like fish out of water, and I'd never heard of you."

"You didn't know who I was? Oh, how rich! I love it! So much for my Hollywood ego."

"TV reception, if and when we get it, is lousy in the Pacific Northwest's forests, so I don't watch much when it does come through." He switched subjects. "You know, I'd seen the Chippendales perform live, but never with masks. That puzzled me. Then there was the change of resorts for the wedding and traveling in separate cars. Even though Jack hadn't said anything to me, I figured someone famous would be at the wedding. Of course, I didn't know I was going to meet TV's biggest star, its *sexiest* star."

Kevin laughed so hard he choked on his wine.

"How did you make it here without setting off any rogue photographers?" Nate asked when Kevin had recovered his breath.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

"I skipped out on my handler and drove my own car, which as you see doesn't telegraph 'star power' like Cruise's Bugatti would. This house is in my mother's maiden name. After I lost my parents in a plane crash and Janet's parents took me in, they continued to pay the taxes on the home and kept it up as my legacy from my folks. So far, reporters haven't discovered it. Consequently, there's never a freelancer camped out just hoping I'll show up. At some point, the press'll learn it's mine, and one more bit of my privacy will be invaded."

Nate nodded, wondering what other bit of privacy Kevin might be protecting. Was it perhaps that TV's sexiest man, playing a straight hero, was really gay? His belly clinched with the hope he was. Nate swirled the last of the rose-colored liquid in his glass as he decided whether or not he had the nerve to say something. Finally making his decision, he looked into Kevin's eyes with his one good one. "Jack can be quite a tease. I thought Jack set you up to kiss me. He says he didn't."

Kevin looked down at his glass. "He's right. It was my own impromptu idea after watching you from backstage. The guys told me they often buss some of the guys in a party such as that. I chose you."

He'd watched him from backstage and "chosen him," had he? *Interesting.* Nate waited, breath held in hopes Kevin would say more. When he didn't, Nate finished his wine and stood. "It's been a huge day. Old friends and forgotten memories, new friends, tears of happiness, fun and raw emotion. It's been wonderful, but I'm bushed. Thanks to you this thing with my eye hasn't ruined a terrific weekend, but I think I'll turn in."

"I'm ready for that, too."

As Nate walked down the hall, Kevin stood in the family room

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

doorway, wine in one hand, and leaned on the arm resting above his head on the doorjamb. Nate sensed he was watching, so he stopped at the guest room door and turned.

Kevin said, "Hit number one on the intercom if you want something. Promise you'll buzz if you need anything?"

"Don't worry. If my eye acts up, I don't intend to be a martyr. Thanks again."

"Sleep well," Kevin said in a soft voice, still leaning against the doorjamb.

Nate had wished very much that Kevin would join him to slip into bed with him and repeat that kiss. A vision of those leathers draped over an ass that sent out an invitation as it walked away popped into his mind.

Next time, Nate wouldn't let him get away.

Nate brushed his teeth with his eyes closed. Too tired to shower, and not wanting to get water on his eye patch, he stripped and fell into bed. He was asleep almost as soon as he'd pulled up the sheet.

The helicopter strained as the twenty logs it lifted snagged in the treetops. Too many logs, too many. He tried to cry out a warning, but he had no voice. The grappling line tightened because it couldn't move, and the heli spun uncontrollably as the line pulled it down toward the trees. Sheila was at the controls. Jack waved down at Nate. A sense of doom flooded Nate and he moaned. Looking up, he saw a surface-to-air missile streaking toward the heli, felt the flame and pain as it rocked and disintegrated into starburst.

Anguished, he cried out.

* * *

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Kevin watched Nate disappear into the guest room and ached. It took all his self-control not to follow, but he managed. Fear aided in controlling his urges. He knew the cost to his career if it were known he was gay, and although Jack trusted Nate implicitly, he was still a semi-stranger to Kevin. Although he thought Nate was gay, he couldn't be sure. Not yet at least.

Kevin had been enormously upset when Matthew's hand had struck Nate in the eye. Talk about a career killer. Since he was the only heli pilot in his small business, losing sight in one eye would probably ruin him. It would be as bad as Kevin losing his voice. Or being outed, he thought in frustration.

So tonight he'd let Nate walk alone to the guest room. But worry that Nate might need him made it difficult to drift off. Sleeping at half-alert, Kevin bolted out of bed when he heard Nate moan and cry out. Fear his injured eye needed immediate attention triggered a rush from Kevin's adrenals that gave him an instant hard-on inside his thigh-length pajamas. He pushed it down, but unless it poked out the front opening, he couldn't be bothered to do more than that. It was more important to get to Nate fast.

The guest room door stood ajar, and Kevin didn't want to startle Nate by bounding in like a knight on a white charger, so he stuck his head in the room and whispered, "Nate, are you okay?"

Silver moonlight spilled into the room, caressing the tousled mat of Nate's dark hair and creating velvet shadows and light on the angles of his frowning face. He moaned again as he wrestled with the tangle of covers trapping him. Finally, he freed himself, sat up and pushed the linens down. They pooled low in his lap, exposing one hip.

Kevin's breathing scrambled at the sight of the naked man in his bed. This was where he'd wanted to be—nude in bed with

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Nate, bathed in moonlight. Instead, only hours ago he'd tamped down the desire to do this when he'd had a chance to join him. If Nate wasn't gay, any approach on his part could be disastrous, even if Nate's preferences included women as well as men. So he'd watched him walk alone to the guest room while his heart ached and his penis surged into a cock ready for sex.

Nate had seen Kevin's bare chest and legs, plus the promise of his cock and balls in the sequined thong. Now Kevin stared at the man in the moonlight, at corded biceps and forearms larger and stronger than most men's; at dark nipples against creamy skin; and a silken swath of hair like an artist's black wash across a broad chest and down to a masculine tangle of hair at the base of Nate's relaxed dick.

Kevin's cock throbbed with want. If the call to action earlier hadn't triggered an erection, what he was seeing now certainly would.

He wanted this fascinating man. Had wanted him from the moment he'd watched from backstage and Nate had seemed uninterested in the sexy female performers. When Kevin danced with the Chippendales and guessed their moves had triggered an erection in Nate, he'd been even more interested.

Kevin hadn't known he was Jack's best man then. He'd kissed him on impulse. Sparked by his need to touch and taste the attractive man, he'd used the cover of other dancers bussing some of the men. He'd shifted his hips as he walked away with his leathers covering his ass, but Nate hadn't known who he was and couldn't have taken him up on the invitation. Which was probably a very good thing. The freedom from scrutiny Kevin was experiencing because he'd come here unnoticed had gone to his head. His actions risked exposing that he was at the wrong time

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

and place.

At dinner, he'd been amused at Nate's polite responses to the women Janet had clustered around him, women who at the time were probably imagining what it would be like to let the gorgeous Nate into their panties.

Later, Kevin enjoyed the repartee related to his kiss and Nate's comment about his tux and the dancers' trade dress. Right now Kevin was wondering how good his orgasm would be if Nate reached into his pjs and played with what was as hard as a board and as damp as early morning dew.

Nate didn't seem to be fully awake yet and his face was lined with pain. Stepping into the room and approaching the bed, he shook Nate's shoulder and discovered fine sweat covered it. "It's Kevin, Nate. Is your eye hurting? Do I need to call the doctor again?"

Nate ran his hands through his hair, causing the large muscles in his chest to ripple and flex and his relaxed dick to shift under the linens. Kevin fought back a moan of pleasure and hunger.

When Nate reached for his eye patch as if to pull it off, Kevin caught his arm. "No, man. You've got to keep that on. You were having a nightmare. Does your eye hurt?"

"Hi." It came out slowly. First, Nate struggled to open his eye and awaken fully. Now, focusing on Kevin's face, he shook his head slightly, as if testing the degree of pain. "My eye's uncomfortable, but I'm not in serious pain. It's the patch that's driving me crazy. Plus, I had a horrible dream—probably brought on because I was tangled up in the covers and am way too hot. Did I wake you?"

Nate's glance dropped to Kevin's crotch, taking in the evidence of the stiff rod threatening to pierce through the cloth. After a long

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

pause, he looked into Kevin's eyes. "I see I did. I startled you into thinking it was an emergency. I'm sorry."

Kevin turned away, feeling foolish that he'd let his emotions hold onto the erection triggered originally by his fear for Nate's eye.

He felt Nate's hand on his hip.

"Don't go." Nate's voice was husky. "I like what I see. And there's only tonight."

The idea Nate found him attractive sent a torrent of happiness through Kevin, and his resolve to leave weakened with Nate's words. He was right. They only had tonight and then they'd go their separate ways.

Nate slid his hands slowly up and down Kevin's back, stopping at the elastic waistband. "You're so beautifully tan. You've been in the California sunshine while I'm pale from working in the helicopter or in shady forests."

"Creamy, untanned skin suits your black hair. I love it. Especially in this silvery moonlight." Kevin's voice was as hoarse as Nate's. His mind silently begged Nate to slide his hands under the cloth and put them on his ass, then to search out all the sensitive places that would ignite his desire to a brilliant flame. Right now he thought he might die unless Nate did. "Keep that up and my cock's never going to go down."

"I can think of several ways to make it do that."

As images of the ways sprang to Kevin's mind, his fully aroused cock jumped and he sucked in air between his slightly open teeth.

Nate's hands continued to caress and beguile from nape to elastic. Next they skimmed past the top of the pajamas and settled on Kevin's firm cheeks. "I melted inside like butter because you

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

cared about my injury, and I love knowing how your fear for me gave you an erection only minutes ago. You turned me on when you danced as a Chippendale, and I fought to bring my cock under control. But then you kissed me and it threatened to get big again. I fell asleep that night with my hand on a full cock and the feel and taste of your mouth on mine. I can even tell you what you had to drink that night.”

“The Glenlivet,” Kevin said.

“Single malt. Ever since your hand cradled my neck to kiss me, whenever you’ve been near me, I imagine I feel your heat soaking into me, penetrating the thick denim of your jeans and mine, making my pucker tingle and my balls thicken. Your saucy ass invited me for sex when you walked away with your leathers tossed over it, but I wasn’t sure if that was a real invitation or a tease. If it was real, I wouldn’t have known who you were or how to get in touch with you that night.”

Kevin turned slowly, no longer concerned about the boner jutting toward Nate, and which had now found the slit in his pajamas and poked through. “The moment Jack introduced us, I realized you knew I was the one who’d kissed you. How?”

“Your eyes. I noticed your sexy cognac-colored eyes shining through the slits in the mask. When I looked into them again, it took my breath away. Excitement surged through my belly and for an instant everyone else faded away and we were the only ones in the room.”

Kevin knelt with one knee on the bed and ran a hand down the sensitive inner side of Nate’s arm. Then he lifted Nate’s hand and pressed his lips to the hot, hammering pulse he found there. He licked the palm and took his time sliding his tongue between each finger, like a cock gliding into a manhole.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Nate went very silent beneath his touch, but his breath came in short, frequent bursts.

Kevin threaded his fingers through the tousled locks he'd longed to touch. The strands filtering through his fingers were so silken he leaned down to let them slide across his face. Their faint fragrant scent heightened his senses. He murmured, "If you hadn't recognized me, I wasn't sure how to approach you. I've craved having sex with you ever since I suspected that, like me, you were only interested in men. I danced to you, you know. It's a wonder I didn't get a hard-on when I did."

Nate closed his uninjured eye, and Kevin surrounded his face with his hands as he pressed his lips gently over it. He reveled in the smooth texture of Nate's skin as he tasted and kissed his temples and cheeks before nipping his upper lip and then the lower one, slipping his tongue along its inner moistness before whispering against the warm, inviting mouth, "If I'm not right about you, I'm making a serious mistake."

"No mistake. I've never been interested in women, not even enough to experiment." Nate reached under the legs of Kevin's pajamas and Kevin felt the heat of his hands on his butt. Nate squeezed in a gentle rhythm belying the strength in his hands. "For an actor, you've got an ass that's not only sexy, it's like iron."

Kevin's heartbeats skittered as his hunger for the powerful man rose like high tide on the sands outside his Malibu home. "I work out a lot. Your mouth has tantalized me ever since that first kiss." He returned to Nate's lips, brushing his mouth over them again and again. When he finally took his mouth fully, Nate groaned and opened to him without urging. Kevin felt him tremble as their tongues touched with deepening intimacy. He drank hungrily from those lips, his thirst not yet satisfied when he ended the kiss and

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

closed his lips on the wildly beating pulse in Nate's throat.

Nate shifted and pushed the bed linens down to mid-thigh, then took Kevin's hand and let him know that more than Nate's heart was responding to what their mouths were engaged in.

Kevin's hand found a velvety, pulsating cock as firm and full as his own. Only a few strokes and it would explode, but his would blow as well and it would be over. As much as he wanted that to happen, he also wanted to prolong their first time together. He released the throbbing cock and whispered, "Not yet."

When his teeth found the nipples surrounded by the soft dark pelt, he teased them to life. They hardened to marble peaks on the ripped pecs, and he felt his own nipples pebble in response without having been touched.

Nate moaned. He released Kevin's ass cheeks and reached in front to tug free the snap on his pajamas.

Kevin paused long enough to push the pajamas down and step free of them before he returned to exploring the dips and curves of Nate's body.

With a cry from deep in his throat, Nate lay back and pulled Kevin on top of him.

CHAPTER 4

The warm, wonderful weight of Kevin's body on his caused everything in Nate's world to shift and change. He was wanted, and the man who wanted and cared for him was, unbelievably, Kevin Connolly. The empty space inside Nate filled and settled. He shut away the reality that it was temporary. It'd been too long since he'd risked sex with a man. Here it was safe for both of them. Maybe they only had tonight, as he'd said, but with this man of the smoldering eyes, it would be good. And it might have to last Nate forever.

They shifted so their cocks were side by side, pointed toward their navels, the sensitive underlips snug against the other's belly. Kevin moved, and Nate groaned as his prick rubbed against Nate's. He couldn't get enough of Kevin. It all felt so right—the kisses,

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

running his hands over narrow hips and skimming the hot, smooth skin of Kevin's body. Even the absence of body hair where he'd shaved in order to dance and then the thick thatch in his groin tangling with Nate's as they took their pleasure in each other seemed right.

Excitement ruffled through Nate, building toward that moment when his balls would tighten and the shudders begin low in his spine as his release pulsed through his cock and spasms shot through his entire body. Eager to bring his lover with him, he slid his hands up Kevin's inner thighs to fondle his cool sac and finger the sensitive tissue beyond it. Kevin slid his legs slightly apart and let Nate circle his pucker and toy with this muscular gateway.

When Nate licked one of his fingers to lubricate it and slipped the tip gently into the hole, Kevin's kiss suddenly turned ravaging. The tremors building in his body telegraphed through to Nate's, who captured his mouth no-holds-barred.

Kevin rolled off, and Nate turned toward him.

"Wait," Kevin said as he reached across Nate and removed a tube of cream from the bedside stand. "Here." He squeezed a dollop of the warm substance into Nate's trembling hand and then onto his.

Under Kevin's ministrations, Nate felt his dick grow warm and slick. He rubbed the cream onto Kevin, heard his breathing grow faster and felt him squirm. The frantic need to find release caused their hands to caress each other in the age-old glide.

An electrical charge sprinted through Nate as every nerve alerted, sending him on a sensual roller coaster that rocketed faster and faster until he'd reached the pinnacle. Pleasure erupted in a shower of stars just as his cock exploded into Kevin's hand.

He felt Kevin's body stiffen and then he pumped hard into

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Nate's hand, body straining, cock pulsing as jism spurted.

The fireworks ended. Heart and breathing rates subsided, returning to normal. Their energy depleted, complete relaxation enveloped them. Sated, they slowly slid into sleep.

Nate awakened to find his hand in a basin of warm water and Kevin's head bent over him as he cleaned cum from his hand. Nate sat up and took over, washing both hands and drying them on a snow-white hand towel.

* * *

Kevin brushed his lips across Nate's. In the aftermath of climaxing, there was nothing sexual in the kiss. "I knew it would be good with you. It's crazy. I don't remember having as much feeling for another man as I have for you, and yet we've only just met. Can you explain it?"

"No, but it's the same for me," Nate said as a well of warmth sprang up inside him. He drew Kevin into his arms and held him for a long time.

They slept again.

Dawn hinted, brushing the dark desert with coral and gold, when Nate woke again. Slipping out of bed, he removed the offending patch, used the drops and applied a new one. When he returned to bed, Kevin still slept, his back to Nate. Nate enjoyed looking at the long curve of his spine and the tight butt where it ended. There were other men more handsome than Kevin Connolly, but when you put the whole package together, there was a presence, a charm about him that made him seem more than the individual parts. If he was also a superb actor, it was no wonder his show was at the top of the game. But here, curled on his side and

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

sleeping, TV's sexiest man looked vulnerable, and that vulnerability heightened his appeal for Nate. Unable to resist, as lightly as a butterfly sipping nectar so as not to disturb him, he kissed the highlighted brown locks.

* * *

There was no sign of Kevin when he awakened again. It made little sense that he should feel awkward after the night's passion, but he did. And it was a little late to be wondering where things between them would go from here. Since showering was out because of his eye, he drew a bath.

"Coffee's served," he heard Kevin call from outside the door.

Clean and dry, he wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped into the room. Coffee, cream and sugar in white porcelain containers on a white tray were waiting on a table in front of the window. Kevin stood beside it, arms folded, facing him full frontal, buck naked, and completely at ease in his nudity.

Nate gasped at the sight of the complete body, something he'd wanted to see from the moment Kevin had burst onto the stage that first night. It didn't disappoint.

"Hey," Kevin said, "what's with the towel?" He walked toward Nate and captured his mouth.

Nate returned the kiss hungrily, but, suddenly unsure of himself, only his lips touched Kevin.

Kevin drew back, smiling a teasing smile. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Nate laughed, but before he could speak, he felt a tug on the towel and it dropped to his feet.

Kevin backed up several steps and looked. The cognac eyes

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

held him captive as he said, “I like what I see.”

As his own words from the night before filtered through to Nate, his groin sprang to life.

Kevin took his own dick in hand and flipped it at Nate as he danced sensual Chippendale steps back to him.

Nate watched the cock lengthen and thicken with every step. The thrill of anticipation caused his own to weep, and it took every ounce of control he had to enjoy the moment and not climax right then and there. He wrapped his arms around Kevin, locking their bodies tight together. His nip on Kevin’s shoulder left marks. When they parted, Kevin would carry a reminder of their lovemaking.

“I just bathed,” Nate said as he released the strong shoulder.

“So? You’ll bathe again. This time with me in the master bath.” Kevin’s kiss was hard and greedy, filled with sexual hunger, blotting out everything but the hot response of his mouth and hands on Nate’s body.

CHAPTER 5

They'd later bathed in a huge sunken tub in the master suite, scrubbing each other and enjoying the sight of each other's bodies. Too satiated for another round of sex, they were out now and dressed, eating French toast, bacon and freshly squeezed orange juice they'd prepared together in companionable silence.

Nate thought about scientists saying sensual attraction was mostly chemical, and he believed it. He had no other explanation for whatever there was between Kevin and him that had pulled them together like volcanic magnets even before they'd begun to know one another.

His eye was less painful, and he thanked Kevin again. He was just noticing how Kevin smothered his toast in syrup while he preferred only butter on his when Kevin said, "When do you have

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

to check out?”

Back to reality after this wonderful idyll, Nate thought about it. “Noon. I need to get going soon.”

“I want to drive you to the airport, but I hope you understand why that isn’t possible. Is it okay if I drop you off where I picked you up in the back of the hotel? That seems terrible, I know, and I’m not happy about it but...”

“Lord, Kevin, I don’t want the paparazzi to spot you any more than you do. Of course, it’s okay.” And it was. Still, he fought to dispel the sudden sensation that, despite the nice setting and the man, the sex had been a tawdry one-night-stand. The ghost of those first days with Airon clouded the back of his mind and turned the taste in his mouth to bitter herbs.

Maybe Kevin had had the same feeling because his face was serious as he spoke. “I want to see you again. I’d like to get to know you better. Do you want to see me?”

Relief rushed through Nate and the memory of Airon’s betrayal fled. Maybe it wasn’t a one-night fling after all. “Of course, I do.”

“Where can I find you?”

“I’ll be staying in Fawnskin. On the far side of Big Bear Lake. I’m assigned to the fire station there.” He rose and pulled a business card for Marquette’s Heli-Logging Service in Seattle out of his wallet. “If you have a pen, I’ll write down my Fawnskin address and my cell phone number on the back. Service is tricky in the mountains. Cells don’t work driving up or down, only on top in the villages, and I’ll be doing things away from the station. If I’m out of range, leave a message. Is there a way I can return your call?”

Kevin shook his head. “Too many ways to slip up. If the reporters find out about us, it’ll be as bad for you as it would be for

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

me. You can't begin to imagine what that means. I have to deal with them almost every time I step out of the house, and I want to protect you from that. Protect both of us."

"That works for me."

When it was time to leave, they embraced at the door, and Nate let the feel of the strong body and the scent that was uniquely Kevin soak into him. Who knew when he would be in his arms again? Finally, they released each other and Nate said, "Thanks again for taking me to the doctor and for everything you did for Janet's wedding. Jack told me. He asked me not to mention it to anyone else, so I didn't, but you're one thoughtful guy."

"She and her parents deserved it. As for the eye thing, you needed me...and I needed you." Kevin ran his thumb one last time over Nate's lips before setting the alarm. He opened the door. "After you."

On the drive to the M, Kevin asked Nate what he'd be doing in Fawnskin.

"A little of everything. The firefighters are also paramedics. We respond to medical calls in the area, inspect forestry efforts at fire suppression and supervise some of the inmates who clear brush and keep the fire roads open for us. I'm qualified to fly air tankers and Hueys, so if there's a fire anywhere they're needed, that's what I'm assigned to do."

"And I'm just a dumb actor. How pathetic that makes me feel!"

Nate sensed Kevin wasn't joking. He no doubt made more in a month than Nate would make in a lifetime, but that would add the factor of guilt to how shallow he believed his life was. "Listen up. Taking people's minds off their troubles by losing themselves in a make-believe world is important. Being the best you can be at your work is a major thing, and providing a perfect wedding for people

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

you love with the money you've earned using your acting skills is beautiful and unselfish.

"I wouldn't put it past you to be supporting various charities you consider meaningful. Never think of yourself as *only* being an actor. Remember, it would be a dull existence if we were all firefighters and heli-loggers."

Kevin laughed. "I admit you've got something there. Thanks for the pep talk."

When he pulled up behind the hotel, he reached for Nate's thigh and squeezed it. "I'd rather be kissing you, but this will have to do."

"I know the feeling." Kevin's hand on him was as thrilling as it had been the first time he'd touched Nate. Nate squeezed Kevin's thigh in return.

"I'll call you," Kevin said. "Damn, but I'm going to miss you."

"I'll keep checking my cell phone. Remember, I appreciate everything you've done." *Especially for sharing yourself as well as your body with me.*

Nate slid out of the car and walked to the gates of the M, hearing the quiet purr as Kevin's Prius motored away. He walked through the gates and into gardens where green grass and bright blossoms added color and sweet scents under a brilliant desert sun, but he was only vaguely aware of the loveliness because his thoughts turned inward to the moments of sexual ecstasies with Kevin.

He entered the M without looking back.

* * *

Kevin had only been home a few hours when his doorbell

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

chimed over and over as someone kept punching on the button outside. Through the peephole, he spotted Bunny Semple, his agent, rocking impatiently on his heels, then reaching out to hit the button again.

Bracing himself for Semple's reaction, he opened the door and waved him in. "Hi, Bunny. How're things?"

The short man who stepped inside had thinning blond hair and was so revved up Kevin expected him to explode at any minute.

In typical Semple fashion, Bunny's words scrambled over themselves trying to get out. "Where in hell have you been? I've been calling for days without a response from your cell or your pager. I even drove by here because I was scared shitless something had happened to you. It was only because one of your cars was gone that I didn't call the police and report you missing. Thank God, you weren't seriously ill or dead, but you're making me lose hair over this. The attorneys have negotiated your new contract. They're waiting for your signature! And I'm pulling together a deal for you to do a Prius commercial."

Kevin rolled his eyes and chuckled. It was typical of Bunny to go ballistic over small things. He'd ignite if he knew what Kevin had been doing with a man named Nate out in the desert. Kevin had returned a day later from the wedding festivities than he'd planned because he'd wanted to spend as much time alone with Nate as possible.

He put an arm around the smaller man's shoulder because he understood his dilemma. If Kevin wasn't pulling in the big bucks, Bunny's income would fall significantly, despite having a few other clients in the business. He'd been a good agent, so Kevin never got riled over his little tantrums.

"Cool it, my man. I appreciate your concern for my safety, but

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

you know we never sign contracts over the weekend, and I'm here now. We have a read-through tomorrow for the show, so I'll sign it the next day. Actually, the important thing is we know they haven't cancelled the show. Or me. Tell you what—I'll cook dinner and you can spell out the Toyota deal. How does that sound? But, Bunny, your hair loss isn't my problem."

"Well, maybe not the falling out, but I'm sure worrying over you is turning it white."

"I doubt that very much." Kevin smiled at him. "You're hopeless." The offer of food and a little wine, combined with talking over a new deal, was all it took to soothe Bunny's ravaging beast.

After they'd eaten and Bunny had left, Kevin paced restlessly. He was tired, but knew he couldn't rest. It finally came to him that he needed to hear Nate's voice. Surely he'd reached Fawnskin by now. On the way home, Kevin had stopped to purchase a disposable cell phone to keep his calls to his new lover private and untraceable.

He pulled the Marquette Heli-Logging business card out and dialed the number on the back, but an automated voice told him the party he was calling wasn't available at that time. It provided instructions on how to leave a voice message, and he did, despite knowing he wouldn't hear back because he'd blocked his number to outsiders. He hoped Nate needed to hear his voice as much as he needed the sound of Nate's.

"Hi. It's me. Sorry I missed you. It would have been nice to hear your voice. I'm just checking to be sure you got home all right after the wedding. It was quite a celebration, wasn't it? I'll try to reach you tomorrow about this time."

It was an innocuous message, he thought. If Nate didn't

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

immediately recognize him by his voice, the message would identify Kevin only to Nate.

Unfortunately, spending long hours on the show and squeezing in time to do the commercial would extend his workweek even more. And they were shooting a couple of shows out of state and one overseas. He sighed. It was going to be hard to steal away and physically connect with Nate. Now it seemed it was going to be difficult even to hear his voice.

Am I crazy to try hooking up with a man who, at his closest, lives two hours away? Come spring, he'll move into the Pacific Northwest or Canada and that'll be worse.

As he pondered his situation, another thought tripped into his mind: Come spring, is it? Working in this fickle business, where will I be come spring?

The image of the man with the expressive brown-and-gold eyes, the clean scent of his skin and the mating of their hardened nipples and loaded cocks as he'd lain on top of Nate sprang to mind. It wasn't only the ecstasy of sex with him—although that was a hell of a lot of the connection he felt with him—it was the easy grace with which Nate moved for a big man, and the quick mind and the subtle exchange of humorous quips. A paramedic, firefighter, pilot and businessman? He was incredible.

And I'm just a damned actor, no matter Nate's pep talk. Kevin sank down on one of the couches to run his hands over his face and massage his tired temples. It was okay for straight males to play the role of gays, but the heavens would explode if people knew a gay played a heterosexual romantic lead such as his. Of course, years ago Rock Hudson had done it successfully in the movies. Although some in Hollywood had suspected his true sexual orientation, it was only after Hudson's death from a newly

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

discovered disease called AIDS that the public knew he'd been homosexual. Many people still refused to believe he'd been gay.

I deserve a private personal life and someone to love, don't I? A long sigh escaped Kevin. Considering who I am and the way things are in the business I work in, maybe not.

He rose and went into the bedroom where he undressed for bed. *I need to get one of the new HIV self-test kits before I see Nate again. Condoms, too.* He smiled. *Flavored condoms.*

* * *

Nate retrieved his car from long-term parking at Ontario Airport in California, and began the ninety-minute drive to Fawnskin. The fun and excitement of the weekend, including the great sex, was still with him, but he'd reserve thinking about the details of the interlude with Kevin until he'd reached his cabin. Otherwise, visions of them naked, cocks filled and ready, or cooking French toast and frying bacon together might cause him to lose concentration and sail off the edge of the mountain on one of its many treacherous curves.

As soon as he started up into the national forest, he rolled the window down and let the clean scent of pine fill the car. He loved the woods and couldn't imagine ever living in a city like Las Vegas or Los Angeles. Contentment settled through him. He felt like the Snow Rock doves trained to return to their home just like homing pigeons. The pigeons were used to send secret messages back to British Intelligence in World War II.

Before leaving Las Vegas, he'd arranged for the maid service to open up and clean. He'd also placed an order with the local market. When he opened the door, the big house had not only been

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

aired out in preparation for his return, he had a small supply of food in the refrigerator, freezer, and on the sideboard. When he was on duty, he'd eat and sleep in the firehouse with the other firefighters, but it was always good to have a little food in his home here.

Year 'round he kept clothes here so he'd have fewer things to haul with him when he arrived each winter. Now he unpacked his suitcases, shook out and hung up what he'd brought. He carried the dirty clothes to the small unit where the washer was above the dryer. He'd never regretted splurging on the convenience. It was worth it not to have to travel around the lake to Big Bear to launder his clothes.

Drought had held California in thrall for several years, and he noticed the dryness of the ground even here in the mountains in winter. He was thirsty, and the tap water up here was clean and sweet. Well water. He drew a tall glass and drank until he'd slaked his thirst. Then he sat down at the small kitchen table and pulled out his cell phone. "No messages." He couldn't stop the wave of disappointment rolling through him.

How many times had a guy said, "I'll call you," and Nate never heard from him again? *Don't think about it or you'll drive yourself crazy. Concentrate on your job. If he doesn't call, he doesn't call.*

Checking his watch, he knew his parents would still be up and, needing to call someone, he punched in their number to check on how they were and let them know he'd reached Fawnskin and was okay. They both adored Jack, and his mom was eager for news of the wedding.

He ended his call with, "I love you two," and as he replaced the receiver he wondered, as he had so often during his life, why he was the only child of the four his mother had delivered who was

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

gay. He was one lucky guy—his parents understood the meaning of unconditional love. When he'd come out to them, there had been shock and confusion until they'd adjusted to the idea, but there had always been love and acceptance. Always.

The following morning, he dispensed with the patch over the now comfortable eye and drove to the station house. The smell of bacon frying and biscuits baking greeted him as he entered through the office front door.

"Look who's here! Welcome back, Marquette," the firefighters called to him.

"It's good to be back," Nate said as he shook hands and endured back slaps from his friends. He meant it.

That evening, after he'd loaded the dishwasher as part of his assignment that day and had washed and dried what pots and pans wouldn't fit in it, he played a few hands of gin with some of the firefighters. He'd sleep here tonight and remain on the job for the next twenty-four hours.

At ten o'clock, everyone on duty gathered around the television set to watch *The Detective*. Even though Nate was sitting cross-legged on the floor, his knees went weak the first time Kevin strode into the scene. They'd lightened his hair and chosen chocolate brown slacks and a matching long-sleeved, turtleneck shirt he wore tucked in. The clothing revealed a fit man with narrow hips and rippling abs. He looked tantalizingly delicious.

The gleaming gold detective shield affixed to his belt to the right of his zipper might as well have winked at Nate. It could well sense he knew what waited quietly beneath that zipper, knew how it felt aroused and thick in his hands, generating heat against his belly.

Nate squirmed a little, repositioning himself so what was in his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

trousers would behave.

“There you go, Claudene. There’s your heartthrob,” the men teased the female firefighter sitting next to Nate.

Claudene’s face flamed and she tossed the dark braid that had fallen over one breast back over her shoulder. “Knock it off, you guys. He’s not television’s sexiest man for nothing, and I’m not the only woman who pants after this guy.”

I seriously doubt I’m the only man who pants after him either.

The detective was totally unlike Kevin as Nate knew him. Always serious, the smile that deepened every laugh line was absent in this on-screen officer of the law. Also gone was the anxious concern Nate had experienced with the man he’d made love with, bathed with, even cooked with. Everything the detective did he channeled cerebrally as he thought through every aspect of the crimes he investigated. Most emotion was lost on him, and he kept close to his chest any hint of his involvement with another officer.

Nate rested his forearms on his knees and smiled. *I bet this character never danced incognito with the Chippendales.*

“What are you smiling about?” Claudene whispered.

Startled, Nate widened his smile. “Nothing much. The scene reminded me of something from a play I was in in middle school, that’s all.”

It was late, fatigue had hit him in the gut, and he was climbing into bed before he remembered to check his cell, which he’d left in his duffle bag because he carried a radio when on duty. Opening the phone, he saw the symbol for a new message pop up. Eagerly he retrieved the message, playing it over several times as warmth spread through him at the sound of Kevin’s voice.

Frustrated, he wondered why they hadn’t set up some kind of

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

arrangement for when Kevin could contact him. The answer was simple—their time together had been so brief they hadn't had a chance to think about such things. It was only in their last hour together that he'd known Kevin wanted to see him again as much as Nate wanted to continue being with Kevin. In comparison to the Seattle and Canadian forests, Fawnskin was tantalizingly close to where the actor worked and lived. For now, he guessed that had to be enough.

Upset that he'd missed Kevin's call, he crawled into bed with the phone held tight to his ear as he listened to it for the umpteenth time. Finally, he got up and plugged it into an outlet to recharge it. What a horror it would be if Kevin called again and the battery was dead.

It was a week before another call arrived. Nate, his heart pounding, fumbled to pull his cell out of his jacket pocket while it was still ringing. He made it in time.

"Marquette," he said. Drawing in a calming breath, he turned a few steps away from where he'd been drying off the big red-and-white fire engine he and Claudene had washed.

"Hi."

His gut clenched. "Hi, yourself. I'm sorry I missed your call. I've listened to it over and over."

The lighthearted laugh rang right through him. "It didn't say much."

"Yeah, it did. It said a lot."

There was a pause, and Kevin's voice softened. "I guess it did, didn't it? Listen, I don't have much time as I'm due back on the set in ten. If I come up this Saturday, will you be free?"

"That'll work. I'm off for three days beginning Saturday morning at six."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

“Friday’s a late shoot, and I may not start out until noon. I’ll call you when I leave from Malibu to be sure it’s still okay.”

Because Claudene was only a few feet away as she rubbed the chamois over the side windows, Nate guarded his replies as they talked until Kevin had to return to the set. If Nate could have whistled a tune of happiness after they’d hung up, he would have. It was something he’d never mastered. To say the call had lightened a dull day didn’t begin to express how he felt.

“Good news?” Claudene asked as she started the chamois down onto the doors.

“What? Oh. Yes, it was. What made you think that?” Nate kept wiping down his side of the engine

“You’re humming.”

“Didn’t realize I was.” Nate realized he’d been singing The Jefferson Airplane’s version of “Somebody to Love.” A twinge of worry crept up. If she knew that song, she might’ve been able to piece together what both sides of that call had been. Apparently not. He relaxed his shoulders, which had tightened with concern.

He slept the night through on Friday, which was a good thing. His house needed attention to be ready for company, but just as he was leaving the station house, the captain called him into his office.

“Nice to have you here again, Nate. I really appreciate not having to break a new man in for these vacation stints.” He brought Nate up-to-date on a few changes that had come through while he was heli-logging, then he said, “I’m sure you’ve noticed how dry the mountains are. I wanted to alert you we expect to see some forest fires, even though this isn’t usually the season for them. I wanted to touch base with you and confirm that, if we do get one, I’ll send you to a helicopter fire-jumper site or the DC-10

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

air tanker areas.”

Nate cautioned himself not to look at his watch during the talk, but he felt anxious about getting home to prepare for Kevin’s visit. At last, Captain Sturm shook his hand and let him go.

The sheets were clean and he’d remade his bed, planned their dinner and breakfast meals, and had run to the store for steaks and corn-on-the-cob to barbecue. Beer and wine were chilling in the refrigerator. The weather had turned chilly, and he was dressed in clean Levi’s and a warm shirt with long sleeves.

Noon came without word from Kevin. Then it was one o’clock, two o’clock, three and no sign of or word from TV’s sexiest man.

First, concern tied his gut in knots. Had something happened to Kevin? He called the highway patrol, but there’d been no accidents reported on the freeway or the roads to Big Bear. He watched the news because if something had happened to Kevin, it would be there, but there was nothing.

Nate sat on the couch and locked his hands behind his neck, elbows out, head back. Disappointment shadowed him. This was always how it began, the loss of a love. There was the “I’ll call you” and then no call. Or the call and the setting up of a date and the date never showing up. He should have known it would happen. Again. He wasn’t the kind of man other men fell for the way he fell for them. Just as it had been all those years ago with his first sex partner, it had always been ever since.

Despair was something that required fighting, and he knew from experience he needed to keep busy to prevent the awful mood that threatened him.

Don’t sit on the couch here and mope.

Maybe he wouldn’t have company to share his steak and corn, but he could enjoy it himself. He strode outside and set up the

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

barbecue with a layer of paper, then kindling he created with an axe and a piece of wood. The charcoals waited in a bag beside the barbecue and next to it, a bucket of water just in case he needed to squelch a spark. All the fire needed was the kiss of flame from a match once Kevin arrived.

That done, he took a log from the woodpile and brought the axe down steadily on one end, splitting it into sizes that would fit in his fireplace. Each time the blade sank in, satisfaction rolled through him. By the time evening fell with no sign of Kevin Connolly, he had enough wood to last the weeks he'd be here.

Standing back to look at his work, he realized he didn't have the heart to use the barbecue tonight. Steak would have to wait. He went indoors, made himself a Mexican omelet for supper and continued to watch the news for anything about TV's hottest star. Nothing. Finally, he gave up and went to bed.

The next morning, he took a hike, then he drove to Big Bear to the small zoo. He chatted with the owner, who was selling tickets, then he purchased one and followed a family inside. Watching the kids race from cage to cage made him smile. He ordered coffee in the marina and sat where he could overlook the lake and the smattering of boats. Even in winter, the lake was dangerously low due to the drought. The ski resort drew from it to make artificial snow when snowfall wasn't heavy enough for opening up for business. They'd drawn too often the past couple of years.

He spotted an eagle sitting on top of a tall, limbless tree driven into the lake specifically as a perch for the eagles and other raptors in the area. He always enjoyed the sight of eagles and peregrine falcons, loved their soaring flight.

He drove home, and after he'd parked and had his key out to unlock the back door, he looked up to see a stranger walking in his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

direction across the property. The man was dressed in tan, loose clothing that had seen many launderings. His beard and mustache were a shade darker than the brassy blond ponytail that peeped from beneath a hat with a broad brim. Despite an overcast sky, the stranger wore dark glasses. Too often druggies wore dark glasses to hide the effects of drugs on their eyes.

Nate stopped and turned, edging closer to the axe on top of the woodpile near the back door. "May I help you?"

The man seemed to have noticed the woodpile and the axe. He stopped at a distance, one thumb hooked with casual grace in a belt loop. "I'm looking for a paramedic firefighter who flies helicopters and runs his own logging business. Might that be you?" The drawl was Alabama, all the way.

Nate stopped and stared, then moved toward the stranger and extended a hand as he let his face crinkle into a smile. "I think that would be me...Nate Marquette. Won't you come in?"

CHAPTER 6

As soon as the door closed behind them, Kevin pulled off his hat with the fake braid and his glasses. He wrapped his arms around Nate. “Let me get rid of this mustache and beard before I kiss you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never kissed anyone with facial hair before. I might like it.” Nate laughed. “For a minute that Alabama drawl threw me.”

Minus the disguise, Nate could read fatigue in Kevin’s face despite his smile. “Where’s your car?”

“I parked it down the street so no one would know I was with you. Helluva thing to be this late.”

Nate nodded. He couldn’t bring himself to reveal the fears he’d been stood up. Instead, he said, “When you didn’t call and didn’t

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

show, I worried. I called the highway patrol, then I watched the news all day and into the night to hear of any accident you might've had."

"Jeez, I'm sorry to have put you through that. We worked from five in the morning Friday until almost one in the afternoon yesterday. I should've called you then, but I was so tired I didn't think of it. After a lunch break, we returned to work until four this morning. After I got home, I sank down on a couch to leave a message for you, but I crashed instead. I woke up this morning with a crick in my neck and the cell phone still in my hand. Undialed.

"You said you had three days off, and all I could think of was to get to you as soon as I could. I ate a bowl of Raisin Bran, washed it down with orange juice, then I grabbed this disguise, which I'd planned for ahead of time, and started out. I noticed the gas gauge was almost on empty, so I decided I'd call you when I filled the tank." He ran a hand over his face. "I don't know if I was just punchy or am a complete idiot. At that point, I discovered I'd grabbed the wrong cell phone and had left the card with your number on it at home in a pants pocket. I called four-one-one, but you aren't listed. It was either go home or just come ahead."

"I'm so glad you didn't go back." Nate studied Kevin's face and noticed again lines of raw fatigue etched there. He ran a thumb over the lines and then pressed his lips to Kevin's. Now I know how nectar tastes to bees, he thought. "You look beat."

"Hmm, I am. But I'm here now. With you."

When Kevin ran his hands over Nate's hips and down his thighs, Nate stopped him. "First you're going to have lunch and then you're going to rest. I know just the thing to relax you."

Lunch was peanut butter sandwiches with butter and wild

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

blackberry jam. They washed it down with milk and ate apples for dessert. Kevin ate as if he was almost too tired to get the food down.

When they'd finished, Nate led him to the bedroom. "Strip and stretch out on my bed face down."

Nate wanted to strip Kevin himself, to pull the tails of his shirt out of his khakis with careful deliberation so they brushed across a waiting dick and set it to tingling, and then to unbutton the shirt with agonizing, tempting slowness until the slide of the fabric would awaken every nerve ending with the promise of sex.

Clamping down on the image before he started imagining the sound of the slide of the zipper down Kevin's pants and the sight of an engorged cock rising through the slit in his briefs while his own did the same, Nate turned away and went into the bathroom.

This wasn't the time for sex, and he knew that's how it would end if he undressed Kevin, who needed to rest in the worst way. In the bathroom, Nate assembled the supplies he needed. With the sink stopper in place and the basin filled with hot water, he slid a bottle of oil into it.

Kevin was on the bed as ordered. "It's chilly without a cover."

Nate took a flannel bath blanket from the closet and spread it over him. He retrieved the warm oil and a fluffy white towel. Sitting down beside Kevin, he folded the blanket down to his waist before pouring oil into one palm and rubbing his hands together. Then he massaged the nape of Kevin's neck, establishing a firm, steady rhythm as his oiled hands slid over the strong shoulders, kneading out knots until the muscles relaxed. Down the arms he worked, stroking the palms of the hands with his thumbs and gently stretching each finger and flexing the joints with care.

"That feels wonderful. I can't identify the smell of the oil."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

“Almond. It’s one of my favorites. If it’s unpleasant, I can switch to one without a scent.”

“No, it’s fine. I like it, too.”

Nate moved over the body he found so strikingly appealing, the body of the man who’d captured his heart way back in Las Vegas. As he reached Kevin’s firm bum, Nate took care to avoid any attention to the crease. As he worked out the tension in Kevin’s legs, he stayed away from the inner thighs and the enticing sac that lay between them. Every erogenous zone, with the exception of the nape, had either been left untouched or, like the palms, touched with only healing strokes.

When he’d finished, he used the towel to wipe off the excess oil, knowing how rough and good that would feel. Then he covered Kevin with the bath blanket and bed covers. When he tiptoed out of the room, he could see the steady rise and fall of the back of a sleeping Kevin.

He had the barbecue fired up, the coals were glowing, and the corn and steaks were cooking when Kevin stepped out the back door. Most of the disguise was in the house. He wore the hat and the dark glasses. For all anyone knew, he’d shaved off his mustache and beard.

He stretched and sniffed. “That smells wonderful.”

“Feeling better?”

“A zillion per cent. Thanks.” In a low tone he added, “I’d show you how grateful I am, but we’re outside.”

Nate chuckled. The laugh rumbled out of a stockpile of happiness. “There’s beer in the fridge if you want one. Bring one for me, too, please.”

It was too cold to stay outdoors once the food had cooked, so they ate in the kitchen and talked. When the temperature dropped

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

even lower outside, Nate built a fire in the living room. They finished their beers sitting in front of it. Kevin collected the bottles and took them to the kitchen.

Nate watched Kevin come out of the kitchen. Standing, he held out his hand. "Come here."

* * *

Kevin sighed as Nate grabbed his butt and pulled him hard against his solid body. He loved feeling Nate's cock locked against his as both dicks strained against the restricting pants, wanting to touch skin to skin as they had in the desert. Nate's mouth closed on Kevin's, and his lips were at first soft and sweet, but then they seduced deeper and fuller, building a hunger Kevin matched. Nate rubbed his groin across Kevin's, setting alight a tingling all over his body.

"I want you, Nate Marquette."

"So I've noticed. The feeling's mutual. The couch is softer," Nate whispered against Kevin's mouth.

They tore off their clothes and clung together, chest to chest, belly to belly, cock to cock. With trembling hands, Kevin stepped away to fumble in the pocket of his khakis for two foil packets, at last pulling them free. He held them up. "Grape or strawberry?"

"I don't care. Just hurry before I cover you with cum."

Kevin knelt, and Nate groaned softly from low in his throat as Kevin's breath bathed his swollen dick. The groan resonated in Kevin's belly and desire coiled tight in his core. Kevin unrolled a purple condom over the damp cock jutting toward his face. He denied Nate the pleasure of suiting him up because he knew he'd erupt the minute Nate's hands were on him.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Standing, Kevin whispered against his lover's ear just before he blew softly on it and then plunged his tongue deep inside. "I hope you like strawberry."

"I want my mouth on you—any time, any flavor at all," Nate responded.

The couch was too narrow, and they didn't make it to the bed. Halfway there, they dropped to the floor, and when Nate's hot mouth closed over what filled the red condom, it was Kevin who groaned.

He stroked Nate first, wanting to feel the fullness as he remembered how velvety it had felt when latex wasn't covering it. He savored grape as he nibbled at the head just beyond the loose purple tip and he took his time as he licked and sucked his way up until his mouth filled with the essence of his lover. His hands roamed over the powerful body until he reached the soft, marbled sac and caressed it. As he felt Nate's passion build, he closed his fingers around the base of his dick and squeezed firmly, just on the edge of hurting him.

Nate's mouth released Kevin's hard erection. "God, Kevin, let me come."

"Not until I've had all I want of you."

That sent Nate back to the taste of strawberries with renewed fervor at bringing Kevin so much pleasure he'd go off.

Kevin knew he'd be too intent on the raging turbulence in his own body to stop Nate from joining him.

Waves of sensation rolled through Kevin, swelling higher and higher until they filled his chest, his entire body. The need to climax drove him to press his groin closer to his lover's face. He cupped and gently squeezed Nate's now thickened sac, hoping it would tighten and spasm until it gave up its load. Whatever Nate

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

was doing to him finally drove Kevin up and over the edge as he slammed hard into Nate's throat.

And then Nate was driving into Kevin's mouth with greater force than before, and Kevin felt him shudder as his erection pulsed and filled the tip of the condom with jism.

As exhilarating and satisfying as it had been, it was over. Any desire for sex had disappeared as if into the ether. Malaise settled in as breathing and pulses returned to normal.

When Kevin came to, he found Nate kneeling beside him.

"It's cold on the floor. I have a warm shower ready for us." He reached to give Kevin a hand up.

Kevin held the latex in place on his dick, which had returned to normal size, until he could remove it and throw it away. Nate had already dispensed with his. They stepped into the shower together and kissed as the warmth spread over their bodies and blended them together.

"We should get tested," Nate said in a matter-of-fact way.

The thought of being skin to skin, mouth to cock without the restriction of latex excited Kevin. "Be careful with that thought or I'm going to get so big this shower won't hold two of us."

Nate handed him soap and a washcloth. "All the more reason for testing. I know I'm okay, but you need proof. I need proof you're okay, too." He paused. "Does that make you feel I don't trust you?"

"It makes me feel you care enough about me not to infect me with anything. It tells me you respect your body and want to keep it healthy. My last test was clean, and I haven't been with anyone since, but I'll go to the lab as soon as I can. I was going to bring an HIV self-test kit, but that doesn't detect other things we could unknowingly pass to each other."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

It was dark by the time they'd dried off and dressed. Kevin reluctantly pulled his keys from his pocket.

"Going to move your car?" Nate asked.

"No. I've had a wonderful time, but I need to get back."

He watched horror flash across Nate's face, then be replaced with firm determination. Before he knew it, Nate had pulled the keys from his hand.

"You're not going to drive in the dark down a steep, unfamiliar mountain road with hairpin curves and no guardrails. If you must leave, we can get up just before first light, and you can navigate the treacherous road as dawn is breaking."

The sudden realization of being too weary to protest—or to drive—swept over Kevin. It was nice to have someone recognize the fatigue still dragging him down. He threw his hands up in a you-win gesture. "Yes, master."

Later, dressed in a pair of Nate's pajamas, which he rolled up because they were at least an inch too long and too wide everywhere, Kevin drew him close and kissed him. "I hate to admit this because it could be seen as a reflection on my virility, but I'm too tired for sex again. Is that okay?"

"Well, hot damn," Nate said. Then he looked down at Kevin and smiled, the hints of gold dancing once again in his dark eyes. "Of course, it's okay. Just having you next to me will be enough. When we slept together in Vegas, it had been a long, long time since I'd stayed all night with a lover."

"For me, too." He eyed the bed. "I'm glad that's not a single. It would be cozy, but uncomfortably crowded."

"I'm a big guy. A restless sleeper. Only a king-size does it for me."

The outside temperature had dropped into the high thirties, but

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Kevin fell asleep snug and warm in Nate's bed, in Nate's arms.

True to his word, Nate woke him just before first light with coffee, creamy hot oatmeal and heated muffins ready. Kevin sat down to eat, adding brown sugar and half-and-half to his cereal. Nate leaned over and kissed the top of his head.

"How do you feel?"

Kevin squeezed his hand. "Rested. Wonderfully rested."

"I wish you could stay here today."

In the worst way Kevin wanted to stay, to escape the demands of being a star and just hang out with this multi-faceted man. He sighed. "Much as I want to, I can't. Duty calls."

"And duty is a damned demanding mistress. I know her well. We'll have to look forward to the next time we can steal some secret hours together." He slid a piece of paper across to Kevin. "Here's my schedule for the next two months. As soon as the weather opens up in Washington, I'll be back at my heli-logging job, but until then I'll be here."

Icicles of dread filled Kevin's chest. All the way up in the state of Washington, was it? Too far away for Kevin to steal hours and be with him.

As they had been forced to in the desert, they said their farewells inside the house, and as Kevin stepped outside and heard the door shut behind him, he felt a painful jarring of his emotions. Sadness, because there was no way to know when he could break away to see Nate again warred with anger that they were forced to hide their feelings for each other.

Too soon, Nate would leave for Washington. *Forget it. At this point, I can't do anything about it.*

He thought the person who'd said, "Live in the moment" had gotten it right. Throwing his shoulders back, he began to live this

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

moment by filling his lungs with pine-scented air. Its chilliness invigorated him. He looked up and knew dawn would break by the time he reached the highway.

Watching his steps as he strode to the Jeep he'd rented, he noticed how dry the earth beneath his feet was for this time of year. Fire, flood, earthquake and drought. Wasn't that how people described California? Mostly they laughed afterwards.

Once he'd put the four-wheel-drive vehicle in gear and headed out, he was okay. He'd left this interlude behind and now his mind was on the road as he headed back to the world of work.

* * *

Through a crack in the curtains, Nate watched Kevin walk away, watched the firm stride that carried him out of sight. Torn between elation that he'd come and frustration he couldn't have arrived Saturday or stayed today so they'd have more time together, Nate had to figure out what to do with the empty hours stretching before him.

He perked up when he investigated clinics that tested anonymously for diseases transmitted through sex and learned this was one of the days they were open. By the time he'd driven down the mountain to the anonymous AIDS/HIV clinic and then walked over to one that wasn't anonymous but tested for the other STDs and returned home, the day was over.

When six o'clock came the next morning, he was already in the station house kitchen preparing breakfast for the other firefighters. It was good to back at work.

* * *

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

A week later, he returned to the clinics for his results. They were all negative. He knew they would be, but here was proof for Kevin. He requested a statement from each clinic so he'd have something to show Kevin.

Despite keeping his cell phone fully charged and on hand at all times, there were no calls from Kevin. When work didn't fully occupy his mind, he fretted at the lack of contact. The old fear of betrayal surfaced again. How stupid was it to believe he could hold onto a relationship with a talented, good-looking celebrity like Kevin Connolly? He could easily find someone more available, someone less complicated to be with than Nate.

Powerful Santa Ana winds measuring sixty and seventy miles an hour through the canyons were in the news. They were hitting the foothills of Canyon Country. Nate shook his head. This wasn't good during a drought.

Captain Sturm assembled the entire team early the next morning. "You know as well as I do it's rare to have a winter flare up, but because we occasionally do, California has no designated fire season. Due to the high winds now, the acting State Fire Marshall has alerted all firefighting resources to stand ready."

Nate sensed excitement surge through the room with the news they'd do the job they'd been trained for—to protect life and property. You didn't work in this dangerous field unless you considered it one of the most important and rewarding jobs in the world.

He forgot about Kevin and the absence of phone calls. When he had word he needed to ferry fire jumpers via helicopter to the fire, his mind was all on the job.

CHAPTER 7

The heat from the writhing fingers of deadly red and orange flames shooting skyward caused perspiration to roll down Nate's temples and soak the uniform's armpits. Nate struggled to hold the big Huey on course in the buffeting Santa Anas and the enormous wind created by the fire itself.

"The jump site's coming up on your right," Tim Barnes, his copilot, yelled over the roar of the rotor blades. "Think you can hold her in this wind?"

"I think so, but this is the last trip. The Huey's not strong enough to fly under these conditions anymore."

"Good. I'm hoping to get back to base in one piece."

Nate's bark of laughter was grim. As he maneuvered the copter down and held it level, firefighter after firefighter, all resembling

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

ninja turtles because of the packs strapped on their backs, jumped from the hovering airship. One of them waved the signal for “All Clear,” and Nate let the Huey rise, tip, and swing away from the fire. Soon only the Santa Anas fought him for control.

After they’d landed, Tim, a seasoned pilot from Sacramento whom he’d flown with before, clapped him on the back. “Great job. Guess we’re just in time to catch the next truck up to the nearest fire line.”

For a week they’d flown jumpers wherever they were needed and delivered supplies. Sometimes they sucked water up into the helicopter’s belly and released it in a dampening stream. They could only fly in daylight and only when the winds allowed it, so they fought the fire when they weren’t flying, catching snatches of sleep on the bare ground. They ate their food cold. What there was of it.

Now Nate grabbed his backpack and climbed into the truck, trying to nap as it rocked over the fire road. It made him appreciate the efforts of the inmates back in Fawnskin who kept such roads clear.

They arrived at a place where the pumper truck had water. It had emptied its tanks, and Claudene was climbing in to drive it back to where she could refill it. Three firefighters he didn’t recognize rode with her. He waved as she drove past. Recognizing him, she waved and smiled.

He and Tim joined other men from other agencies and station houses. With shovels, they were tamping out embers and sparks or shoveling dirt over them to put them out. Nate lost track of time.

After a couple of hours, Tim stood up and rubbed his back. “I feel like an old man.”

“This many days of non-stop work with little food, little

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

sleep—and that on hard ground—would make anyone feel old.”

Someone pointed toward the fire near the area the pumper’s water had put it out. “I think the fire’s coming up behind us.” He was young and inexperienced, but he had spotted the danger.

Nate yelled, “Damn right it is! Shelters! Now!” Even as he pulled his out and popped it up, he was barking into his radio to the command center dispatcher with their location and problem.

The other men fumbled as they dug into their packs for the fireproof shelters designed for this kind of event. They made it into them moments before the searing killer flames swept with a monstrous roar over the tents.

Nate had never been so terrified in his life. Not even when heli-logging. If he’d wet his pants at the sight of the flames speeding toward them, his clothing would already be dry from the heat. Thoughts of his mother flooded his mind. Then of his dad and sisters and how painful his death would be for them. He wondered if Kevin would be affected. Shaking in terror, he listened as the fire moved on, but he was afraid to exit the protective tent. The next noise was the sound of water, glorious water as it sprayed over the tents the men huddled inside.

“Nate! Tim!” Claudene’s voice was the most welcome sound he’d ever heard.

Nate opened the flap of his tent and crawled out into steaming mud where the water had flooded the hot ground. He stood up. “I think I’m okay.” Looking around for Tim, he was relieved to see him appear from his shelter as the others did. “We’re all here and accounted for.”

“Where are your gloves?” Claudene asked Nate. “The hair on the back of your hands is singed.”

“Must’ve pulled them off in the hurry to get the shelter set up

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

and radio for help. I didn't even know I'd done it." He hadn't been aware of discomfort in his hands, but now he turned them palms up and saw blisters. Not burns, but from too much shoveling and lifting supplies despite wearing gloves.

Shock set in, beginning with fine tremors in his hands, and then he began to shiver despite the heat. The men began to cough because the air was thick with smoke from blackened trees and brush around them. Nausea swept over him, and Claudene made him sit on the runner of the truck and put his head between his knees. Then she loaded as many survivors into—and onto—the pumper truck as possible and drove them to safety, to the command post and the Red Cross first aid tent.

The captain ordered Nate and Tim home, but the winds had died down and the helicopters and DC 10s could drop badly needed water and fire retardant. Word had arrived that the fire had been set. For Nate and the men in the shelters, it had become personal. Anger as hot as the fire burned through Nate. Tim stomped around, arms crossed, swearing. The Red Cross doctor finally agreed to let them return to duty.

* * *

Kevin was in London playing detective before television cameras when the word filtered through the actors and crew that southern California was on fire. At first concerned it might be threatening his Malibu home because Malibu had burned all too often, his concern turned to fear when he learned of the men who'd had to use the protective shelters. As soon as he saw a newspaper showing a helicopter dropping water on the fire, his heart told him Nate was there. There wasn't any news of which men were trapped

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

in the wall of fire. Frantic to know if Nate was safe, he located a telephone, but the long distance call didn't go through.

* * *

Nate stayed as long as he could, but after almost two weeks, collapsing fatigue finally sent him home. The winds had dropped to normal and some containment of the fire had been possible. The fire commander ordered a group of firefighters back to their units, and he and Tim were among them.

Home had never looked so good. He'd used a Red Cross phone to notify his parents from the fire site that he was okay. Now he called them again to let them know he'd returned to Fawnskin. They talked for a long time, and he made plans to fly to see them. Unable to tolerate even a hint of smoke in the house, he phoned the cleaners to come and pick up his clothes. He doubted he'd ever light a fire in the barbecue or his fireplace again.

The shower he took was so long he'd used up most of the hot water before he reluctantly left it. Now he gargled. He used saline drops in his nose, all to clear out the soot lodged there. Using a Respro mask while on the ground had helped prevent a lot of that, but he hadn't worn it when flying.

He ordered food in and ate. Then he crashed for twenty-four hours. He rose and ate and slept some more.

Even then, his face still showed signs of the stress and fatigue of fighting the fire.

Ordered to take leave for ten days due to being trapped in the fire, he made the drive into Big Bear to pick up his dry cleaning, to order coffee and drink it sitting beside the lake watching the flight of eagles and falcons. He wandered through the shops and bought

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

himself a new winter wool shirt in dark shades of green and navy blue.

Back in his home, he caught sight of his forgotten cell phone where it lay on the kitchen table. When he picked it up, he saw he had voice mail: Kevin was coming the next day. Happiness spread through him.

It was amazing he could sleep that night, but still exhausted, he did.

Kevin was coming.

* * *

Kevin couldn't imagine it had taken so long to make this drive the first time. Then he realized his eagerness to see Nate, to know he was okay, was distorting his sense of time. When he pulled up and parked away from the house, he almost forgot to pull on his hat with the braid in the excitement of seeing his lover again.

Always confident, Kevin felt an unfamiliar trepidation as he approached the front door. They hadn't seen each other for weeks, and suddenly he questioned whether Nate's feelings for him would be the same.

"Door's open," Nate called out.

Kevin stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind him. He removed his hat and placed the beard and mustache in the crown before he set it down. A barefooted man came out of the kitchen and stopped there.

At first, Kevin thought Nate hadn't gotten his message. Wasn't expecting him. Then disappointment swept over him because Nate had obviously invited another man. Irritation flooded him. He wasn't interested in a threesome.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

“Sorry,” he said to the stranger while he reached behind him to open the door. “I’m a pretty monogamous kind of guy. I don’t do ménage.”

“I certainly hope you’re a monogamous kind of guy. That’s the kind of guy I am. Hello, Kevin.” The deep voice was soft, with a tentative note in the welcome that rose and seemed to hover in the air between them.

Kevin looked again and studied the man who’d greeted him. He was expected all right, and there was no other guest invited for the night. The man leaning against the kitchen doorjamb, arms crossed, was Nate. He was thinner and remnants of the stress from firefighting haunted his face. For the first time since Kevin had known him, he seemed unsure of himself and vulnerable.

The knowledge that he was seeing the *real* Nate Marquette, who trusted him to understand at the deepest level he wasn’t always strong was like a blinding flash in his brain.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” There was a hesitation in Nate’s voice, as if he still wasn’t sure how Kevin would react to him. Elbows bent, he extended forearms and hands out to his sides. “I’ve lost a lot of weight.”

Kevin couldn’t hold back the sexual sensations rushing through him. His voice wasn’t quite steady as he said, “You’re beautiful to me. So very beautiful. What’s more, you’re alive.”

Nate held out his hand. “Come,” he said, his words punctuated by relief.

Kevin stepped into Nate’s open arms and held onto him as if never to let him go. Through his own chest, he felt Nate’s heart pounding. Almost breathless, he murmured, “I think your heart’s beating as fast as mine.”

“That’s because I wasn’t sure what you’d think, seeing me like

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

this.”

“I think this lover is the true Nate Marquette, and I like what I see. I’d like to push this person I thought was a stranger to the floor and fuck him.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

He could feel Nate’s laughter resonate through his body. Nate reached around Kevin, picked up some papers from the dining room table and handed them to him.

Kevin read them and looked up. “You were tested.”

Nate nodded.

Kevin pulled folded papers from a back pocket and presented them to Nate. “I’m clear, too.”

The papers dropped to the floor, forgotten, as Nate captured Kevin’s face in his hands and drew his fingers down the line of his jaws before he brought his mouth down hard on Kevin’s.

Mouths locked together, they pulled off shirts, unbuttoned jeans, and broke the silence with the sound of zippers sliding down and heavy breathing as they made their way to the bed. When they were naked, Kevin pushed Nate onto his back. “It’s my turn this time, my wounded warrior.”

He cupped Nate’s ears with his hands and licked Nate’s lips. When he’d satisfied his need for that, his tongue roved over his neck, pausing to feel the wild pulsing of his arteries.

“I love the taste of you, and the clean scent of your skin. Nate Marquette is always clean,” he murmured and continued to lick across powerful shoulders and down the inside of his forearms. His tongue found and flicked around and over dark nipples, then down the strong torso, and into the belly button. As he approached his lover’s groin, he felt Nate waiting, silent, but with his breath coming in short, shallow bursts.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Kevin didn't linger. He skipped to Nate's toes, sucking each one into his mouth, kissing his ankles and running his hands up Nate's legs to his knees. His fingers stroked the back of those knees, and then he began licking again on the sensitive inner thighs. Nate sighed as Kevin pushed his legs gently apart and licked his sac, thickened now from excitement, before he took it in his mouth and let suction and his tongue work the expected magic until Nate writhed beneath him.

He swept his fingernails across the tender skin between bush and hipbones. Nate squirmed with pleasure, and Kevin felt his own cock thicken and load for sex. With a groan, Nate closed his hands on the sides of Kevin's head and centered his mouth over Nate's engorged erection. From shaft to tip, Kevin's tongue laved him, coaxing, but when he sensed his face would soon be drenched with jism, he closed his hand around the base of Nate's cock and prevented it.

"Don't tease me again." Nate's voice was deep, guttural, pleading.

"Roll."

Nate rolled. Kevin licked the hard buttocks until Nate rose on his knees. Kevin's fingers slid into his hole one, two, then three fingers stretching him, creating the electric sensual charge he knew this would bring. "You're very tight."

"Not any more. Hurry."

Kevin fulfilled both their needs when he slid inside that tightness. He pulled almost out and then glided back in, over and over, as the stricture of Nate rubbed against the most sensitive part of Kevin's cock. Nate's pleasure had reached a fevered pitch, and the sounds he made heightened Kevin's excitement, humming through his body until he couldn't hold back any longer. He

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

reached around to grasp Nate's dick. He felt the hard pull on his spine, then the spasms begin in his balls and finally the overwhelming orgasmic release as they shot for the stars together.

Kevin collapsed beside Nate and ran a finger over his shoulder. "Wow," he whispered.

Nate, stretched out face down now, slipped an arm around Kevin's waist. "Uh-huh."

"What is it about us together?" Kevin asked.

There was no response. He didn't expect one. Chemistry, he supposed, just before dropping off in a languorous, post-coital doze.

"Time to shower," Nate said some time later, as he ran a finger down Kevin's back to rouse him.

They stepped into the shower together.

* * *

Nate was ravenous. Passion had momentarily erased all thoughts of food, but now his stomach protested with vigorous growls. Earlier, he'd wrapped the garlic bread, covered the lasagna with foil and put them in the warming oven, so now he pulled them out. The small table in the kitchen nook had been set with placemats, dinnerware and utensils. A red wine was open and breathing in an ice bucket, and on his instructions, Kevin pulled a hearty tossed salad dotted with tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado, olives and grated carrot out of the refrigerator and set it on the table.

They discovered they preferred the same salad dressing, then they sat and dove in.

"Did you make this yourself? It's delicious."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

“Make it myself? You’ve got to be kidding. After fighting a forest fire for a dozen sleepless days until I crashed here last night, I assure you this food wasn’t prepared by my singed and blistered hands.”

“Okay, so you don’t cook. You got a fairy godmother or something?”

Nate laughed. ‘Fairy godmother? That’s rich. But I do know how to cook. Firefighters do the meals in the station houses, and I make my own meals a lot when I’m logging, but this afternoon I phoned a local restaurant and had them deliver everything, including the wine. I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

Kevin had just sipped his wine. He put his fork down and reached across the small table for Nate’s free hand. *Singed and blistered* had just registered with him.

Pounds lighter, fatigue etched on his features, and now the physical injuries... An ache spread through Kevin’s chest at the thought of anything hurting this strong man. He ran his fingers over the singed hairs on the back, and when he turned it over, he flinched at seeing a few blisters. When he reached for the other hand, Nate let him see that one, too.

Kevin lowered his lips, cool from the wine, and pressed them gently to the blisters.

Nate touched his head to Kevin’s.

Kevin’s voice was quiet when he said, “Why didn’t you tell me? They must’ve hurt when we made love. I could’ve done all the work.”

“They aren’t that bad. Besides, it was other parts of my body that were busier with you, if you’ll recall. A little discomfort in my hands barely registered.”

Kevin released them and leaned back in his chair. He sipped his

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

wine. “You’re the genuine thing, aren’t you, Nathaniel Marquette?”

“What do you mean?”

“The business I work in is fraught with studios making stupid mistakes in programming, hyperbole, back-stabbing, and meaningless ways of addressing each other. ‘Dah...ling, you’re so mah...velous...so talented.’ When I’m interviewed about the show, I’m required to rave about the director, the actors, whomever. It reflects on the quality of the show unless I rave about an actor, even if they’re difficult to work with, hold up the entire cast because they’re chronically late when we film and may be replaced because they’re really not that good at their job. Or I may have to praise a director who’s a pain in the proverbial butt. Disingenuous...that’s the word for too much of Hollywood. The worst of it is, I have to pretend I’m heterosexual.”

“Who knows about you?” Nate asked.

“The Engvalds, Janet and Jack. A few guys from my past who would never dare out me because they’d then out themselves. What about you?”

“My family. Not that many guys in my past who even know where I am or what I’m doing these days. Jack has known since college. I warned him at the wedding he needed to let Janet know after she thrust all those women in my path. I also forbid him to allow her to continue trying to set me up with ‘somebody to love,’ as she phrases it.”

Kevin threw his head back and laughed. “Oh, I know. She’s a force to be reckoned with, isn’t she?”

Nate had no trouble convincing him to stay that night. Happiness seeped through as the shared warmth of their bodies kept them safe and snug against the freezing night.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

After breakfast, he said, "Don your disguise. I'm going to take you on a tour of the area."

For a Hollywood VIP, Kevin seemed to soak up the mountain atmosphere, enjoying coffee beside the lake and using Nate's binoculars to see the perched eagle close up. They walked through Big Bear and hiked off the path into the woods. Unable to resist this man who was in the world he loved, Nate stopped and leaned against a huge pine with bark that smelled like vanilla. He spread his legs apart and pulled Kevin into the "A" made by them.

They kissed. As the kiss became more than intimate and their feelings deepened to arousal, Nate felt Kevin's hands at his hips, heard the sound and feel of his zipper sliding down. Nate's dick immediately loaded until his briefs could no longer hold it in check. It poked out through the hole in them.

"Hey," he warned as Kevin knelt.

"No one's here," Kevin said. "Stop me if you hear someone coming."

Then his mouth closed over Nate, hot and wet and tonguing. His teeth grazed the head, he sucked...and Nate was lost. He couldn't have stopped Kevin if an entire troop of underage Boy Scouts and their leader had suddenly appeared.

A few minutes later, stunned and weak from the driving climax he'd just experienced, he steadied himself by holding onto Kevin's head for a moment as he swayed. Kevin neatly slipped Nate's spent penis back into his briefs and zipped up his cargo pants.

When Nate had recovered, he said, "You caught me unawares."

Kevin's grin creased all the smile lines in his face. "Yeah. It's good that way, isn't it?"

They continued their hike for a little longer. Kevin was in shape, but lacked appropriate footgear, so Nate kept it short.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

However, Kevin insisted on buying hiking boots. "For next time," he said. He paid in cash.

"If you fly in a helicopter you have to wear shoes with leather bottoms," Nate said. He didn't know why he said it. It just popped out.

"Why?"

"In case of a crash, the bottoms of the shoes don't melt and burn people's feet."

Kevin turned pale. "Have you ever crashed?"

"Hey, didn't you know I'm the most famous heli-logger around? Mister Safety himself. Pretty sharp as a firefighter flying Hueys, too." To relieve the seriousness of what he'd said, he added, "Talk about hyperbole!" Relief rolled through him when he saw Kevin's face pink up again at his joke.

He dreaded the time when Kevin would have to leave, but it came. Kevin was waiting just inside the door when Nate came up behind him and licked the nape of his neck as he slid his hands around to unzip Kevin's jeans. Reaching inside, he teased the hard-on he'd created until it peeked through Kevin's boxers. Nate encircled it with his hand.

Kevin reached up and back, locking his hands behind Nate's neck to steady himself, rocking to the rhythm of what Nate was doing to his cock. His dick responded to this manhandling as every penis had since boyhood experimentation. But this was no experiment, and Nate noticed he looked down to watch Nate's hand as it stroked him to a peak and explosion.

Nate waited until he thought Kevin's mind had cleared before he released him. "You said surprises were a good thing."

Kevin's laugh was shaky as he tucked himself inside his briefs and pulled his zipper up. "I did, didn't I? Guess I got it right."

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

As they said goodbye, Kevin said, “In two weeks, we’ll be shooting in the valley on the racetrack and horse show ring in FairPlex Park in Pomona. I think you have the day off when I’ll be involved. Here’s my card. It’s a closed shoot, but everyone involved in the show can invite visitors. This’ll admit you to the spectator areas. Just don’t talk when they’re filming or go anywhere unaccompanied.”

Nate’s hand closed around the precious gift. To see Kevin perform in person would be a more than rare treat. But he’d have to be very careful not to do anything that would hint of the closeness of their relationship. There was no way he’d do anything that threatened his lover’s career.

CHAPTER 8

The next two weeks passed without a word from Kevin. Nate knew he must be busy. He was busy, too. They both wrestled with full work lives. Choosing the day Kevin would be in the scenes they'd be shooting in FairPlex Park, Nate dressed with great care. Nothing about his appearance should call attention to him, so he dressed in nice but casual clothes.

He noted his pass was generic. Nothing linked it to Kevin. That was good.

The morning sun had just peeped through the cloud cover when he drove into the parking lot used for events at FairPlex. In September, Los Angeles would hold its annual county fair here. Now only workers and visitors for the shoot seemed to be arriving. He had to show his ID and the guest card just to pull in and park.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Then he waited for the tram to fill before it carried everyone to the gate. As they exited the tram, they showed their credentials again. And again at the gate.

An older woman, whose hair was dyed black and permed into tight ringlets, approved his credentials and handed him a map with a schedule. "They'll be filming in the racetrack next. Time's on the schedule. Providing they're on time, of course." Her chuckle triggered the rough, gravel coughing fit of a smoker. She circled one of the many buildings that lined the road to the track. "Report here and they'll provide a jacket for you so you can be part of the crowd in the shoot."

An extra. He was going to be an extra. His whole body hummed with excitement. This would be fun. He didn't get out enough to relax for fun.

And he was going to watch Kevin perform live.

They gave him a windbreaker in bright yellow. Talk about trying to stay in the background, he thought. That added lightness to his step and a smile to his face. He listened carefully to instructions on when they were to cheer.

The shoot was late. The gatekeeper had hinted at that, so he was prepared. They boarded mini-vans and rode past rows of buildings on either side of the main walkway housing vendors and their goods during the fair. The track lay in the curve where the grounds continued north.

The stands for the small track were all on one side and the worn wooden seats were less than comfortable. The crowd of extras was growing restless when, without warning, the sound checks were completed and the cameras had people manning them.

As they'd been told, the scene began with a trumpeter, dressed in the red coat, white jodhpurs, tall boots and high black hat of an

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

equestrian. He stepped onto the track to sound the “Call to the Post” on a long herald trumpet. Horses and jockeys came onto the track and warmed up the before they loaded them into the starting gate.

The race began. Nate cheered with the other extras on cue. As the horses neared the finish line, some stood and screamed for their favorites, and Nate cheered, but stayed in his seat behind those who stood to avoid calling attention to himself. It wouldn’t do for him to appear on film.

The stunt jockey in green silks riding the lead horse stood up in his stirrups, clutched his chest and fell from his horse. The riderless chestnut Thoroughbred continued to run around the track until an outrider pulled up beside it and reached for his reins.

On cue, groans and cries of “Oh, no!” issued from the extras.

The police bluesuits arrived and marked off the crime scene with yellow tape. Homicide detective James Parkington, aka Kevin Connelly, dressed in gray slacks and a charcoal gray sport coat over a black turtleneck, walked onto the track and ducked under the tape to view the body.

Nate’s heart thundered in his chest, and as he watched Kevin perform, pride again flooded him at Kevin’s skill as an actor. God, but he loved this man. The thought had sprung so easily from the depths of his feelings that it surprised him. *Love Kevin? Oh, yeah.* That described it to perfection.

He refocused on the shoot. There were endless takes, always with fresh horses but the same jockeys and silks until at last the director released the extras from duty and told them to keep their jackets as a souvenir.

Nate stood and, as the other extras climbed around him to leave the stands, he stood on a bleacher seat and looked for Kevin. He

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

spotted him at the far end of the track, near the buildings where the horses exited after a race. He scribbled “NM” on the back of the card Kevin had given him and fought through the crowd to hand it down to a crewmember on the ground, asking him to give it to Kevin. He waited until he saw it handed to Kevin, who immediately turned away and walked to an overhang in front of the buildings.

The card fell unnoticed to the ground. The crewmember picked it up, tossed it into a nearby trash container and headed back to the stands.

Shock tightened around Nate’s chest like a steel band. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. He feared he could be having a heart attack. Kevin hadn’t even looked in the stands to see if he was there. He’d dropped the card as if it meant nothing to him.

Nate realized he couldn’t stand here forever. Almost everyone else had left the stands. Emerging from the shock he’d suffered, he looked one last time at Kevin. He was barely visible now, walking in shadows beneath an overhang. A man joined him, flung his arms around Kevin and kissed him full on the mouth.

Pain crippled Nate’s heart as if struck by lightning. He turned away. He had little memory of stumbling to the tram that carried him to the parking lot or getting into his car and driving home. How he managed the mountain terrain without an accident he didn’t know.

Back in his house, he lay in the dark, unable to eat or sleep. His whole body ached with the pain of this betrayal. Thoughts of how he’d kept his guard up all these years after Airon, not investing strong emotions in someone who might betray him, plagued him. At last, he’d let someone in, let that someone deep into his heart and mind, and now here he was...hurting again. He wondered how

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

he could've missed the clues, for there would've been clues that Kevin would cheat on him as Airon had.

He'd been blind. And way too needy.

As dawn broke, he rose and prepared for work. It all came down to *him*, he decided. He'd caused this gut-wrenching pain by allowing himself to be serious about the affair. It was beyond stupid to believe a celebrity like Kevin Connolly could be satisfied with the likes of a lowly Nathaniel Marquette.

* * *

Two weeks without a phone call had gone by before the fiasco at FairPlex and now three more had passed with no contact from Kevin. Nate let the battery on his cell run down and didn't recharge it. He wanted to see and touch Kevin so much it was killing him, but he wanted an end to his pain more. The memories of sex and exchanging confidences with Kevin here in his home were too fresh and caused too much agony, so he moved out of Fawnskin and spent the last weeks of his job in a rental house in Big Bear.

"You've lost even more weight since the fire," Claudene said one morning during a lull as the two of them worked the community's hazardous waste disposal site.

Claudene stopped the cars, wrote down what they were dropping off, and Nate, wearing heavy blue gloves on his hands, carried the chemicals to the sorting area.

"Have I lost weight? I hadn't noticed." It was true. Nate hadn't noticed. He'd been too intent on dealing with what was happening with his emotions.

"The sadness in your face has been wrenching my gut. Wanna

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

talk about anything?”

A rush of feeling for her perceptive concern rolled through him. He smiled at her. “I hadn’t noticed that either, but you remind me of my youngest sister. She’d just kick her big brother’s butt and tell him to get on with it. Maybe I’ll do just that.”

After they’d closed down the site for the week and were walking back to the fire truck, he put an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem. Any time you want me to play little sis, I’ll be around.”

* * *

At FairPlex Park, Kevin hadn’t had time even to glance at the card handed to him when filming had finished because out of the corner of his eye he’d noticed a man rushing toward him. The man was a stranger and appeared out of nowhere. Everyone wore their credentials hanging from a cord around their necks, but nothing hung over his shirt. Someone handed Kevin a card, but his alarm bells were jangling and he didn’t look at it. Only later did he realize he’d let it fall through his fingers.

The stranger reached Kevin and threw his arms around him. “We belong together, baby brother,” he said.

Kevin recoiled as rough, dry lips press against his mouth. The man’s breath and the smell of his clothes were odious. He pushed hard at the man and freed himself. “Get away from me! How did you get in here?” Reaching into his slacks pocket, he punched the number on his cell phone for security. By the time the security guards arrived, however, the man had disappeared.

Later, the head guard reported, “We can’t find him, Mr.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Connolly. He's obviously very familiar with the fairgrounds. We think he must've hidden here overnight or longer waiting for you to arrive."

Kevin washed his face and rinsed his mouth over and over before he left for home. For the first time, he realized he was being stalked. He insisted the studio stop publishing their schedule for shooting scenes outside of the studio in the trade newspapers.

As if emboldened by the embrace, crudely worded love notes began to arrive in the mail. They made reference to the incident in the fairgrounds, so Kevin figured they were from the man who'd accosted him. Sometimes Kevin thought he saw the fleeting figure of the man when he was out and about, convincing him he was right about having a stalker. One night he saw a figure standing at the edge of the light from a street lamp several houses over.

"You gotta hire a bodyguard." Bunny paced, running his hands through his hair. His eyes bugged out like those of a dead fish.

"Calm down, Semple. The guy's probably harmless, and I've hired a private detective. If we notify the police, it'll get in the papers, and if he reads them it'll be even harder to catch him," Kevin insisted.

"People like that are touched in the head. They escalate. Some of them believe in reincarnation, although they probably wouldn't call it that. They're crazy enough to think if you two die together you'll be reborn in another life and be together forever."

"Look. I saw the guy. Smelled him. He's homeless. No way he's going to harm me because he doesn't have the resources for it. I do not need a bodyguard."

To settle Bunny's nerves, he had his house and grounds thoroughly alarmed, but if he hired a bodyguard, it would hamper his contacts with Nate. Those were few enough as it was, and he

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

missed being with him. A lot. For now, he was afraid to contact him. There was no way he wanted to unleash the crazy guy on him. Surely they'd catch the man and then he could see Nate.

Four weeks later, the PI found the stalker living on the streets. The police arrested him after finding evidence of the stalking among his things.

With a sigh of relief, Kevin telephoned Nate, but the phone wasn't in service. He sneaked away one weekend when he knew Nate would be off duty and drove to Fawnskin, but he didn't answer the door. Kevin waited all day, slept in his car and half froze that night, but Nate didn't return.

His usually ebullient spirits dropped to dejection, and he drove home.

He tried calling several times over many days, but Nate's phone was still off. In desperation, he called the fire station, where he learned Nate no longer worked there.

* * *

For Nate, the clean, sweet air of the cedar, fir, maple and red alder forest was like a healing balm. He opened up his cabin and aired it out, unloaded groceries and other necessities from the helicopter, then turned on the water, which he'd shut off for the winter to keep the pipes from freezing. Wearing a hard hat, he drove the rough road to the logging site and introduced himself to the boss of a crew he'd worked with previously. They discussed the logistics of the job.

Before leaving the cabin the next morning, he checked the messages on his phone in the Seattle office. Caller ID alerted him he had a message from Kevin. The hurt he'd barely tamped down

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

flared up, mingled with anger. No doubt, Kevin's affair with the man he'd kissed at the fairgrounds had soured, and now he thought he could pick up where he left off with Nate.

He didn't need this. Heli-logging was a dangerous business that required a clear mind unencumbered by emotional pain. He deleted the message without listening to it.

He delivered men to the cutting zone deep in the forest and returned over the treetops to the landing site. When the call came that trees were ready for pick up, he flew back and his day began.

At the close of work, he had a beer in the Leaping Deer, a small bar and grill, with the crew boss and some of the men. He was tired by the time he reached the cabin, but he checked his office messages. Another call from Kevin. He deleted it. It was the fourth day he'd done so.

He'd just finished his supper in the cabin when there was a knock on the door. He opened it.

Kevin stood on the porch. His mustache and beard were in place, and he was dressed in logger gear, right down to the red and yellow reflective vest. He carried a red hard hat under one arm. He grinned and pointed to his boots. "Leather soles."

The blood left Nate's face. His lungs forgot to fill. For a moment, he clung to the door for support. "Go away." He slowly shut the door in Kevin's face.

"Hey!" The surprise in Kevin's voice caused more pain for Nate.

Although it almost killed him, he didn't open the door when Kevin pounded on it and called out again and again. He couldn't keep the tears from spilling over when Kevin gave up. He wondered if Rhett Butler had felt torn by his emotions when he finally walked away from Scarlett.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Problem was, he thought as he tossed and turned in the night, it wasn't *done* for him. His low spirits had lifted when he heard the familiar voice at the door. Now he wondered if he could keep his relationship with Kevin and share him with this other man. The answer came back *no*. If Kevin had had a brief fling and come back to Nate, could Nate stay with Kevin? Again, the answer came back in the negative. Cheating wasn't his idea of monogamy. The bottom line was, he was trapped by his own standards. On that glum thought, he finally drifted off.

The next morning when he arrived at the loading zone, eyes bleak from a sleepless night, a smiling Kevin greeted him with a handshake. He also handed him a Release from Harm statement verifying that if he were injured in any way he or his estate wouldn't sue.

"The guys tell me you have to make two trips to drop them off and there's room for me in the second one."

Clever guy that Kevin. He'd neatly trapped Nate into letting him climb into the heli. As Kevin pulled himself in and settled next to him, he said under his breath, "You're not getting away with this, you bastard. Until you tell me what's wrong, consider me your second skin."

Nate stared at him. This was a Kevin he'd never seen. One he certainly didn't know.

When the last man was loaded, Nate handed Kevin a pair of earphones that would protect them from the roar of the rotors. Nate's earphones were radios so he could communicate with the ground crews, especially the "Clear" men who let him know when it was safe to lift a load.

Nate lifted off and the big bird rose into the cold, blue sky. He hated the sensation that with Kevin beside him his life was

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

complete. But then, that was the crux of the problem, wasn't it?

* * *

The heli bird lifted above the tree line, and Kevin gasped as a world of mountains, trees and lake stretched endlessly around him in awesome beauty. Shades of greens and reddish brown and black patches of earth peeped through here and there as the steep slopes dropped down to the frigid blue of a lake and river. Remnants of winter snow shone as white patches, tucked away in pockets hidden from the golden glints of sunlight.

He sucked in his breath again. He hadn't realized how all-consuming he'd let Hollywood and his job become. Nate knew worlds and things he'd missed out on in his drive to be and remain one of the best actors in the unreal world that was Hollywood.

Beside him, Nate was talking on the radio to a groundsman as he settled the bird onto a platform made of a crosshatching of logs. They touched down without a hitch. The men seated behind Kevin jumped down, ducking beneath the decapitating rotors, holding their hats against the powerful downdraft they made.

Kevin looked down on a big yellow chest with a red cross on top sitting on the ground next to the landing pad. He didn't need to ask what that was or why it was so large.

Nate was listening in his headphones and talking on the tiny radio mike near his mouth when Kevin noticed he had a five o'clock shadow. It made him look so all-man and so sensual that Kevin looked away. He'd tossed and turned all night, afraid Nate hadn't wanted to see him because he was hiding a diagnosis of cancer or some other horrible condition. He knew from the tests it wouldn't be HIV, so it must be something untreatable. This

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

morning, looking big and strong, only Nate's eyes revealed he hadn't slept any more than Kevin had.

Before lifting off again, Nate said, "The wind caused by the rotors reaches over sixty miles an hour. It's the loggers' job to be sure the route of my flyover is safe. They've removed snags, dangerous trees and trees too weak to stand the strong wind, and we'll fly within the boundaries of that safe path."

The heli rose and flew above the top of the forest to a place where men were cutting trees. One man tapped his hard hat several times and held one arm out from his body as he bent the other one at its elbow and pointed it the same direction as the first arm.

Nate spoke to him via radio, then said to Kevin, "That's the hooker. He's using international hand signals to tell me how many logs there are and where. I'm maneuvering over them now. If you look down, you'll see I'm lowering the grappling hook. He'll come in and wait, letting the hook come to him, then he'll grab the ends of the loop already under the logs and attach them to the hook. I'll snug it up tight."

Kevin watched as the hooker did the job in seconds, raced away from the logs, turned to face them and signaled again.

"Now he's telling me on the radio and with his hands and arms that everything is clear for me to make the turn and head to the dumping site. It's an open radio wave, so he's using my copter's name and call number so if there are other heli-loggers on nearby slopes they won't mistake the call for them. When we pick up logs or release them, it's imperative there are no loggers underneath the heli. That's the purpose of the clear call."

Kevin remembered a horrible filming accident that had happened before his time. A well-known actor died in an outdoor night scene in rough water when a helicopter came down on him.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

They were filming in low light, the pilot was following directions, and the weather was such no one saw who was in the water beneath him. Kevin shuddered at the memory.

Nate shared his lunch with Kevin at the landing site, but he was all business. There were no subtle touches of the hands. He even sat so their bodies wouldn't come in contact at all. It was almost as if they weren't even friends. After they'd eaten the last crumb, the crew boss arranged for Kevin to be on the ground at a cutting site to see the operation from there.

He listened to comments about Nate from the crew.

"He's good people," one of the loggers said.

Kevin nodded, but he wanted to say, "He's good people, and he's mine. All mine." But after the reception he'd gotten last night he wondered if Nate really was his anymore. He wasn't sure he could bear it if Nate no longer cared for him.

* * *

For dinner, they ate barbecue and drank beer in the Leaping Deer, where tree stumps formed the tables and beer barrels the chairs. An inch of sawdust covered the floor. Nate chuckled to himself over Kevin's reaction to the rough and tumble place. For a moment, he'd screwed up his face in distaste when he noticed his new boots were covered with sawdust, but it instantly disappeared into a smile.

"Interesting place you've got here," he said as he drank from his beer bottle.

Nate choked on his beer and burst out laughing. It felt good. He was far too serious for his own good. He sobered when the problem of Kevin hung heavy on his heart once again.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

They parted, and Nate checked on the helicopter one last time for the night, then drove to the cabin and pulled onto his gravel driveway. As he went up the porch steps, sudden fear cause the hairs to raise on his arms and his heart thudded when a figure moved in the darkness.

Kevin stood by the door, hands in his pockets.

“What are you doing here?” The bitterness in Nate’s voice was sharp. He couldn’t stop himself.

Shock spread across Kevin’s face. He stepped back. “I...I thought you’d be glad to see me. I’ve had a hell of a time finding you. Your cell phone isn’t working, and you haven’t answered any of the messages I’ve left on your office phone where I’d left a number where you could reach me, so I came here.”

“How did you track me down?”

“Track you down? You gave me your business card, remember? When your phone was out of service for so long, I risked calling the fire station and learned your job there had ended. I knew you’d be heli-logging, so when you didn’t return my calls, I contacted the state’s forestry department to find out where they were logging. Then I called the logging outfits to see if they’d hired you.”

Kevin took a deep breath. “I’m confused. You seem unhappy to see me. I suppose it was stupid of me, but I thought you’d have missed me as much as I’ve missed you.” The smile had disappeared. His voice was flat.

Oh, I’ve missed you all right. You broke my heart.

“I suppose the other man dumped you, and so you’ve come back to poor, gullible Nate. This isn’t the first time it’s happened to me, but it’ll be the last.”

“Other man? I don’t know what in hell you’re talking about.”

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Irritation blended with controlled anger to wipe the flatness from Kevin's voice.

"Look, I've been betrayed like this before. I hope you saw what a dangerous business I'm in. I can't have my mind grieving over a broken love affair while I'm flying or someone will get hurt. Maybe even killed." Nate stepped around him and unlocked the door.

When he opened the door, Kevin pushed him through it and followed him inside.

He kicked the door shut behind him. "This isn't a conversation I want to have on the porch." He poked Nate in the chest with a finger. "You haven't answered me. *What* other man?"

"The man I saw you kissing so passionately at FairPlex." Everything in Nate ached to crush Kevin to him, to taste him again as his tongue searched Kevin's mouth. He wanted to feel his body, solid, warm and alive as it melted into his. He also wanted him to stay forever, but he spoke in a voice so cold even he didn't recognize it as his. "I was there that day. I had someone deliver your card with my initials on it to you so you'd know I was there. You threw it to the ground and went to kiss another man."

Kevin leaned back against the wall for support as all the air escaped his lungs. "Oh, my Lord, I thought maybe you were avoiding me because you had cancer and were dying or something. You saw that? Is that what's wrong?"

"I'd say it's quite enough."

"I've been the target of a homeless, mentally ill stalker. So far, my agent's managed to keep it out of the news because I hired a private investigator to locate him. On the one hand, the stalker believes I'm his long lost baby brother, the only family he has, and on the other, his lover. That's who you saw hug and kiss me.

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

Apparently, you didn't watch long enough to see me push him away or notice the swarm of security guards responding to my call for help. I don't think I've ever been so scared. Came embarrassingly close to peeing my pants."

Nate's face filled with fear. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, but I could hardly wait to wash my face and rinse my mouth out."

"Did they catch him?"

"No. The security officers believed he'd been hiding inside the grounds for several days and eluded regular patrols. Somehow, despite all the tight security, he got to me that day and then escaped. I refused to notify the police because it would go public. Then crudely-worded love notes began arriving. I was afraid if I went to see you, the stalker might follow me. If he knew we were lovers, he might see you as a rival and hurt you."

Nate pulled him away from the wall and wrapped his arms around warm, solid, safe Kevin.

"You've lost more weight. Are you okay?" Kevin asked.

"I'm fine."

"No, you aren't."

Nate kissed his hair. "Now that we're together, I'm fine. I've been such a fool. I should've trusted what I knew of you. Instead, I let an old experience I thought I'd overcome distort you into someone else. Have they caught the stalker?"

"My PI found him. The police discovered evidence proving he was the stalker. He's in jail."

"Thank God."

"As soon as they locked him up, I tried to reach you by phone. When I couldn't, I drove to Fawnskin knowing you had time off, but you weren't there. I waited all day for you. In hopes you'd

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

return, I slept in my car, for which I wasn't prepared, and nearly froze my ass off."

Nate groaned and hugged him tighter. "There were too many memories of you in my house. It hurt so much I couldn't stay there, so I rented a place in Big Bear." He led Kevin to the couch and put an arm around his shoulder to keep him close. "Let me tell you why I was such a fool."

He told Kevin about Airon, details he'd locked deep inside and that he'd never shared with anyone, not even Jack "I should've known you weren't another Airon, but I was very young, it was my first sexual experience, and the betrayal hurt like hell. I regret I didn't realize it was still a sore festering inside me."

"And you've been afraid of getting too close to another man again," Kevin said.

Nate sighed, then smiled. "And with good reason, I think, considering some of the duds I've dated."

"I haven't had an Airon in my life, but I've certainly dated some flakes. Actually, from what the women on the set tell me, dating flakes is pretty much par for the course no matter your gender. It's a wonder I haven't pulled back, too."

Nate kissed him, then he whispered against Kevin's lips, "I love you, Kevin Connolly. *You*. Not TV's star and its sexiest man. I love the Kevin Connolly I met at Jack's wedding."

"I love you, too, Nathaniel Marquette. Have loved you from the moment I first saw you. It's a good thing it's the real me you care about because I'm not always going to be the hottest star, and in a couple of months they'll choose another sexiest man. I'll be a has-been. You'll always have work, but it isn't that way in my business. With a snap of a finger, they could cancel my show when it's at the top of the ratings. They could decide to move in a new

SOMEBODY TO LOVE

direction and replace me. I could go years between gigs or I might never work in television again.”

“I made such a mess of things. Can we start all over from the beginning?” Nate asked in a low, raspy voice.

“What do you mean?”

“The night we met, you danced for me.”

“Oh, I remember all right.” Kevin’s voice was husky as he trailed a finger down Nate’s cheek.

“Dance for me now.”

A lazy smile that caused all the lines to crinkle spread across Kevin’s face. He kissed Nate, teasing his mouth open with his tongue, dancing first inside its heat and wetness. Ending the kiss, he removed his shoes and socks and stood.

In the confines of the small living room, with Chippendale moves, he began to dance. He unbuttoned his shirt and teased it off like a female stripper removing a long glove, and when the shirt lay crumpled on the floor, he reached for the button on his pants...

CAROLINA VALDEZ

Carolina Valdez, author of the popular Amber Heat Wave winner *Dark Stranger*, composed her first stories at the age of eight. That was about the time Santa left the first books she had in her home-abridged versions of the *Wizard of Oz* for children. She has happy memories of trips to used bookstores with her mother to locate and buy the full versions when she was ten or twelve.

Captivated by the odd characters and their adventures, Carolina wrote a letter to L. Frank Baum, the author. Ruth Plumly Thompson replied, enclosing a map of the Kingdom of Oz. Sadly, the letter and map have disappeared over the years, but the love of writing and creating her own fictional worlds have remained. Carolina has a collection of Oz books, one of which, given to her by her mother when it was new, has recently been appraised at \$350.

Before writing for Amber Quill Press, Carolina had more than sixty publications to her credit, ranging from children's stories to articles in professional journals. A public health nurse with an advanced university degree, she won *RN Magazine's* First Award for Writing, and has been published also in the *American Journal of Nursing*. She was a Guideposts Writers Workshop and Guideposts Reunion Workshop winner, and her work has appeared in that periodical and several *Daily Guideposts* books. Among her other wins are the Soul-Making Literary Prize for Essay, the Marjorie Davis Roller Award for non-fiction, Della Crowder

Memorial and Millennium awards for poetry, and the Norman E. and Marjorie J. Roller first prize for a story about a horse that can float on water.

She contributed (under the name Carol Holman) to *Mean Girls Grown Up*, a book regarding adult female relational aggression.

Dark Stranger was her first venture into sensual romance. Her first attempt into the murder genre can be read on-line at *Mysterical-E*. Her latest can be found in the 2006 crime anthology, *Landmarked for Murder*.

Valdez is a member of the Orange County, From The Heart, and Hearts Through History chapters of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime/Los Angeles.

She resides with her husband in sunny Southern California.

* * *

**Don't miss *Hole In One*
by Carolina Valdez,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

During the days, they were fierce nineteen-year-old rivals in a collegiate golf competition, but at night, their passion sizzled under the sheets. After Team USA won, Rio "River" Vargas returned to his native Spain and Greg Thorenson headed back to his home in the United States. But when Rio didn't respond to a letter he sent, Greg wasn't sure if Rio's silence was because Greg

had beaten him for the win or because their affair had been only a four-night-fling.

Now, professionals at the height of their game, they meet again as competitors in a major tournament in the California desert, where the prize of thousands of dollars is at stake. It's been six silent years since those wild, hot nights as young men. Maybe for Rio that earlier passion had been an experiment, an aberration of who he really is and of whatever Greg may have meant to him. But to Greg, that earlier passion had been something deeper...he had fallen in love.

Upon seeing Rio again, Greg is torn between ignoring the past or re-igniting the banked embers of emotion to see where they'll lead. But can he risk it? If Greg opens himself to love, and also wins this tournament, Rio may very well walk out of his life a second time...

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