



# Off Trail

## JB McDonald

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Off Trail

TOP SHELF

An imprint of Torquere Press Publishers

PO Box 2545

Round Rock, TX 78680

Copyright 2010 by JB McDonald

Cover illustration by Alessia Brio

Published with permission

ISBN: 978-1-60370-380-2

[www.torquerepress.com](http://www.torquerepress.com)

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

First Torquere Press Printing: July 2010

Printed in the USA

*Dedication:*

With many thanks to my close friends and significant others, who understood when I couldn't do things because I was writing, editing, or proofreading. Special thanks go to DK, who not only understood but listened to me rant when I was struggling, helped me with plot points when I needed it, and cheered me on even when it meant skipping a date.

## *Chapter One*

Keith put the car into park at the top of the hill, staring down into the village nestled in the little valley. It was a tourist town, and the people here made their living off the ski slopes in the winter and the lake in the summer. All the trim was painted neatly and the buildings were meant to look like log cabins. He and Josh had spent winters here, skiing and dog sledding, curled up by the fire with hot cocoa and sexy stories.

Josh had been gone for a little over a year, and Keith hadn't been back since. It was time, though. He preferred it here, and he had nowhere else to go.

Taking a deep breath, Keith put the four-wheel drive SUV into gear and started down the mountain. "Shall we, guys?"

From the back, where the seats had all been laid down, what was left of Josh's kennel whined. Kara stood up, circled, and lay back down, trying to find a place that was comfortable on her distended stomach. Keith figured he'd better stop soon; pregnancy seemed to press on her bladder as much as it would on a human's. With luck, they'd make it down the hill and into town first.

The snow was still several inches deep on either side of the road, with drifts piling up in shaded areas. Spring wouldn't come to the mountain community for another two months

yet, no matter what the groundhog said. Keith drove carefully but quickly, a year's absence making no difference in how well he remembered the roads. The SUV moved smoothly. They'd bought it three years earlier; strong enough to tow a trailer so they could take the dogs and gear anywhere, modern enough to appease Josh's sense of aesthetics.

The body shop had been able to put it back together after the accident. Josh hadn't fared so well.

The memory still hurt, but it wasn't as devastating as it had been. The first six months had been bad, and there were still moments when Keith wanted nothing more than to pull out what was left of his heart, but those moments were fewer and farther between. He had to believe that everyone else was right. That, someday, the gut-wrenching pain would go away altogether, leaving behind bittersweet nostalgia.

As if sensing Keith's gloomy emotions, Sam whined softly and pulled himself forward, reaching between the two front seats with his graying muzzle to nudge at Keith's elbow.

Keith reached back absently to pat the big, square head with its thick covering of fur. Large, cupped ears flopped sideways, and Sam's pink tongue lolled out happily. After a moment, Keith returned both hands to the wheel, feeling better about the world again. It was the dogs who'd gotten him through, though at first he hadn't even wanted to look at them. They were Josh's pride and joy, and Keith had come within a hair's breadth of selling the lot.

In the end, fifteen dogs had been too many for one person to handle, anyway. He'd found homes for most of them,

reputable breeders who were thrilled to have the kennel bloodlines, and kept only four. Of course, Kara was ready to pop at any moment. He hadn't thought Sam could physically do it, but apparently the two dogs had found a way.

The sun peeked out between soft gray clouds as they finally reached the base of the mountain and the little town. The lake rippled, empty -- too cold to go swimming, not cold enough to skate. It would be that way for months, though some hardy fishermen and the occasional group of teenagers would still make use of the water. By July, the summer tourists would come in, crowding into every available cabin and townhouse to enjoy the water and surrounding forest. But for now, the town was quiet.

A year hadn't changed much. The general store was still where he remembered it, though the sign had been repainted. There was a restaurant where a bar used to be, and a cybercafé for the technologically minded. As he rolled slowly by, he saw that the cybercafé was currently closed for business, due to reopen when the summer crowd arrived.

Keith steered his way off the main street, heading down the winding side roads. Here were the smaller, unadorned shops where the town dwellers spent their money. Where food didn't cost an arm and a leg, but you had to look for the local grocery store. Nothing was quite as cute or quaint, but it was all neatly kept and in good repair. It was a thriving community, even if it wasn't exactly growing.

Keith was glad it wasn't growing. He didn't know if he would've been able to take it if things had changed too much to recognize.

Kara whined again, bringing Keith back to the present -- as she had so many times before. "All right, sweetheart," he murmured, pulling over on the side of the road. "Just hang on." Snow and gravel crunched beneath the tires. He opened the door, taking a deep breath as cold air whisked into the SUV. The smell of pine needles seemed to turn the air a crisp green, as if Keith could see the very essence of it. It chilled his lungs, clearing his head a little, invigorating his blood.

The dogs had scrambled to their feet, looking hopefully out the window. Keith opened the back door, was assaulted by hot breath from all the excited panting, and stepped to one side. "Kara. *Just* Kara," he added, when the three others looked like they might scramble out, too.

Kara leaped daintily to the empty road, trailing her leash. He picked it up and closed the door, walking her around to the edge of the snow.

She picked her way through the melting slush, large paws leaving even larger prints, and finally found the perfect spot under a tree. She trotted back to the SUV happily when she was done, her long belly fur almost brushing the ground. He was always amazed she could be so graceful while so heavily pregnant, though he had to admit she tired easily.

It was another thirty minutes to the cabin, clear on the other side of the town -- the side farthest from the tourist activities -- and back up into the mountains. It had been standing alone for the last year, but it had weathered without them before. The town was virtually the same; he expected no less from his home.

When he got there, he pulled over carefully, then sat in the SUV, staring at the building Josh had always referred to as their log cabin. Log was right; at first glance, it looked like it had been put together with rough trees and daub. There the relation to a cabin ended, though. Keith knew that it was all modern and insulated under that façade.

It was two stories, with a porch that stretched off of the mountain, a little less than a man's height above the ground. Three chimneys from the three fireplaces reached toward the sky like naked branches, bereft of smoke or life, topped with old snow. More snow was piled easily a foot deep on the roof, with icicles hanging down from all the eaves like stalactites in some dreary cave. The rail around the porch had a long crack down the center. There was a bird's nest on the nearest chimney.

It obviously hadn't been cared for in a very long time.

Bracing himself for a mess to be cleaned before he could sleep, Keith opened the car door and stepped out onto snow. It crunched under his hiking boots, compacting beneath his weight. He opened the back door and let the dogs out, watching the three leap free and start bounding around, checking the surroundings to see what had changed -- or maybe reminding themselves of where they were.

Sam stayed in the SUV, yipping hopefully in his happiest voice. That something so high and squeaky could come out of a hundred and twenty pound dog was always a little stunning to Keith.

"Hang on, bud," Keith murmured, opening up the trunk and hauling out the wheelchair. "Gimme just a minute."



Sam had already pulled himself around to the back, front paws spreading as he dug his nails into the blanket to drag his useless back legs along. He was still yipping.

"I know, I know," Keith laughed. The wheelchair settled lightly down onto the road, tipping forward against the shoulder brace. Next came the hardest part, and the only thing Keith didn't like about the SUV -- Sam couldn't come close to getting in or out himself. Keith looped one arm under the dog's barrel chest, the other under his abdomen, and heaved him out onto the ground.

Unable to do more than the barest of wags with his damaged nerves, Sam's front end seemed to take over the wagging duties. He danced from front paw to front paw, weaving back and forth with excitement, but too well-mannered to try and go anywhere.

It took only moments to tip the wheelchair up, roll it forward over Sam's crippled hind end, and rest it on his shoulders. Another moment to snap the straps in place across his chest and under his belly, and then loop the supports under his hips. Counting beneath his breath, Keith made it to three and pulled, picking up Sam's hips and locking the straps into place on the metal contraption. Finally, he strung up the unusable back legs and checked everything to be sure nothing pinched. Sam couldn't move his legs, certainly couldn't support his own weight, but he could still feel if something hurt. Sure that all was well, Keith gave Sam a pat; his cue to go charging off, forelegs racing along, wheels spinning.

Sam hit the snow and floundered, but dragged the wheelchair through it with great determination.

Keith frowned. He should have expected that the snow would be a problem. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him. Adding it to the top of his mental list of things to fix -- a list that wasn't long yet, but he guessed would be soon -- he trudged toward the stairs that led up to the porch and stopped.

*Stairs.* Sam couldn't wheel up stairs.

He added it to the list as well and marched up them himself, stomping down with each foot to try and make a path through the snow. Crashing down the steps definitely wasn't on the to-do list.

In the summertime, they'd had a porch swing out here. Skis had leaned up against the wall, constantly ready to be put away -- though somehow they seemed to spend the summer outside. Boots piled by the door, the ratty welcome mat that Josh insisted on out front (as if anyone ever came up this way who hadn't been invited first), muddy paw prints everywhere, and on every beam that could support them hung pots of flowers that Josh bought and Keith killed.

It was empty now. Only the rocker sat on the far end, so covered in snow it was almost invisible. They must have had quite the storm, Keith mused, to have snow over the porch, blown in under the overhang. It had even banked up against the walls, nearly as high as the windows in some places.

Which meant he wasn't getting the door open without some digging.

He turned and went back to the SUV, glad he'd thought to pack things like snowshoes and skis and a snow shovel

with the dog gear, strapped to the roof of the car. It took some effort to get the shovel down – naturally, it was underneath everything else, including the light but awkward sled -- though he finally managed it and marched back up the porch.

Kara had decided the world was too white and cold for further exploration, and tucked herself into the vehicle. Sam barked while Mason and Hughie ran around in circles, kicking white powder up onto their long, black and tan coats, and breaking through occasional ice. Keith took a quick look at Sam's wheels -- they seemed stuck -- and decided that the dog didn't look upset. He'd keep half an eye on Sam, and in the meantime not have to worry that Sam would topple over somewhere.

It didn't take long at all to shovel the snow away from the door. It took longer to get the ice off the lock and the cold tumblers to twist. Another thing to add to the to-do list: make sure he could lock the door without locking himself out.

He had to put his shoulder to the wood to open it, and then it went screeching across the floor like a thousand harpies overhead.

Josh had always said he was melodramatic. To do: replace door. It wasn't a good sign that the wood was warped.

He stepped inside. Leaves crunched underfoot and disintegrated, leaving behind broken skeletons. Leaves indoors really weren't a good sign.

It was colder inside than out, but he'd expected that. The

drifts of plant matter against the walls and corners he hadn't expected. With growing dread, he looked around.

The front door opened into a large room, nearly the size of the entire downstairs -- perfect for dozens of dogs, Josh had laughed when they'd first seen the place. The center area was set three steps lower than the rest, a room within a room, complete with a couch, recliners, and a low wooden table, all surrounding the big stone fireplace.

There were leaves everywhere. Paw prints tracked across the light wood floors, tufts of fur lying here and there. One of the couches -- the ugly green one Keith had hated so much -- had been torn up, the stuffing pulled out (or burrowed into, and he didn't want to know which).

There was a draft inside, and it wasn't coming from the doorway behind him.

Bracing himself, Keith turned to his right and headed toward the bathroom. At least in there the plumbing seemed to be working, and the refuse from animals and plants was less. Nothing had wanted to stay on the cool tile. He closed the door behind him, as if that might keep creatures out, and walked across to the kitchen.

The skylight that Josh had so loved was broken. Beneath it, the wood floor had been stripped of varnish and lay bare and weathered, warped from rain and snow. There was an entire branch lying in front of the double kitchen sinks, brown and dead.

A horrible, high-pitched chattering made Keith jump and whirl, staring at the squirrel that sat on top of the big, stainless steel, double-door chef's refrigerator, yelling

rodent profanities.

Before Keith could even think of what to do -- what did you do when a squirrel got into your open house? -- Hughie was there, well over a hundred pounds of long, salt and pepper fur writhing with excited mania, leaping up against cupboards, the fridge, the counter, anything to get at the intruder. Mason raced to help, and their deep voices rattled around the empty house worse even than the squirrel's chattering.

"Knock it off!" Keith bellowed, and both dogs dropped down to all fours and gave him heavily disappointed looks. The squirrel just kept going. Outside, he could hear Sam's frustrated howl. The kitchen window showed him the dog, scrabbling through white powder, dragging the wheelchair along.

Keith rubbed his eyes. So there was some cleaning and de-rodenting to be done. He'd board up the skylight, and it would be as good as new.

"Come on," he muttered to the dogs. "Outta here."

They fell into line, following him out the door with their shaggy tails waving behind them.

The den was next, past the stairs at the back of the house. He tried not to look at the couch-turned-nest as he walked past it, half afraid of what other critters he might find.

The bad news just kept piling up.

Something -- he guessed something human -- had broken through the den window. The place was trashed, the thick

rug ruined with mud and rain, the floorboards underneath -- he didn't look at those. More leaves, more branches. Bottles and trash, confirming his suspicions. He didn't examine anything too closely before turning and walking up the stairs.

This, at least, wasn't so bad. The four bedrooms had escaped mostly unscathed, except for trash from his visitors, more leaves, and a bird that twittered at him when he opened the linen closet. He closed it again, leaving the bird in peace and thwarting Mason and Hughie's hopes.

Animal damage, but the master bedroom and bathroom seemed all right, and the skylights were whole. He took a breath and looked around, glad that even the nesting animals had stayed mostly downstairs. Likely using the windows to get in and out.

Cobwebs, dust -- those he'd expected and could deal with. He turned and regarded Hughie and Mason. They regarded him back.

"Well, gents." They both pricked their ears, and Hughie's head tipped. "I'm thinking a hotel for the night might be a good idea."

Mason plopped his butt on the ground and whined.

\*\*\*

As it turned out, Mason's disagreement stood. Back in the SUV, Keith leaned his head against the driver's seat headrest and closed his cell phone. None of the hotels -- neither of them, he should say -- would accept dogs. One dog, sure. Even two large ones. But four? No way.

The bed and breakfast had apologized profusely, and offered to let the dogs stay in the back yard, or to give him the number for a kennel the next town over (which, when he reluctantly called, informed him they didn't take unfixed dogs).

Sam and Kara panted in the back, though Hughie and Mason had left to go exploring again. He could see them, two dark shapes sniffing under the trees about a hundred feet distant. Keith turned to look at Sam.

Sam looked back with a dopey smile on his black and tan face, muzzle going silver, big ears flopped sideways.

"Okay. So... we'll just fix up the place for the night. Only need one room, right?"

Sam's tail thumped laboriously against the seat.

"Right." He climbed back out of the vehicle, regarding the cooling afternoon and the house that had been so damaged. If he turned the heater on, the heat would just escape out the broken windows. He didn't have boards to cover them up. That'd take a trip back into town to gather nails and wood. But he could close the doors and turn off the vents in those rooms...

He started toward the cabin once more, neither Kara nor Sam even asking if they could come. Both of them were tuckered out, though Sam's eyes were bright and alert as he watched out the windows. Kara continued napping.

It didn't take too long to close the vents in all the rooms except the master bedroom and the main downstairs living

area. Keith had planned on turning the den into a bedroom. It had a fireplace, and he wouldn't have to lug Sam up and down the stairs, but with the windows broken that was no longer a possibility. Lugging him for a few nights wouldn't hurt anything, though.

The heater kicked on with a cough and a rattle before settling down to a low hum. He silently thanked the neighbor who'd been checking the pipes and electrics every other month for him, then wondered why she hadn't mentioned the windows.

Maybe she hadn't seen them. They were in the back of the house.

Next, he broke out the cleaning supplies they'd left behind a year ago. He promptly threw them out. Everything was broken, leaking, or had been used to make an animal nest.

With a muttered curse, he stood at the basement door, tucked behind the stairs to the second story. He hated the basement. It was tiny, dug into the side of the mountain, lit with a single bulb. A single bulb that was probably burned out. He'd tried the flashlight; the batteries were dead.

Reluctantly, he pulled open the door. Cool air wafted up from below, and he could make out the faint shape of plastic boxes. It smelled like mice. He hated mice.

"This was supposed to be your job, Josh," he muttered, and took the first step. There were only seven stairs in all, the ceiling looming just overhead. He grabbed the first sealed plastic box he could reach and hauled it back up, heart pounding. It should have--



Ah. There. Relieved, he wiped the dust off the label. In Josh's neat block writing was printed, **Linens: towels, sheets, etc.** Josh had insisted on packing everything up the last winter they'd been here, saying they'd want new stuff come summer anyway. Keith had never been so glad as he was now. Even the plastic was chewed, but when he set the box down and popped the lid open, the contents were as clean as the day they'd packed them.

They still smelled like oak logs from the fire, laughter, and the cologne Josh always wore. Keith hadn't found anything that smelled like Josh in almost a year, and the sudden heartsickness left him breathless. Carefully, he withdrew the towel on top, bringing it to his face and inhaling deeply. He remembered this day as sharply as if it had been yesterday. Arguing gently over what to pack and what to leave out. Getting overruled on everything, and telling Josh he was a neat freak. Josh laughing and agreeing and saying Keith would appreciate it when it was all nice and clean later. Kissing. Distracting each other. Leaving three hours late, because they'd had better things to do than pack.

He missed Josh. Three little words that had more power than he could have ever thought possible. Three little words that seemed completely incapable of explaining how he felt.

Achingly, he put the towel to one side and looked at the rest of what was in there. More towels, sheets, a blanket at the very bottom. He couldn't bring himself to use any of it as cleaning rags. They smelled like his lover.

Packing it all back up, Keith set it aside and walked back out to the car. "Mason! Hughie!"

Both heads poked out of the SUV windows.

Keith frowned. "I don't wanna know how you got in there..." He crunched through the snow, paused to make sure Kara and Sam were in there, too -- they were -- and got back into the driver's seat. "All right, guys, one more stop, and then we'll settle down for the night. First, cleaning supplies."

The big dog faces all gave him highly approving looks. He patted the nearest head -- Mason's, covered in thick black fur, red touches hidden under his jaw and belly -- and started the engine. The closest edge of town was twenty minutes down the mountainside. If he hurried, he could make it before dark.

To his mental list, he added a flashlight and batteries.

\*\*\*

It was full dark by the time he finally wound his way back up the mountain road and parked outside the cabin. The dogs were all sleeping in the back, a head occasionally rising to peer blearily around before it was laid back down again. They woke when he turned off the engine, but settled down to wait again when he got out of the car and followed the path he'd broken earlier to the front door.

The house was dark. He fumbled with the lock before remembering he'd just bought a flashlight and batteries, then went back to the car to fish them out of the bag and wrestle with the battery packaging. When he had everything set, he went back to the house, found the lock, unlocked the door with another rattle, jiggle, and a few curses -- definitely needed to get the lock looked at -- and

turned on the lights inside.

At least they came on, though the cabin didn't look any better at night than it had in the day, and now he had hours of work to do and he was tired. He dropped several bags of supplies and a single bag of groceries on the floor and looked around, wondering what needed to be done first.

The bedroom. If he could get the bedroom cleaned up, everything else could wait until morning.

After putting the meager groceries away, he picked his supplies back up, stuffing the newly bought mop and broom under one arm, and trudged up the stairs.

At least the animal damage up here had been kept to a minimum. He swept the leaves out, tore down the worst of the cobwebs, then went downstairs to retrieve the trunk he'd pulled from the basement earlier. Sheets and towels, thank God. He dressed the bed, tossed the single blanket up, and tackled the master bathroom.

It took him the better part of two hours to get everything done, and he looked around with a vaguely shell-shocked expression.

Dogs. Right.

He marched back down the stairs, cursing the cold when he realized he'd forgotten his coat, and hurried to the SUV. Getting Sam in and out of his wheelchair was never a big deal -- except when Keith was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to collapse. He still managed it somehow, waiting for all the dogs to empty their bladders before lifting the wheelchair--and Sam's crippled legs -- up

the porch stairs. Getting it inside proved almost as difficult; he hadn't shoveled the snow off the whole porch, just in front of the doors.

The dogs exploded inside with happy barking, racing around and sniffing each corner as if they'd never been there before in their lives.

"Don't fall down the inset, Sam," Keith cautioned, as if it would do any good, while he settled the wheels on the wooden floor.

Sam raced off with the other three, leaving tracks on the wood. Keith didn't care. It wasn't like the dogs could make the house any worse. While they explored, he dragged himself back out to the car, unloading the dogs' suitcase from the foot area by the passenger seat. Everything else he left out there: it would hold just fine overnight. He slammed the SUV door and began the march back to the now-lit house.

His breath plumed out, ghostly white in the darkness, shining in the moonlight. He paused to watch it drift up into a sky so brilliant with stars that every tree seemed dusted, the snow reflecting pale blue back up at the heavens. It was silent this far up in the mountains. The occasional rustle, the hoot of an owl, but no sound of traffic. No yelling neighbors. No slamming doors.

Now that he was here, there'd probably be barking dogs.

He twitched a smile toward the sky and walked on, remembering that this was always where he'd been happiest. Josh had loved the city, the dog competitions, the bustle of the theater and clubs and coffee houses. And for

his work, for the showing and breeding, the high-priced vets they'd needed for shipping semen or breeding bitches without the stud dog present -- for all of that, it had made sense to be somewhere more civilized than here.

But this was always where Keith's heart had lain. In the quiet of the mountains, the slow pace of a small community. This, he'd thought as the world seemed to abandon him after Josh's death, this was what his lover had given him. Josh's family had tried to take this away, too, had nearly won this house as well as the other, but in the end, Josh had known them all too well. Even after death, he was taking care of Keith.

A dog head appeared at the lit window, the wet nose making a print on the glass. And of course, Josh had left him the kennels. It had broken his heart to sell so many of the dogs, but they'd be happy where they were now, and Keith couldn't take care of all of them.

These four he'd kept. These four had been the heart of their family. He adjusted the big duffel bag on his shoulder and pushed open the front door. Sam whined at him, wheels caught on the first downward step of the inset. Kara, Mason, and Hughie swarmed around his legs, nearly knocking him over in their enthusiasm.

"Okay, okay, push back," Keith laughed, kneeling a large ribcage. They scattered out of the way, and he walked over to grab one of the overarching bars on the dog wheelchair and lift it before it rolled the rest of the way down the three steps, dragging Sam along.

Sam gave his barely-there wag and took off in another direction, shoving the other dogs out of his way.

"C'mon, beasts. Let's feed you and head to bed, huh?"

They flocked after him happily, cheerful faces watching him with utter adoration. He put all other thoughts from his mind and focused on them.

\*\*\*

He woke from dreams about Josh. Sleeping in sheets that still smelled like his husband, it wasn't surprising. What was more surprising, what made his heart race, was the barking mayhem that had hauled him awake.

He rolled out of bed and staggered on the cold floorboards, fumbling to pull a sweater on, otherwise clad only in his boxers. All four dogs had seemingly lost their minds, even Sam having dragged himself, without his wheelchair, to snuffle at the draft between the bottom of the door and the floor.

"Enough. Enough!" Keith pushed past canines to open the door. They bulleted out, streaking down the stairs with a single-minded intensity. Sam was gone before Keith could stop him, front legs paddling, back legs sliding down the steps with a series of painful-sounding bangs.

They only reacted that way when someone was in the house. His heart picked up again, hammering at his ribs as dreams and reality merged for one long, horrible moment. Josh was here. Alive. Walking in the door--

He tore down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time, hope fluttering in his breast like the beats of a hummingbird's wings.

There was a woman standing in the doorway, looking pale and horrified as the dogs looped around her.

Not Josh. Keith's heart plummeted. Of course it wasn't Josh. Josh was dead. Had been dead for over a year, and just because this cabin was bringing back old memories didn't mean he was suddenly going to be alive.

And in the meantime, there was still a woman standing in the doorway, her path out blocked by Kara.

Keith blinked sleep from his eyes and tried to focus through his disappointment. "Can I help you?"

Her smile wobbled. "I'm Elizabeth. Your neighbor." Her voice went up on the last syllable.

"Hughie, manners," Keith said. The dog pulled his nose out of her crotch. "Don't mind them -- they're just wondering why you're in my house." It was something that Keith was wondering, now that his mind was beginning to clear. "Where exactly do you live?" He knew his neighbors, and this wasn't one of them.

"Just the next house over." She smiled hopefully, pointing with one well-manicured hand.

"That's Alice's house." His gaze raked this woman from her neat, dark pony tail to her firmly pressed slacks. This definitely wasn't Alice.

"I bought it. Escrow closed six months ago. She asked me to keep an eye on the place, said she couldn't get ahold of the owners..." Half desperately, she held up one hand. "I

have a key." It dangled from a Hello Kitty keychain.

Keith scowled. "She just *gave* you the key?" Actually, that sounded exactly like Alice. And he did seem to recall messages from her, now that he thought about it. "All right, thank you," he said, waving away her continued explanation. "But I am the owner of the house, and I'm in residence now, so you can--"

"I'm sorry," she cut in. "But can you prove that?"

He stared at her. At the dogs swarming around her legs, perfectly at home. What sort of intruder would be standing on the stairs in his pajamas with his car outside and a whole slew of dogs inside? "My name is Keith Douglas. You can ask next door," he said firmly. "I appreciate your help, but surely you have better things to do -- and I need to get dressed."

She hesitated a moment more, then nodded and edged toward the door. The dogs didn't get out of her way until Keith whistled, and then all four of them came as quickly as they could -- Sam dragging his back legs.

"I'll check with the McCoys."

"You do that." He glared at her until she'd finally left, closing the door behind her. She still had the key. Damn it.

Keith melted down onto the stairs, instantly buffered by large dogs, each trying to get the closest. He sat, petting long, soft coats and looping his arms around strong shoulders. Then Hughie caught sight of something -- probably that squirrel -- and the whole pack took off, racing around the downstairs with Sam scooting along after them.



Slowly, Keith pushed to his feet and trudged back upstairs. Maybe coming here wouldn't be as easy as he'd thought. He'd been getting better about not having Josh in his life. After fourteen months, the pain had become a dull ache, something he could live with without noticing. Now it was bad again, every smell reminding him of Josh, every corner he turned bringing back old memories.

He walked into the master bedroom and closed the door, heading to the bathroom to shower and dress. His suitcase was outside. He paused, then decided he'd just change into the clothes he'd worn yesterday. It wasn't like the house cared if he was dressed cleanly or not, and he'd only be scrubbing again.

While the water warmed, he stripped off his sweatshirt and eyed himself critically in the mirror. After Josh had died, he'd stopped eating. Stopped running with the dogs or going to the gym. He'd lost weight hand over fist, until he was nothing more than bones held together by stringy tendons, with a layer of skin over it all. Over the last four months, though, he'd started putting weight back on. Gaining the muscle back had taken longer, but it had come. He was by no means a bulky man, but he never had been. If he stretched, he was five eleven, of average build, with curly blond hair and freckles that gave homage to his Irish ancestry.

At least he no longer looked gaunt. He could remember standing in front of this very mirror with Josh behind him.

Josh had been brushing his teeth -- the man had been paranoid about his teeth -- and fiddling with the radio.

The radio was still there, though Keith couldn't get it to pick up anything except static. He leaned toward his reflection, eying his teeth critically. White, slightly crooked, all there. He shook his head and turned, opening the glass doors and stepping into the shower. The water was perfect.

\*\*\*

It took him all day to clean the house -- or at least sweep and dust. He didn't dare run back to town to get anything to board up the windows, because his things were supposed to be delivered by the moving company that day. Which also meant that the few groceries he'd managed to buy the night before had to last him throughout the day.

He ate a lot of bread and made more lists, this time writing them down on the bathroom mirror with a dry-erase marker he found in one of the basement storage boxes. Just about everything he'd need except food and clothing was down there, and the clothing -- and other personal effects -- were on their way. Chewing on a heel from the loaf of rye, he added *rodent traps* to the list and headed out of the bathroom.

The squirrel chattered at him. He ignored it, stepping onto the porch to shovel the rest of the snow away. The truckers had to be here soon; it was four-thirty, and they'd guaranteed delivery by five. He wished they'd hurry up, though. He could have gone into town and gotten supplies, food, plastic for the windows--

Sam came wheeling out of the house and shot off the porch before Keith could get to him.

--a ramp for the stairs.

"Christ, Sammy," Keith muttered, hauling the mess of dog and metal back up. His heart didn't stop pounding until Sam went wheeling away, proving he was unhurt. "You're gonna snap your spine someday doing that..."

The wheels bogged down in the snow, and Sam barked in frustration at the other dogs. His voice boomed out, matching his hundred and twenty pounds, nothing like the squeaky play-bark he usually offered up to Keith. King shepherds made an intimidating pack, Keith had to admit. Their similarity to German shepherds made people automatically cautious, but above and beyond that, they had long, flat backs and a much heavier bone structure. Big, square heads with massive jaws and muzzles made them yet more fearsome, and their thick, long coats added a predatory look.

Keith knew they were all big babies.

Sam had finally dug through the snow far enough to get purchase with his front legs, and he was dragging himself out of the sink hole that one wheel was in. Keith let him work at it, knowing that it would wear the dog out. It was another thing to add to the to-do list: find a way to make the wheelchair work in snow.

And on rough terrain. Keith chewed on the inside of his lip, wondering what would happen when the thaws hit and Sam was stuck with a mountain. He could grade some of it, so Sam had a place to run, and they'd all go back to jogging on the road -- perfect for wheels -- but Sam wouldn't want to be left behind while the dogs explored, either, and if the chair tipped...

Maybe they should have found a way to stay in the city.

"Keith!"

He nearly leaped out of his skin, whipping around to see who could possibly be calling his name here. Tamera and Brian approached, crunching across the snow, both wearing smiles. "Elizabeth came by earlier, said you'd come back!" Brian circled around the porch to get to the stairs.

Tamera handed a casserole dish to him over the rail, then followed her husband. "How come you didn't tell us you were coming? We'd have helped get the place ready for you!"

With amusement, he looked down at the glassware, wondering what was inside and thankful to have something other than bread. "I know. I should have told all sorts of people, but I wasn't sure I wanted the help. And as it turns out, that's maybe a good thing -- the back windows were all broken, and there were animals inside. Wouldn't have wanted you to deal with that."

Tamera gave him a quick kiss, took the dish back, and walked into the house. "We could have dealt with that, and then you wouldn't have had to. You need to learn to ask for more."

Brian rolled his eyes, but he was grinning as he did so. "How long are you staying? And where's Josh?"

And that was why he hadn't mentioned he was coming. Keith felt his smile strain, even though he'd answered this question time after time. It was amazing, the number of

people who simply hadn't been told. Keith hadn't thought of it, and Josh's family didn't know most of his friends.

"Josh died. Over a year ago. I'm sorry."

Brian just stared at him. Tamera came back from within the house, frowning. "What did you say?"

Obediently, Keith repeated the news.

"Oh, my God. Come inside," Tamera said, beckoning to both men. "Keith, what happened?"

It was amazing, how he could tell this story now without feeling anything. "Give me a second, and we'll talk," he said, then whistled once, trotting down the steps to bring Sam inside.

The wheelchair was stuck again. He grabbed one of the bars and lifted, walking the dog up the stairs and into the house while the three others collected behind him.

"What happened to Sam?" Tamera yelled, standing up from where she'd taken a seat on the couch.

"Accident." Keith walked Sam down the three steps to the lowered family room and set the wheelchair down. "Josh was in an accident last year. He didn't pull through." He'd lived for three days, comatose. Long enough for his family to arrive and take over, barring Keith from seeing his husband -- sanctioned by their church, if not by law. Legally, he wasn't family. Tennessee didn't recognize gay marriage.

He took a deep breath, letting the anger go, and pointed to

Sam. "He survived, but it injured his spine. I suppose I should have had him put down, but..." He couldn't do it. It was as if, unable to save his lover, he'd had to save something. He'd been damned if he was going to let Sam die -- even if it had cost well over three thousand dollars and left the dog in a wheelchair. Sam was happy, and that was all that was supposed to matter for a dog, right?

"Keith, I'm so sorry," Tamera murmured, bringing him back from his thoughts.

He smiled, the same polite smile he gave everyone. "It's all right. It's over now. And I'm here." He laughed, gesturing around the house. "For what that's worth. This place has been wrecked."

"Alice tried to contact you," Brian began.

Keith nodded, interrupting. "I heard. I wasn't taking calls, then. This isn't her fault -- animals and teenagers and faulty design, probably. Anyway, it'll do. I'll get it fixed up in no time."

"You should call Spencer."

He glanced at Tamera, raising one eyebrow. The name was vaguely familiar, though he couldn't quite place it.

"Spencer. Thomas. You know him! Everyone knows Spencer. He's -- well, he went to school for welding or something, but he's sort of the local handyman. He does great work." Tamera smiled at him hopefully.

"Is this another of your strays?"

She looked annoyed, but Brian started to laugh. "He is. Spencer fixed our roof and she's been finding him work since -- never mind that he seems perfectly happy with his current workload."

"He could be living so much better," Tamera began.

"He's living just fine!"

"Above The Bagel Factory! He could have a house of his own!"

Brian shrugged, then laughed and flinched away when Tamera swatted at him.

"I'll call him," she said firmly. "He'll be able to come help, especially if I tell him it's important."

Keith smiled. "That'd be great, thanks. I could use the help." Mostly because it was easier than arguing.

Sam hit the stairs and got his front feet on the lowest one, struggling to pull himself up the rest while the wheels caught. Keith dove for his dog, catching the wheelchair just before it tipped. He hauled Sam up the three stairs and let go, watching as Sam trundled across the floor, oblivious to the near-accident.

"What are you going to do with him?" Brian asked quietly. "Is he going to get better?"

Keith shook his head. One of the wheels slammed into a doorframe, caught for a moment, and released as Sam twisted around the corner. "I'm going to put rubber on all the walls," he muttered, and sat down on the step.

"But it wouldn't take much for him to fall down these stairs--"

"I know." He turned to face his visitors, suddenly wishing they'd just go home. Instead, he pasted on his company face and tried to sound positive. "I'll probably build some ramps and see if I can't train him to use them. That should help."

"You could grade part of the yard," Tamera suggested, in a tone he'd grown used to -- one that was full of pity. "There aren't any stairs outside. A fence would keep predators away..."

Keith tensed. "He's an indoor dog." Keeping Sam alive had been his choice, and he wasn't going to punish his dog for it.

Tamera fell silent, shrugging against the censure in Keith's tone. "Well--"

"Knock knock!" A burly man stuck his head through the open front door, a clipboard in hand. "I'm looking for Keith Douglas?"

Keith jumped up, relieved. "You the movers?"

The man tipped his head. "You're losing all your heat, leaving the doors open like this."

Keith only snorted, thinking of the broken windows. "Relax. I turned the heat off." It was easier to leave everything open while he cleaned. The dogs had heavy coats, and he'd kept busy enough to stave off the chill. It meant having to re-heat the whole place later, but that was



all right.

The mover shrugged. "Your bills. Where do you want us to put this stuff?"

He signed paperwork and began the process of directing, knowing there wasn't too much to be done. Trinkets, photo albums, clothing, dishes -- he'd taken what he could from the house he and Josh had shared, all of his own stuff and as much of their mutual stuff as he could as soon as he'd heard the judge had deeded the house to Josh's family. Before they'd had a chance to come in and clean him out. He'd had only a few hours' notice, though, so while there was more than he could fit in the SUV with the dogs, there wasn't more than a small truckload.

He hoped Josh's family took care of their plants.

"We'll get out of your hair," Brian said, sliding out the door.

"And I'll call Spencer."

The mover and Keith watched the two go, hurrying back across the snow.

"Nice of 'em to stay and help," the mover said dryly.

Keith laughed and turned back to the paperwork. "They brought me dinner. I'll forgive them for not staying to unpack."

\*\*\*

It was the next morning before Keith was able to get back

down to town and visit the tiny do-it-yourself store. He bought large rodent traps to get rid of the squirrel and whatever was in the couch, specialized plastic and tape to cover over the windows and skylight -- assured by the store owner that it worked better than boards -- then went by the grocery store for a more thorough shopping trip and returned home as the sun neared its zenith.

There was a cherry-red truck parked outside his house, the tailgate down, a man slouched in the bed.

Keith pulled to a slow stop and got out of his SUV. "Can I help you?"

The new arrival turned to look at him, smile stretching under his short black hair. "Hope so. I'm Spencer."

Keith's eyebrows jerked up, though he couldn't quite say why. Something about the man annoyed him. Maybe it was the way he lounged, as if he had all the time in the world. Maybe it was the tattoo just visible on the nape of his neck, under the neckline of his shirt, or the three earrings in one ear. Maybe it was the lady-killer smile, or just simply the fact that Keith hadn't expected him. "You work fast," he muttered, opening the back of his vehicle.

"So I'm told," Spencer murmured back, a definite tone of amusement in his voice.

Keith shot a sharp look over his shoulder, but couldn't read anything in that dry expression. He grabbed up four grocery bags and yanked them out of the back, heading toward the porch. "You don't have to help," he hollered when he heard the rustle of plastic.

"Not like I'm doing anything else." Spencer's tone was casually agreeable. His boots thumped up the newly cleaned stairs, and Keith resisted the urge to tell him to be careful.

Be careful of *what*? It wasn't like the place was perfect.

"Watch the dogs." Keith really shouldn't have gotten so much pleasure out of that, nor out of opening the front door and seeing roughly three hundred and seventy pounds of muscle and fur streak outside to swarm around the porch -- and the two men on it.

Sam came through after, out of his wheelchair and scooting along, barking the whole while.

Keith glanced over at Spencer, and was almost annoyed to see that he'd set the grocery bags down to pet the dogs, laughing and scrubbing at ears and scratching their ruffs. Kara in particular seemed to adore him. She licked at his face, one front paw lifting as if she could get that much closer, whole body arching into the touch of his hands.

"Traitor," Keith muttered, and walked around Sam to get inside.

Sam, at least, knew who fed him, and with a final bark at the new arrival, he turned and pulled himself after Keith.

"What's wrong with that one?"

Keith's mouth tightened. "Car accident. Damaged his spine."

"Aww, poor guy. C'mere, fella."

Sam barked, planted now beside the grocery bags Keith had set on the floor.

"Or not. Is this one of your problems?"

Keith turned, unsure what Spencer was talking about. Spencer stood looking up at the skylight, bags of groceries still held in his large hands. Keith followed his gaze. "Yeah. That's one of my problems. But we haven't talked about money or anything, so--"

Spencer laughed. "I know, don't worry. I won't assume anything's a done deal until it's done." He stepped forward, setting the bags on the black marble countertop. "Nice place. I always wondered who owned it."

"I do." By himself, now. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get the rest of the groceries--"

"Oh -- I got them all." Spencer smiled. His eyes were blue, Keith noticed suddenly. A dark blue, with the skin a bit wrinkled at the corners, as if he spent a lot of time smiling.

"I need to close the trunk," Keith said.

Spencer shook his head. "Did that, too. The dogs are still outside, though."

It was tempting to call them back in, if only so he had something to do. Instead, Keith shrugged and began unpacking groceries, taking the bags away from Sam before Sam could sniff inside.

"Tamera said you needed some handy work done. I'm not

*actually* a handy man, but I do work here and there."

"What are you?" He opened the empty fridge and started stuffing spoilables in with no particular rhyme or reason.

"I'm a metal worker."

"A welder."

Spencer circled around, leaning against the fridge so he was in view. Keith didn't look at him. "An artist, technically. I put together statues and things of that sort."

"Sounds exciting." He pulled out the bread and chips and shoved them into the long pantry, moving away from Spencer. "I'm pretty sure I can't afford an artist, though. I just need some basic work done. Window repair, ramps built, that sort of thing."

"You're probably better off getting someone who specializes in window repair for that," Spencer admitted. "But I can build ramps."

"And I'll bet they'll be pretty," Keith muttered in an undertone. "C'mon, Sam." He walked purposefully into the other room, picking up the discarded wheelchair and sorting out straps while the dog pulled himself over as fast as he could -- surprisingly fast, since he slid on the wood floors easily. Out of the corner of his eye, Keith caught Spencer watching. He tried to ignore it as he strapped Sam into the contraption and took him outside, lifting the wheels down the stairs. Sam took off for the other dogs, but only got a few feet before the snow started to bog him down. Keith's mouth tightened. He watched Sam struggle a moment before finally getting free, only to become stuck

another ten feet out.

Sam barked at Hughie, and Hughie turned and came racing back, dirty snow flying every which way. The dogs had destroyed any pristine white there might have been in the area, running and playing and chasing squirrels. Sam couldn't follow them. He barked, tried to spin after Hughie, and remained stuck.

There was so much to be done, and Keith didn't know if any of it would help. As the year had progressed, any hope that Sam might get better had grown more and more faint. Though the vets had initially thought that Sam's ability to feel touch, along with continued bladder and bowel control, meant the nerves might regenerate, it had become slowly clear that it wasn't going to happen. The reality was becoming too much. Sam had been manageable in the city, where Keith took the dogs jogging, where concrete kept the tires from getting bogged down, where he'd lived all on one level.

Maybe moving here had been a mistake. But he didn't have anywhere else to go.

They'd make it work. He'd made it work so far, and--

"Is he going to get better?"

It was too close to what he'd been thinking. He turned to shoot a heated glare at Spencer, but Spencer was already trotting down the porch steps. "I don't think this will work," Keith said to Spencer's retreating back. "I can build ramps myself." And he wanted the man out of there.

Spencer ignored Keith completely, kneeling in the snow

beside Sam as if unaware it was soaking his jeans right through. "Easy, guy," Spencer said, one hand on the bars that arched over Sam's back, the other on a wheel. "This really isn't suited to snow, is it? It'll have problems in mud, too, I bet..." He pulled the wheel out of the hole it had fallen into, watching it with narrowed eyes as Sam trundled away once more. "Does it tip over a lot?"

Keith bristled. "We do just fine. It gets him around."

When Spencer turned, there was surprise on his face. It faded quickly, replaced by the same expression he'd had before: as if he'd just found the best puzzle ever. "Yeah, yeah, it's great. I mean, any other dog would be stuck totally..." He stared at Sam again, head tipped. Inky black hair shone in the sunlight, so black it was almost blue. It couldn't be natural.

"We don't need your help." They were doing just fine, and this man -- he was a threat. Keith wasn't sure how, but it was there. In the set of broad shoulders under his green thermal, in the spider-web tattoo that stretched across the back of his neck, in competent hands and smiling eyes.

"Hm? Yeah. I just... yeah, okay." Spencer shook his head and flashed a grin back. "Right. Well, tell Tamera I stopped by and offered, or I'll never hear the end of it. And, oh -- here." He fished a bent business card out of his back pocket, walking up the porch steps to hand it over. "Call if you change your mind."

Keith took the card automatically, already determined to throw it away. This was his and Josh's house, and he didn't need *help*. He was doing just fine.

Keith glared at the slide of cloth over Spencer's back until Spencer got into his truck, starting the engine and pulling slowly away.

That one was trouble. Keith didn't need any trouble. Or anyone asking him about Sam. He was doing what he could. They'd be just fine.



## Chapter Two

Among the other groceries he'd bought was a six-pack of Corona. Girly-beer, Josh had always called it, but Keith liked it. He just said he was comfortable with his masculinity, that was all. That night, after he'd finished the last of the cleaning (except for the basement, which he was only going to do if he *had* to) and put up the plastic on the windows (a bigger pain in the ass than he'd have ever guessed), he broke out one of his beers and took Sam out of his wheelchair, grateful not to have the dog smashing spokes into walls and furniture, even more grateful that Sam couldn't take a tumble into the main area and hurt himself.

He felt guilty as hell for being glad to limit Sam's mobility, and that was almost as bad as constantly watching. He needed a beer and to sit in front of the television, thinking about nothing. Dinner was a distant third. Very distant.

The dogs got fed. Josh had always been adamant about that: they ate first, mostly so that they weren't forgotten if too many drinks were had. After that, though, Keith decided to take the night off from reality. It wasn't possible, of course, and at ten o' clock he put Sam in a sling and staggered outside to let the dog use the bathroom. With three beers in him and a hundred and twenty pound dog paddling away with his front feet, he staggered off balance and crashed into the corner of the house, cursing the whole

time. Even worse, he almost lost Sam.

Somehow, Keith got his legs under him and them both down the stairs without toppling over. He clutched his head while Sam did his business, wishing the throbbing would go away.

Getting back up the stairs was almost as bad; the icicles were melting, dripping down onto the steps in patches throughout the day, but with the setting sun it had all refrozen into a slick coating. Keith did drop Sam this time, and earned a woeful look over the dog's furry shoulder.

He got them back into the house, took Sam out of the sling, and eyed the stairs. He'd been planning on one more beer just to dull the ache of the day, but scrapped it. Even the slightest dizziness and he'd end up crashing down the stairs with Sam in his arms, injuring both of them. He couldn't do that.

His mind turned to all the things that still needed to be done -- window professionals called, the floor re-varnished, the front door replaced, the lock fixed, the skylight repaired, boxes unpacked -- and decided he needed to think about *anything* else.

Josh. By the fire, laughing. Sharing a glass -- or a bottle -- of wine. Learning to snowboard last winter, and failing miserably at it amid laughter and smiles.

He couldn't think of that, either. Keith sprawled in the armchair (*To do: throw the sofa out and get a new one*) and leaned his head back. Hughie lay at his feet, panting softly. Kara and Mason were in front of the unlit fireplace, sharing a chew toy. Sam sat by the front door, as if only his

presence there kept the wild animals at bay.

Keith's mind turned to Spencer. His gut tightened, anger and guilt and lust curling through his stomach. It had been more than a year since Josh had died. It hadn't been long enough to find interest in anyone else. He didn't want to be interested again. And anyway, Spencer was too young, too much of an artist. He was frustrating, for a reason Keith couldn't quite name. He just needed to stay gone; everything about him rubbed Keith the wrong way. He seemed self-sure and arrogant and more than a little annoying.

Keith dragged his mind away. There had to be something else to think about.

His thoughts spun in slow circles. What he really wanted was another beer. What he did, instead, was turn up the volume on the television.

\*\*\*

He'd laid down traps and cleaned the birds' nests out of the upstairs closet and the top of the chimney, along with tearing down several wasps' nests from under the eaves and the fireplace in the den. He was just glad it was cold enough that none of the wasps were out. That could have been a much bigger mess.

He hadn't figured out how to get the couch to the curb for the garbage man to pick up yet -- he'd called to confirm that the garbage man *would* pick it up -- and had just resigned himself to bothering Brian for an extra set of muscles when a cherry-red truck pulled up outside.

He glared at it.

Spencer stepped out, clad in baggy black jeans and a white thermal with a black T-shirt over it. His hair had blue streaks in it. Keith was *sure* they hadn't been there the day before.

"What about skis?" Spencer asked, nearly leaping around the hood of the truck and bounding up to the porch.

Keith stared at him as if he'd lost his mind, and finally answered with a non sequitur of his own. "Your hair is blue?"

Spencer didn't seem to think that comment was out of the ordinary at all. "Got bored, yeah. What about skis? On -- what's your dog's name?"

"Which one?" But he already knew which one. Only one dog had anything you could put skis on, and resentment grew under his breastbone.

"The crippled one. I was thinking, if we took the wheels off and put skis--" Spencer leaped around the rail, taking the porch steps two at a time.

"If he can't stand up, how is he supposed to ski?"

Spencer gave him a distinct 'are you serious?' look.

Keith squirmed. Somehow Spencer had been so easy about everything, this one quick glance was almost painful. "Sam," Keith said. "His name's Sam."

"Will he let me near him?"

"Of course." Keith was almost offended that Spencer might think otherwise.

It must have been audible in his voice, because Spencer shot him a wry smile. "He barked at me yesterday, so..."

"*Oh*. Right. No, he'll be fine. What do you want me to do?"

Spencer waved him away, crouching down next to the happily panting dog and eying him. "Do you have his wheelchair? Can I see it?" he asked, twisting to look up.

"Yeah, sure. Let me just..." Keith popped inside, hooking the shoulder bar of the wheelchair with one hand and coming back out. Sam scrambled upward at the sight of it, ever hopeful. "Not right now, buddy."

Spencer took it, his focus narrowing down to examining the way it worked, the bars, the welded frame, the sling. He nodded slowly, one long finger tracing where they'd seared one axle to the bar that came down beside Sam's leg. "Is he pretty comfortable in this, overall?"

Keith nodded, but when he realized Spencer wasn't looking said, "Yeah."

"Any skis'll have to be rigged so they don't catch in the snow," Spencer murmured. "We need a way to make it flex..."

Keith hesitated. "How much is this going to cost?" He braced himself for the worst. He'd learned, over the last few months, that rarely were people kind when money was involved. Spencer didn't seem to hear him, though,

engrossed in his own thoughts. "Spencer?" Keith reached out, touching his fingertips to a strong shoulder.

Spencer jumped and looked up. He flashed a bright smile, exposing one chipped tooth. Josh would have had a fit, Keith thought. "Sorry! Just Spence. And nothing, really. Figure it's a challenge. These are bike tires, yeah?"

"Yeah. Neighbor kid's bike. But -- I could pay you *something*." And what a change, to go from dreading payment to offering it.

Spencer stood, looking out at the woods. Mason and Hughie had finally come back from treeing a raccoon to check out what Spencer was doing there again. They circled around his legs, wagging like crazy. Finally, Spencer turned and gave Keith another smile, mouth quirking up higher on one side than the other. "Tell you what, you can buy some old bikes. I bet some shocks will give us the spring we need, and if we had bigger tires -- maybe fatter tires, for mud..." He was gone again, gaze turning inward.

Against his own inclination, Keith found himself hoping Spencer could make something better. He could deal with tattoos and earrings and artistic license if it meant Sam's life would improve -- and with luck, his own might become a little less rigorous.

Movement within the house caught his eye, and he grimaced at the sight of Kara snuffling enthusiastically at the couch. He hadn't seen whatever might be living in it, and kept hoping maybe something had just ripped it up without making a home there, but... well, the dogs were *very* interested. "Hey, Spence?"

He looked up, eyebrows raised.

"You think you could help me with the sofa? I'll pay you." Better to keep everything on a professional level.

Spencer laughed, setting the wheelchair down and ruffling Sam's head once more before standing to head inside. "You don't have to pay me. It's moving a couch, not replacing your floors." He paused, glanced around, and smiled back. "Not that you should do that, with all these dogs inside. Nails are going to do something awful to the wood..."

Keith bristled. "I asked for help moving the couch, not opinions on interior design."

Spencer glanced over his shoulder, still smiling. "Wasn't criticizing. I was commending you on your forethought in not replacing the floors. Or something." His smile grew into a playful grin.

Keith glared anyway. The wood had been Josh's idea. Keith had been all for tile that *looked* like wood, but wouldn't scratch or have to be re-varnished. They'd had this house for five years, and already the floors were so scuffed and damaged that they probably needed to be sanded down and varnished again. Especially now with the water coming through the skylight.

He didn't want to think about it. "Just get the end of the couch," he muttered, gesturing.

Spencer laughed and did so. On the count of three, they lifted it, staggering up the inset steps to the main floor and then heading for the door. It took some work to get it out; it

was nearly wider than the frame, and only pushing and angling it just right -- then carefully getting their hands out of the way -- forced it outside. By that time the dogs were barking and underfoot, excited about this great new game with the cursing and the stumbling.

"Hughie, out of the way!" Keith snapped, nearly killing himself when the dog slammed into the backs of his knees.

"What're the other ones, Dewey and Louie?" Spencer panted as he maneuvered through the door.

"Kara and Mason. Watch Sam -- he's lying right in the way."

"Christ! And he's too big to step over!"

"Sam, lie down!" Keith called, unable to see whether or not the dog actually did. But a moment later the couch lurched into him, so he figured Spencer had taken that step forward. "Don't push, you're gonna knock me down the stairs."

"Wait wait wait. Is there a reason we don't chuck it over the rail?"

Keith paused to look. His fingers were starting to go numb. His arms were burning, and he couldn't stop thinking about the ice on the stairs the night before... "Good idea."

Together, they staggered over to the railing and tipped the couch. It landed in the snow with a dull thump, cushions bouncing all over. Keith and Spencer stood shoulder to shoulder, looking down. Then Spencer flashed him a quick grin and vaulted over the rail, landing butt-first on the couch. "You coming?"



"I'll take the stairs."

Spencer's voice chased him down. "What fun is that?"

"I don't break my tailbone on an old sofa, for starters."

Spencer laughed and stood, stacking the cushions back in place as Keith approached. "Where to now?"

"Just there." Keith nodded toward the curb -- which didn't really have a curb, was just the side of the road -- and bent to pick up the couch.

Cold sank into his fingers from the snow, clinging on where it was pressed between his skin and the material. It wasn't more than a dozen steps before they hit the road, though, and Keith dropped the couch gratefully.

Spencer stretched, hands in the small of his back, pecs straining for a brief moment against his shirt. Keith yanked his gaze away, feeling as if he'd betrayed Josh. Or Josh's memory, which was just as bad.

"Got any more furniture that needs moving while I'm here?"

He didn't look at Spencer. "No. Thanks, I appreciate it."

"No problem." One hand snapped out, a loose fist connecting lightly with Keith's upper arm. "You need anything, you let me know. And if I figure out a way to make the ski-chair work, I'll bring it by."

It took Keith a moment to translate ski-chair into the

wheelchair for Sam. Then he nodded, stuffing his fists in his pockets. "Thanks."

Spencer raised a hand, heading toward his truck.

Keith watched Spencer leave, conflicted. He didn't want Spencer around, he was doing just fine with Sam, they needed the help, he wasn't doing fine on his own, Spencer annoyed him, Spencer made him feel aware of another man again--

He didn't want the conflict. Wearily, he turned and marched back up the stairs. He needed to pick up after the dogs. At least that didn't create any conflict at all.

\*\*\*

"Have you heard from him since?" Tamera asked, her voice blending with the murmur and clink of the half-full pub.

"Spencer? Yeah, he called the other day. Asked for a bunch of measurements on Sam and told me how much the bikes cost him." That had been two days ago -- three days since Keith had actually seen Spencer.

"But nothing since?"

"Tamera..." Brian's words trailed off warningly.

She glared at her husband. "What? I was just asking."

He sipped his beer and didn't respond.

Keith watched the whole exchange with growing unease. He'd always laughed off other peoples' stories about

Tamera the matchmaker, but now he was beginning to wonder. He wasn't ready to be matched up to anyone, and sure as hell not Spencer. Spencer was--

Spencer was--

Spencer was everything Josh hadn't been.

In a desperate bid to change the topic, Keith blurted, "Got the windows repaired. Guy did a good job, too. He's coming by tomorrow to fix the skylight."

"Spencer could have done that." Tamera sounded almost disapproving.

"Yeah, well..."

"He'll probably be by tonight."

Which explained why she'd wanted to go out. Keith winced. "Tamera, look, he's probably a great guy--"

"We're pretty sure he's gay."

Keith kept talking as if she hadn't spoken. "--but I'm not interested. I had a great partner, and I'm not ready for another one."

"Who said anything about a partner? Just to sleep with. He's a little younger than you, but not much! He's -- what is he, Brian? Twenty-two? Twenty-four?"

Brian shrugged, looking determinedly at the television playing silently in the corner.

"I don't want to hook up!" The people at the tables around them glanced over, and Keith slunk low in his seat, already regretting the outburst.

Tamera glared mulishly at the door.

Josh had never liked her much. They'd always been friendly, but never friends. When they'd invited Keith to the pub, he'd thought it would be good to get out of the house and see some people. Now, he was regretting that decision. Should have stuck with Josh's ideas.

With Alice gone, there weren't many people he knew here. Josh had been the outgoing one, the gregarious one. Keith had been happy to stay at home and live a quiet life.

God, he was going to have to tell *more* people that Josh was dead. People he only barely knew, but who knew Josh. At least the others weren't so likely to try and find a replacement for Josh right off the bat.

He drank the rest of his beer in silence, probably faster than he should have, and set it aside. "Thanks for inviting me out," he said, standing. "I'm gonna head home."

"But--" Tamera looked from him to the door and back again, and he could almost read her mind: Spencer hadn't arrived yet.

"Thanks," he said firmly. "I'll see you around." Tamera was Spencer's champion, he remembered Brian saying. It was another mark against Spencer, as far as Keith was concerned.

He wound his way around tables toward the door, pushing

through and stepping out into the cool night. It cleared the over-warm air from his lungs, filling them with fresh, clean oxygen. It even smelled better out here: crisp, a bit like the evergreens so nearby, with the peculiar scent that accompanied snow.

He'd ridden down the mountain with Tamera and Brian. But he had a cell phone; he could call a taxi. For the moment, though, walking seemed like the better option. He needed the movement to burn off steam, to root himself back in his body rather than the angry thoughts spiraling around his head.

He ate up the ground with long, easy strides, glancing at the store fronts as he passed. Lots of little restaurants, delis, cafes, coffee shops. Everything a tourist could want, including the quaint little grocery store where few of the locals shopped. It was several blocks before a truck pulled up next to him. He glanced over.

Spencer. With a grimace, Keith straightened out and kept walking.

"Hey! Keith!"

Even in his current mood, he couldn't just ignore a direct hail from less than ten feet away. He stopped and tucked his hands into his winter coat, turning to face Spencer. "Yeah?"

Spencer had already parked his truck and leaped out, springing around the hood to open the passenger side door of the cab. "I've got a prototype! It's just cobbled together -- I need to make sure it fits Sam and that it works the way I think it will before I make everything solid, but I wanted to

show you! Tamera said you'd be at the bar tonight. Glad I caught you." He pulled a metal monstrosity from the back, flashing a brilliant smile as he did so.

Keith was already shaking his head, eying the contraption. "It's way too heavy."

"No, no. It's much lighter than it looks, and it supports itself. See?" Spencer thrust it into his hands, forcing Keith to take it or let it fall.

He glared at it. It *was* lighter than it looked, with short ski-like bars where the wheels would have gone. Instead of pointed tips that curved gently upward, the bars had been rounded like the front of a sled, keeping them from catching in the snow.

There were two posts that led to each ski, instead of the one that held the wheel axles. The back post was solid, with a simple joint on the end that allowed the ski to change angles. The other looked like it had some sort of shock attached. Keith set the whole thing down, watching how the nearest ski moved. It did have a shock attached; a highly flexible one that allowed a much greater range of movement in the front of the ski.

"I'm thinking maybe two more modified skis," Spencer said, crouching to point. "Out on the sides. It'll make him more likely to hit it against things, but less likely to tip. You think he'll learn to go around stuff wider?"

Keith thought about Sam smashing into walls in his wheelchair, and smiled wryly. "No. But he'll figure out how to untangle himself."

Spencer nodded. "I'd like to have a better balancing system. Sort of a split-axle set up, so that if one ski goes up the other will stay level, but it needs to be solid to keep him up, too... Still, skis farther out will help with that. It's not like he'll be wheeling around on level ground; he needs a lot more stability for running through snow."

Keith nodded wordlessly, not sure what else to say. It sounded like Spencer had thought of far more than he had in making the original wheelchair. He'd looked up web pages with wheelchairs for dogs and based his requests off that when he talked to welders, but no one had taken split-axle stability into account.

"Have you got those ramps made yet for inside?"

He frowned, brought suddenly back to the here and now. "No. I've been getting the windows repaired."

Spencer nodded, no obvious judgment in his expression. Keith relaxed slowly. "This won't help in mud, obviously," Spencer said, gesturing to the ski-set. "You might just consider putting woodchips or something around your house, though. I'm not sure anything will make mud very easy."

Keith tapped the shoulder bar, gaze meandering across the metal. It was ugly; looked like any old bar Spencer could find had been used for the task, ranging from rusted pipe to shiny aluminum. "How much do you want for this?"

Spencer looked honestly annoyed. "I told you nothing. I meant it. It's fun. Consider it my good deed for the month."

"But I'd like to pay you." He didn't want to be in anyone's

debt. Especially not when that debt could be called in for something like a date. Everything should remain professional. If it remained professional, Spencer couldn't get the wrong idea.

"You'll just have to live with that wish unfulfilled. I don't need payment." Spencer stood, as if by distancing himself physically, he could stop Keith from pushing. "You have other stuff to do tonight? If you want, we could head up now and see if it'll size out right."

Keith stood, too, and found that Spencer was still a bit taller than he was. The night was getting cooler -- or maybe he was just noticing it more -- and what he didn't want was to stand around outside. He wasn't really dressed for lengthy stays in the cold; he hadn't been expecting to do much more than walk from a car to the pub and back again.

"I was heading home," he said finally. "But--"

Spencer looked at him, waiting.

Keith didn't know what he was going to say. But he didn't want Spencer coming over to his place, especially not at night. But he didn't want another favor -- the ride home. But he didn't want help.

"I'm not interested in seeing anyone," he blurted out.

Spencer smiled, a tiny little quirk at one corner of his mouth. "I'll put out a bulletin. C'mon, hop in -- unless your car's around?"

He shook his head.



"Then I'll give you a ride. I'm excited to see if it works." Spencer flashed that brilliant grin again, lifting the ski-set and returning it carefully to the back seat.

Reluctantly, Keith climbed into the front. The truck still had that new car smell, with an all-leather interior and satellite GPS. Lights on the dashboard told him that it had a lot of other things, too, but he couldn't make out what they were from his angle.

Spencer slid in beside him and turned the key in the ignition. It rumbled to life, assuring them of power under that shiny hood.

"Nice truck."

"Thanks. I love this damn thing. Probably gonna end up in the shop half the time, but..." Spencer ran a hand over the console adoringly, put the truck into gear, and they moved forward.

Keith leaned back, relaxing despite himself. It was warm in the truck; he hadn't realized how chilled he'd gotten, standing there. The heater ran quietly, pouring more hot air across his skin. "Why do you think it'll break down?"

Spencer smiled wryly. "It failed in *Consumer Reports*. Normally I only buy stuff they've approved, but, well... He seduced me. You know how it goes. You're walking down the street when someone gives you a flirty wink, offers to let you see under their hood..." He glanced over, eyes twinkling even in the dark of the night.

Keith chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I can understand that." *He seduced me*. Who called their trucks men except other gay

men? Maybe the occasional woman -- he wasn't sure how that worked.

And it didn't matter. He didn't want anything -- he was only wondering because he hoped Spencer understood. Though how Keith could possibly be any more blatant than stating he wasn't interested, he didn't know.

The silence grew rapidly uncomfortable. Spencer broke it at last, long fingers tapping the steering wheel as they headed out of town and up the mountain. "You have a bunch of dogs. They sleep outside?"

"Of course not." He couldn't even imagine what Josh would have said to that -- the dogs were a part of the family. Here, there were snow and bears. Fifteen dogs was a lot to have indoors, especially when one or more of the females were in heat, but they'd managed it. Big, rambling houses helped.

"Of course." There was that amusement again, as if Spencer thought the entire world was funny, even when he should have been annoyed.

Josh used to get annoyed a lot. Keith was annoyed on his behalf. "Don't tell me. Growing up, you had a family dog, and it was locked outside all the time."

"Growing up, I had a cat." Spencer glanced over. "My dad didn't like dogs."

That took some of the wind out of Keith's sails. It was hard to be offended when the person had committed no crime. "Josh always said that it was cruel to lock a dog outside on its own. That it needed to be part of the pack."

Spencer nodded easily. "Makes sense. Josh is...?"

Now there was a way to make sure he'd have to talk about his partner's death. Sometimes, he could be really stupid.

"Josh was my husband."

Spencer glanced at him sharply. "You were married?"

"Not according to the state." They'd been talking about moving to one of the states with gay rights, but hadn't gotten around to it. Keith's lawyer had said that if they had, it would have been much harder for Josh's family to take so much. That was all right. Keith was fine with what he'd been left.

"And you're not married now?"

He braced himself. "Josh died last year."

"Oh. Sorry." Another uncomfortable silence fell. Spencer looked like he'd pulled in on himself, as if this was entirely too much weight resting on his shoulders. As if, by shrinking away, he wouldn't be asked to make any more comments. It was the first time Keith could remember seeing Spencer anything but self-assured, and he felt a little guilty for causing it -- as if he could have said anything else. But there were only so many ways to explain that Josh was gone.

He searched for a new topic, anything that might fish their conversation out of the murk. Silver glinted, catching his eye. One of the three hoops in Spencer's ear. "You have a lot of earrings?" As conversational gambits went, it wasn't inspired. But at least it was *something*.

Spencer lifted one hand to his ear, feeling them. "Just the three."

"I mean -- at home?"

"No. Just the three."

Keith nodded. The conversation fizzled and died.

He'd never been so relieved to see his cabin come into view, the porch light on and several windows lit.

"I suppose it'd probably be better to do this in daylight..."  
Spencer looked around, seeming troubled.

Keith couldn't blame him. His neighbors were far enough away to be hidden behind the trees, and there weren't streetlights up here. A few feet from the cabin and everything went dark. "Well, you just need to see that it'll fit, right? We can do that inside. And we can get some idea of if it's working near the house."

Spencer brightened and nodded.

Keith slid from the truck, skin tightening at the rush of cold air. What had been welcome before was a misery now. He folded his arms over his chest, trying not to look too much like he was shivering, and shifted from foot to foot while Spencer hauled the ski-set out of the cab.

Together, they headed up the porch stairs. Keith pushed through the door, greeted by enthusiastic beasts on the other side, all weaving around his legs and getting in the way. From the sunken island in the center of the room, Sam barked his hello.

"You just leave the door unlocked? Don't you worry about robbers?" Spencer asked, wading through hip-high dogs, the ski-set held far above their heads.

Keith snorted and closed the door behind them. "With them in here?"

"Point. Hey, scoot, guys."

Keith glanced over sharply, something in his chest twinging at Spencer's words. Not the words, he realized. The tone. That easy fondness that so few people managed. Not sugary, not syrupy, it was the same sort of amused affection that people who really understood dogs often used.

Except Spencer'd grown up with a cat.

Keith watched him set down the ski-set, settling it carefully as the dogs finally cleared room for him. Sam was still barking, high-pitched, weight rocking from one front paw to the other. Keith hurried down the three stairs, looping an arm under Sam's hips and lifting while Sam floundered to join the others. "You spend a lot of time around dogs?" Keith asked, staggering over and dropping Sam next to the ski-set.

"Not really. I mean, there's a lot of them around here, and sometimes I see clients' dogs when I'm working out of someone's home, but..." Spencer shrugged, lifting the newly rigged chair and settling it over Sam's body.

"You're just a natural dog person?"

"I'm a cat person." Even as he said it, he ruffled the fur on Sam's head and got an adoring lick in response. "I think this needs to be a little bit taller. And here -- I need to weight it differently, so there's not so much pressure on his shoulders. But..." Spencer looked up. "Do you have those straps you use to hook him in?"

Keith went and got them, sliding them under Sam's back legs. There were no pre-made holes to latch them into on the new ski-set, though. After a good ten minutes of fussing, Spencer finally rigged it to work by looping them around the sides. It wasn't great, but it would do for a test run.

Then they had to get Sam out of it to take him outside. Spencer seemed to find the whole thing amusing, much to Keith's consternation. Delays due to not thinking something through weren't ever what Josh would have found funny.

Spencer took the ski-set while Keith took Sam, and together they walked out into the snow, shutting the dogs in the house so they'd be out of the way. The steps were at least marginally safer; Keith had made it a point to scrape them free of ice daily.

"Okay, you keep him still," Spencer said, settling the ski-set over Sam once more. "I'll strap him in." He flashed an eager grin upward, and Keith responded reluctantly. He wasn't ready to like Spencer, but the man's excitement was infectious.

This time it didn't take long to get Sam in the contraption.

"Let's see how it moves," Spencer said, gaze riveted.

Keith whistled, patting his thigh as he moved away. Sam moved with him, floundering for a moment as he started. Once the skis were gliding over the snow, though, momentum kept him going. The tips rose over hummocks, the solid braces behind keeping the entire thing up. Sam still bounced because of those, but he was used to that; it didn't dim the doggie smile.

"That'll do." Spencer hurried toward them, sinking a bit into the snow with each step, looking like a lame penguin. "That looks great! I'll tighten up the frame, change the balance so he doesn't have to support it so much -- but I think it'll work!"

Keith grinned, flushed from his short sprint. The snow was only ankle-deep, but still made moving hard work. If nothing else, it kept him from seeing the ground.

"You are *such* a good dog!" Spencer ruffled up Sam's ears, rubbing the huge head and square muzzle.

Sam wagged as enthusiastically as he could, looking up at the two men with adoration. It wasn't the ability to run, Keith knew. It was the attention Spencer showered on him. Not a dog person. Right.

They took Sam back to the porch, got him out of the ski-set, and Keith picked him up and took him back inside. When Keith came out again, Spencer had brushed the snow off the bottom of the skis and slid the whole thing into the back seat. Turning with a broad grin, Spencer stuffed bare hands into jean pockets and walked up to the front of the porch. The porch was a good four feet off the ground. While Keith leaned on the rail, Spencer smiled up at him, breath puffing out in white clouds visible even in the

darkness.

"I'll see if I can't get it all set up, and I'll call you. It might be a few days -- I've got some jobs to do -- but I'll call as soon as I can."

Keith buried the pang of disappointment. In a few days, the snow might have melted off. Sam would be stuck until then, and after then -- well, mud was still a problem. But, he reminded himself firmly, Spencer was doing this as a favor, and he'd accept it as such. Josh would have done that.

"A few days is great," he said with a forced smile.

Spencer didn't seem to notice it in the dark. He just nodded cheerfully and hurried around the hood to the driver's side, whistling as he climbed into the truck.

Keith watched Spencer put it in gear and drive slowly away, careful on the dark mountain road. The cold was seeping into his clothing. It made him shiver, especially where his elbows rested against the rail. Finally, he told himself he was being ridiculous and pushed up, stepping toward the door. He wasn't sure why he'd waited there, watching the truck roll out of sight. Wasn't sure why he was sorry to see Spencer go. Certainly wasn't thinking about seeing him again.

He didn't want anything -- he'd been serious about that.

The excited dogs wiped out any lingering emotion. It was hard to remember what he'd been feeling, leaning on the rail under blue moonlight and stardust, when four furry beasts were clamoring for attention. He swiped at Hughie's



head when Hughie tried to jump up, and waded through them all toward the kitchen. He could do with a snack, and they certainly wouldn't object.

\*\*\*

Keith hustled Sam back into the house, the snow falling so thick and heavy it had already made a thin blanket across the dog's dense fur.

*So much for no snow*, he thought, kicking the door closed and counting dog bodies as he set Sam down. They'd tracked slush into the house, and -- as he watched, Hughie shook and sent wet flecks zipping from his coat -- all over the furniture. "Thanks, Hughie," Keith said dryly.

The dog panted happily, tail sweeping from side to side.

"Everyone find a spot and go lie down," Keith called out, wincing as Sam slid down the steps into the inset, back legs banging. He really needed to make that ramp. At least the skylight was fixed now, and all the uninvited animals trapped and released well away from the house. He hadn't yet had time to go couch hunting, but he still had a recliner and loveseat -- which had already been covered in dog hair. He wasn't likely to sit on it.

The snow kept falling outside, darkening the night still further. Keith grabbed a bunch of blankets from upstairs and trundled them down, tossing them in front of the fireplace and promptly shooing Kara off before she could lie on them. She gave him an injured look and curled in the corner, her ears tucked back. Keith ignored her, knowing she'd get over it in a few minutes. She didn't even *like* lying by the fire -- she got too hot -- so he didn't know what her

hurt was about. Maybe it was just hormones. She was due to whelp any time in the next week.

He sprawled out on the blankets, picked up his book, and tried to read.

It was one he'd started a dozen times over, curled next to the fireplace on a heap of blankets while snow fell outside. It wasn't a particularly good book. The plot was contrived, and the characters more like caricatures. But it was tradition, just like the hot chocolate steaming beside his elbow, and the fact that he wouldn't get through the book.

As many times as he'd started it, he'd never finished it. Josh had somehow managed to distract him.

The fire warmed one side of him, and he rolled over, still reading. Sam picked up his bone and scooted toward Keith, content for a while to be occasionally petted and to chew on his toy. Pages turned quietly. The logs popped, devoured by flame. Dogs sighed and moved, Hughie and Mason heading upstairs to play. Sam moved away from the fire, too hot.

Keith turned more pages. It really wasn't a very good book. It had been better with Josh there, nudging him to get up, do something else. Suggesting they snuggle on the couch, which was gone now anyway, or watch a movie together, or make better use of the blankets and have lazy sex.

Keith turned the page. Kara whined and got up to drink some water, slopping half of it on the wood floor. Sam pawed a ball, barked as it rolled around, and then slammed it with one massive forefoot.

Keith turned the page. The fire dwindled. A log broke, showering sparks across the stone framing. He was three quarters of the way through the book, as far as he'd ever gotten. It wasn't any better. He set it down, splaying it open on the floor, and pushed up to get more wood from outside.

The world was white when he opened the door, and he kept one hand on the outside wall. He could see -- somewhat. He could see the porch railing, and the overhang from the house kept the worst of the snow from blowing in. Beyond the porch, though, there was nothing more than a white blanket. He followed the wall of the house around to the side, where wood was stacked for nights like these, piled onto bracers to keep snakes away. It was cold enough that he didn't have to worry about spiders; they'd all be dead or hiding now. Keith loaded up his arms and shuffled back to the door, kicking it open and smiling briefly at the dogs, who'd arranged themselves in a semi-circle, waiting patiently as if they'd been there all night. Hughie and Mason went trotting back upstairs, tails waving behind them, and Kara moved her ponderous, heavily pregnant body back to where Sam was in the inset.

As the only dog who couldn't get up the stairs and wait by the door, Sam was looking distraught, ears pricked, eyes focused sharply on Keith.

"It's fine, old man," Keith murmured, walking down and dropping the wood by the fireplace. Sam scooted up behind him, and he sank his fingers into the thick fur between Sam's ears as he fell slowly to the blankets again. Sam sat beside him, big body propped up on steady forelegs. Keith tossed another log into the fire, watching it snap and burst before the flames began to gradually rise again. He kept his arm around Sam, leaning his head against the dog's skull.

He'd always enjoyed these nights. Nights when they weren't going out or having people over. When there wasn't anything to do but stay home and stay in, cuddling up with a book and his lover, the dogs adding safety and security as they sprawled all over the floor. All outside noise muffled, all the animals tucked in their dens, and the fire providing warmth and light.

It wasn't the same without Josh. Keith closed his eyes. After a moment, he picked his book back up and started reading again, comprehending only every other word. Sam sat with him, even though he knew the fire was too hot for the dog, knew that leaning against the furry shoulder meant Sam was even hotter. Still, Sam remained as solid as a rock, as if understanding that Keith needed the support.

The ending to the book was just as unimpressive as the rest of it, and Keith wished he'd never gotten all the way through. He tossed it to one side. It landed with a loud crack. Kara jumped and growled, and Hughie and Mason went tearing across the upstairs, sounding like elephants as they charged down. Sam didn't budge.

Keith wrapped both arms around the stalwart dog, digging fingers into the fur to scratch at the skin underneath. Sam was soft, his eyes as bright as ever, his teeth still large and white. He didn't move even when the younger males came racing up, barking first at Keith, then the fire, and finally -- when they realized nothing more was going to make loud noises -- settled down. They sniffed at Kara, who grumbled at them until they went away, got a drink, and finally headed back upstairs.

Sam was panting like a bellows. Eventually, Keith pulled

off, giving the dog one last pat. As if he knew that his duty was done, Sam turned and dragged himself away, falling on his bone at the farthest point from the fire he could get to, and chewing industriously. He might be getting old, Keith thought fondly, but he wasn't slowing down.

Keith glanced toward the wheelchair, propped up in the corner by the door. There had to be a better way to help Sam get around. Wheeling inside wasn't practical. Between the inset of the main area and simple things like doorways to get caught on, Keith spent all his time worried Sam would get stuck or fall over, doing more damage to an already injured spine. He took Sam jogging along the road and wore Sam out that way, but the dog had more energy than a once-a-day jog could allow for, and he couldn't run around with the others. Maybe the ski-set would help. If running around with the others *did* work, then...

Then maybe things would be better for a while.

Josh would have known what to do. Josh was the dog man. He'd understood them in a way that was more instinct than anything, had always seemed to know just what to do to make them happy with the minimum fuss needed. Keith had learned a great deal over the years, but not enough. Not enough to cope with this.

*Is he happy?* Josh would have asked. Keith could hear it as clear as day, and knew just looking at Sam that the answer was yes, he was. For now.

*Then what's the big deal?* Keith had no time. Dealing with Sam was a full-time occupation. Lift him down the stairs in the morning, put him in the wheelchair or the hip sling and take him out to go to the bathroom, trying to make sure

they went out the door and down the porch stairs safely -- a job that often led to scrambling and banged shins as Sam tried to hurry. If they were using the sling, then it meant taking him outside right away and positioning him so he didn't wet himself while he peed. Then back inside for the wheelchair, and if he had wet himself, a scrub down with baby wipes and reassurance that everything was all right.

Then jogging, which was the nicest part of the day. Sam kept up effortlessly on the roads, and Hughie and Mason came along -- these days, Kara was too gravid to keep up, and she was happy enough to sleep. Then back home to get the wheelchair off, fighting with it over the strip of snow between the road and the porch, up the stairs, unstrap Sam, and spend the day carting him in and out to go to the bathroom or stretch his legs.

Keith couldn't have a beer at night anymore, or not enough to get buzzed, anyway, because if Sam needed anything, Keith had to be clear-headed. He couldn't stay away for long hours, out of simple fear that Sam would fall down into the inset and hurt himself, or somehow get stuck somewhere -- his back legs knocked things over occasionally, though Keith had removed most of the unsteady furniture. There were no more spindly-legged chairs by the kitchen table, but Keith still found himself worrying.

He found himself worn out, constantly fretting over whether or not he'd done the right thing. Sam couldn't run and play with the other dogs anymore, and he was always skinning his back legs by slamming them into corners or furniture.

But he was happy. Keith was worn out, sure, but Sam was

happy. Keith couldn't leave for hours on end, but Sam was happy. He struggled with the wheelchair several times a day, and lately, because Sam couldn't make the wheelchair move through snow and was therefore stuck with only jogging for exercise, Sam had been getting more and more restless. But overall, Sam was happy. The other dogs didn't go sledding anymore, because Keith didn't want to leave Sam home alone. They weren't happy about that, but they'd survive.

Maybe the ski-set would help with some of the problems.

Keith leaned back against the recliner, staring into the flames. Josh would have known what to do. Josh would have solved all of these problems, would have handled Sam with ease and caring and not given a second thought to should-haves.

Snow was still falling outside, and Keith resented it. These had been his favorite days when Josh was alive, but Josh wasn't alive. Now he was trapped in a house with too many good memories, knowing what could be and stuck with what was. His thoughts were depressing, and he was bored. Keith let his head fall back against the seat and wished the snow would stop.

### *Chapter Three*

The morning started with a phone call. Keith slapped at his cell, picking it up before he'd even opened his eyes, with a mumbled, "Lo?"

"Keith, hey, there's snow."

The voice was familiar. He rubbed his face and then stared at the ceiling for a long moment.

"We were gonna try out the ski-set?"

Ski-set. Ski-set. He hadn't gone skiing since last year, when he and Josh had been here.

"For Sam."

Sam. Spencer. "Right!" he said, light finally dawning. "When did you want to go?" Blearily, he turned and stared at the bedside clock. Eight a.m. Even the dogs were still sleeping, though two of them had cracked their eyelids to give him dirty looks.

"I can be there in twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes? Was the man insane? But somehow, before sanity could prevail, Keith heard himself say, "Yeah, okay."



"Awesome!" And the line went dead.

What the hell had he just agreed to? Keith lay there for a long moment that stretched into ten minutes, somehow each blink taking more time than it should. Then it finally occurred to him that Spencer would be there in another ten minutes, and he was still in bed.

He dragged himself out from the warm blankets, nearly tripped over Mason -- who didn't budge -- and staggered to the hamper. He stared at it before remembering he'd need sledding clothes, and finally staggered to one of the boxes he hadn't yet unpacked. (*To do: finish unpacking.*) The flaps pulled open easily, and he began to root through long underwear and snowboarding pants. When he had what he thought he might need, he stripped down and pulled the new clothes on, glad Josh had convinced him to buy snowboarding pants that actually looked decent, instead of the puffy ones he'd had before.

Not that he had any reason to care about how he looked, not really, but a man had to have some dignity. He dragged a lightweight, long-sleeved thermal on, leaving the heavier sweater and jacket off. He didn't want to roast in his own house.

Sam groaned when Keith went to pick him up, heaving the dog into his arms and fumbling at the door handle. He staggered down the stairs under his burden, and was halfway across the room when a knock came at the door. That had *not* been twenty minutes.

The dogs upstairs all started barking, and Sam writhed to get down. Keith stumbled, trying to hold onto a hundred

and twenty-plus pounds of suddenly determined dog. The dog won. With a final twist, Sam fell from Keith's arms, even as Keith tried to catch Sam mid-air, images of broken limbs flashing through his mind. The attempted catch only made matters worse. Sam hit and Keith tripped, crashing over the crippled dog and smashing one hind paw. Sam yelped. Keith rolled, afraid he'd crushed his pup.

Not that Sam seemed bothered. He heaved himself toward the door with the other dogs, barking just as maniacally as they were.

"It's open," Keith called from the floor, slowly pushing into a sitting position.

Spencer entered, edging inside so the dogs couldn't escape - - Keith didn't point out that they wouldn't, anyway -- and closing the door behind him. "You okay?"

Keith rubbed his knee, then switched his attentions to his shoulder. "Peachy. You're early."

"Am not. What happened?" Wading through dogs, Spencer walked over and offered a hand, his face a study in concern.

"Your hair is red."

"Just part of it. What happened?"

Keith hauled himself up on Spencer's arm, wincing as his weight settled on a definitely bruised knee. "I was carrying Sam down the stairs when you knocked. He fought, I fell--"

"Down the stairs?"

"No." He waved a hand vaguely. "We'd reached the floor by then. Do you not believe in having normal-looking hair?" Not that the streaks of red in the blue-black weren't striking.

Spencer was looking at the stairs, that same problem-solving expression on his face that he'd worn when he'd first seen Sam's wheelchair flounder in the snow. "You have a problem with unusual? You need a ramp on the stairs, too."

"We're managing fine." He turned, hobbling toward the kitchen.

"Yeah, I can see that. So if I had normal hair, that would make you less grumpy?"

He ignored the humor in Spencer's voice and grabbed for the coffee pot. "Coffee would make me less grumpy." The dogs whined at the door. Sam still needed to go out -- his bladder control wasn't what it used to be, with his spine damaged. Keith shoved the pot at Spencer and headed back toward the dogs. "Make some, would you?"

"Where are your grounds?"

Keith flapped a hand toward the cupboards, already shoving his feet into his boots while he looped Sam's sling around furry hips.

The morning was clear and bright, the snow like a sheet of the softest white covering everything. Then the dogs ran through it, and it was no longer pretty and fluffy, but crisscrossed with dog tracks. Keith and Sam followed the

others, making it as far as the corner of the house before Sam found a good spot. Keith looked elsewhere while the dog did his business. Granted, he had to hold Sam up, but it still seemed polite not to watch. The other dogs sniffed and looped around the nearest trees, double checking for squirrels -- which chattered at them from above, sending Kara into a frenzy -- and marking over each other's scents. Mason and Hughie spent a good amount of time sprinting from one tree to the next, peeing on each other's marks until Keith thought there couldn't possibly be another drop left in either one. Amazingly, they continued.

He took Sam back inside while the other three finished sniffing. Stomping snow off his boots, Keith glanced around.

Spencer had found the coffee grounds and filters, apparently. The pot was starting to gurgle. Spencer himself had gone back to the stairs, peering at them as if they'd give him the answers to the world.

Keith let Sam down to go explore the house, heading into the kitchen and finding a mug. "You want some coffee?"

"No, thanks, I had some tea this morning. You know, we could turn this whole thing into a ramp. Then Sam could get up and down."

"Not up. I doubt he has the strength for a ramp that steep." Keith poured milk and a little bit of sugar into a mug, then stared at the coffee maker as if pressure would help it speed up.

"Well, down, at least. You wouldn't have to worry about either of you breaking your necks." Spencer wandered into

sight, leaning against the counter nearby.

Keith grunted and glanced up. Spencer's hair was glossy in the light coming in the window, splashes of crimson making the ebony even darker. The silver hoops in his ear glittered brightly, the dark T-shirt over his thermal setting off the pale column of his throat. Keith caught himself visually tracing the soft shadows along Spencer's tendons and Adam's apple, and looked quickly away. Spencer was physically everything Josh wasn't. Josh wouldn't have approved of earrings, dyed hair, or tattoos. Keith didn't, either.

It had just been a really long time since he'd been laid, that was all.

"You're not still bothered by my hair, are you?" Spencer asked on a small chuckle.

"Of course not." Keith glared at the coffee maker some more. "It's not even naturally black, is it?"

"Nope. It's naturally light brown."

Keith couldn't help but look back then, trying to imagine the sleek-boned Spencer with light brown hair. He couldn't do it. As if his doubt was written on his face, Spencer smiled and leaned toward him, head tilted.

"See? There's roots." He parted his hair, tapping his scalp with one snub-nailed finger.

Keith peered. "Oh, yeah," he said finally, lifting his own hand and brushing hair out of the way. It was a mistake to touch Spencer. The hair under his fingertips was silky, not

dry and brittle like he expected from repeated dying. He swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat, and combed through more of it. He told himself it was just to see if he couldn't find more roots, try to imagine Spencer with hair that color, but he knew otherwise. He caught his lower lip between his teeth, inhaling as the scent of Spencer's shampoo was released.

It was too much. He pulled away quickly, flushing and turning back to the coffee maker. "Nice."

He could feel Spencer's eyes on him. "Thanks."

Silence stretched. The dogs went racing past the window, kicking up snow. "You wanna call them in?" Keith asked. "We don't want them totally worn out."

"Sure." Spencer pushed away from the sink, striding quickly across the floor. "They all going too, then?"

The corner of Keith's mouth kicked up. "Oh, yeah." His eyes flicked toward the tarp outside the kitchen window, now covered by snow, that sheltered the dog sled and all their gear. If Sam could keep up... and if not, then he and Spencer could walk home while Sam rode on the sled.

The beasts came in at a run, shedding snow everywhere as the house exploded with noise and excitement. They brought the morning air in with them, crisp and clean and smelling of cold and pine. The coffee maker finally stopped burbling, and Keith greedily poured his cup full and took the first sip.

He nearly spat it back out. "Good God," he said after he'd swallowed. "What did you put in here?"

"I just followed the directions..."

He gave Spencer a horrified look. "You don't drink coffee, do you?"

Spencer shook his head.

"Freak." Keith took another tentative sip, figuring it couldn't be as bad now that he was expecting it. It was. He poured the rest of the coffee down the drain. "Let me grab some toast and we'll head out," he said with a shake of his head. "The air'll wake me up." Or maybe the sludge already had. He wrinkled his nose and rubbed his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

Spencer hovered nearby. "Sorry. I just figured..."

Keith grinned, silencing him. "Don't worry about it. Have you got snow boots? I have an extra pair." They were Josh's, but surely Josh wouldn't mind. It was for the dogs, after all. Not that Spencer was as tall, or as broad, as Josh had been. Hopefully his feet were close enough, though.

There was no more excitement as he got some toast and directed Spencer to the boots in the basement. They did fit Spencer all right, and Spencer tromped around in the snow while Keith gathered sledding supplies. "How can you possibly not have snow boots and live up here?" Keith called, untangling nylon harnesses.

"I left 'em home. Didn't think we'd be going *that* far," Spencer called back.

Keith stepped outside, and the dogs went wild at the sight

of the harnesses, cavorting and romping all around Keith's legs. Sam started barking, high and squeaky, carrying on like he could join in if he was just loud enough.

Spencer watched them with a sort of bemusement, quick eyes tracking everything. Then Keith uncovered the dog sled, dragging the snow-covered tarp off the whole thing, and Spencer's face lit up.

"Is that what I think it is?"

Keith was inordinately pleased. "That depends. Do you think it's a dog sled?"

"That's *so cool*. They're sled dogs? Do you race them?" He tromped over, running a hand down the clean aluminum lines of the frame.

"No, we just did it for fun. It was better when we had a full team, but three should do." He pulled the sled away from the house, clipping the gangline to the pulling point and whistling for the dogs. Spencer caught Sam as the big dog tried to scoot by.

"Hang on, buddy. You're staying with me." Grinning, Spencer pulled the ski-set around with his other hand, fitting it over Sam's back.

Keith let Spencer work while he put the dogs in nylon harnesses, gesturing them to where they belonged. Kara went at the front, where she'd do less work; a pregnant dog leading might keep them all slower, and she sure as heck didn't need to pull. He figured by the time she wore herself out, Sam would be tuckered, too.



He clipped the tuglines to the x-back harnesses, clipped the special no-slip collars to the gangline, and paused to see how Spencer was doing.

"Okay!" Spencer called, giving Sam another once-over. "I think everything's ready to go."

Keith whistled for Sam, and nearly held his breath while Sam began to pull himself forward. The skis slid across the snow, back legs held safely up. It seemed to be working. Keith grinned and jerked his head, motioning for Spencer to hop on the sled.

No one looked graceful running through knee-deep snow, and Spencer was no exception. But he was grinning like a fool, and it made Keith chuckle. "Get on," Keith gestured to the seat of the sled again.

Spencer peered at it dubiously. "You're kidding, right? How do you steer?"

"The dogs steer."

"How do you *brake*?"

Keith laughed, shaking his head. "I've got the brakes. Get *on*, would you?"

With great trepidation -- and a fair amount of fumbling -- Spencer lowered himself into the seat area of the sled, only a few inches above the runners. He had to sit on top of the safety bag, there to transport an injured dog or human, and there wasn't really anything to grip except the sides. He managed all right, long legs folding up so he could fit.

Keith pulled the snowhook out, lodged it on the rung behind Spencer's back, and started to push. "Let's go, dogs! Hike!"

They didn't need any more encouragement than that. As if they'd been waiting for the cue -- of course, they *had* -- they leaped forward, straining against the harnesses. The sled jerked into motion. Spencer slammed back, and Keith jumped quickly onto the foot rests behind the brake operator.

"Holy shit!" Spencer howled, his knuckles white as he gripped the sides of the seat.

Keith laughed. "They haven't even gotten going, yet!" Unless they were in phenomenal shape, three huskies would have had a hard time pulling two full-grown men, especially up the slight incline they were currently climbing. But king shepherds were three times a husky's size, and these three made short work of getting up the hill.

Sam, Keith noticed, fell back as he floundered up the incline. Just when Keith was getting ready to slow them all down, though, Sam seemed to find his footing and began to catch up. Keith called encouragingly, and Sam barked the whole way, a gleeful exultation in being able to run again.

As they crested the rise and started down the other side, Sam caught up. Spencer let out a half-terrified, half-excited yell. The dogs tore down the slope, kicking up snow behind them while Keith rode the brake carefully so as not to overtake the team. "Stop being a pussy," he shouted, ducking low so he was closer to Spencer's ear. "They know what they're doing!"

"Pussy!" Spencer protested. "Shit, man, they're -- oh fuck, tree!"

"Gee, dogs! Find the trail!" Keith called. The dogs cut neatly to the right, around the tree, and started seeking, quickly finding the old route they used to take. It was little more than a flat space between small hills, and in the spring it filled with water and they had to find a new 'trail.' But covered in snow, it was a natural space with no plants to get in the way, where the dogs could pull easier.

It also gave any new passengers time to calm down. Keith held off conversation until he saw the half-panicked tension leave Spencer's shoulders, and the white-knuckled grip on the bars loosen slightly. The noise levels had dropped, now that the dogs didn't have to dig into the snow quite so hard and weren't sending it flying back against the sled so much. Sam had quit his barking, catching up to Kara and settling in beside her as if he were helping to pull. Snow whisked under the runners, and the world was sheathed in the weighted calm that came with winter.

"This is cool," Spencer said at long last, settling against the back rest.

Keith chuckled, balancing his weight. "Yeah. When we had a bunch of dogs, Josh and I had two sleds and we'd take them out and race."

"Christ. How many dogs did you *have*?"

"Fifteen. Not all of them ran, though. Most of them were show dogs. Josh was big on the rare breed circuit." They'd spend weeks traveling from place to place, and between it all there was dog training and breeding.

"And all the dogs stayed inside?"

Keith nodded, then added, "Yup," when he realized Spencer couldn't see him. "He wanted them to be good family dogs for whoever got them. He wanted to help improve and promote the breed." He'd wanted so many things. For months after he'd died, Keith had struggled with trying to continue. Keith didn't know all the things about breeding and breed standards that Josh did, though. Keith didn't care like Josh had. The decision to stop was still one of the hardest Keith had made.

The team was moving well, Kara and Sam keeping up easily. The skis instead of wheels on Sam's chair certainly seemed to work. "Hang on, Spence," Keith said, then added in a firm voice, "Haw, dogs!"

Kara and Sam swerved to the left, up the small hill, and Hughie and Mason followed, leaning forward in their harness to drag the weight of both men upward. Keith hopped off the sled and ran behind, lightening their load, jumping back onto the braces when they reached the top. "Gee!" The dogs went right, running along the rise.

"The sled's gonna slip!" Spencer yelped, trying to lean away from the hill.

"Leaning that way will encourage it to slide down." Keith laughed, trying to counterbalance what Spencer was doing. The dogs kept running, oblivious to the excitement they were causing. Slowly, they pulled away from the edge and Spencer settled down.

"Relax, Spence," Keith said, bending low so he didn't have

to shout over the sound of the wind. "I'm not going to let you fall."

Spencer snorted his disbelief, and Keith laughed.

He called the dogs to a halt long before they were actually tired, worried that Kara and Sam would over-do it in their excitement. The three mobile dogs flopped down into the snow, panting madly but with big grins on their faces. Sam even dropped, his hips held up by the ski-set but his chest in the snow.

Spencer clambered up from the seat and went to Sam, checking out how the skis were holding up and unhooking Sam's back legs so he, too, could sprawl. "It looks like it'll work," Spencer called back cheerfully, straightening from his examination.

Relief swept through Keith, and he grinned back. "That's awesome. I mean -- really. Thank you." He couldn't be sure, but for a moment he thought Spencer flushed.

Spencer jammed his hands in his pockets and watched the dogs, shrugging awkwardly. "It's nothing. I'm glad I could help."

Keith was struck suddenly by how young he looked. Tamera had said he was several years younger than Keith, and Keith was only thirty-two. Idly, Keith wandered closer, glancing over the dogs. They should have brought water with them, but none of the pups were lapping at the snow, so they couldn't be too thirsty. Shortly, Keith stood shoulder to shoulder with Spencer, watching as Sam dug himself a furrow to lie in.

"How old are you?" Keith asked.

"Twenty-four." Spencer glanced at him. "Why?"

"Just wondering. Tamera said you were young." He grinned at the flash of annoyance on Spencer's face, and couldn't help teasing slightly. "And you looked about eighteen for a minute there..."

Spencer rolled his eyes -- looking about eighteen again -- and glowered at Keith. "You're not that funny."

"I'm hilarious. Did you grow up around here?" He was pretty sure not, or Josh would have mentioned him at some point. Josh had known everyone, especially the other gay people.

Expectedly, Spencer shook his head. "Texas."

Keith's eyebrows rose. "Didn't see that one coming. You don't even have an accent."

Spencer gave him a wry smile. "I didn't quite fit in there. I spent some time in Houston and that was pretty good. Went to college in New York. That was awesome. After I graduated, I went home, but..."

Keith nodded in commiseration. "Family didn't like you dating other guys?"

Spencer glanced at him, surprise written clearly on his face. "Oh, no, they didn't care about that. They're totally supportive of whatever I want to do. It was -- well, it's *Texas*. Not exactly known for being gay-tolerant, you know?"

"Yeah." But at least now he also knew without a doubt that Spencer was gay. Not that it mattered -- except maybe he should be more careful. Didn't want to give the wrong impression.

"So." Spencer shrugged. "Here I am. Thought I'd find a little mountain community and do some hiking, biking, skiing, fishing -- whatever came up."

"Living the life of a loafer, huh?" Keith quirked a grin. "Make rent and everything else will take care of itself?" He'd spent a few years after college like that himself, barely scraping by and happy to do it so he could spend his time doing what he loved. Hiking, biking, skiing, fishing -- that sounded about right.

"Something like that." Spencer cast another eye over the dogs. Hughie had stood and was straining against the lines, trying to sniff a nearby tree.

"We should get moving." Keith reached down, gesturing for Sam to stand and then buckling his hips back into the skis. "You wanna stand or sit?"

"Could I stand?" Spencer's face lit. "It looks like fun."

"Be my guest." Keith spent a few minutes explaining how to use the brake -- step on it until the small hooks dug into the snow -- and then turned the dogs around. He settled into the seat and called out, "Let's go, guys!" They lurched forward as if they'd never been out, and he heard Spencer yelp and run before the sled jerked and Spencer was standing on the runners. Keith snickered.

They raced along the ridge once more, the dogs following their own tracks back toward home. Despite the way they'd taken off, Keith could tell they were flagging. Sam and Kara, setting the pace, were sticking to a relaxed trot rather than the run they'd sustained for so long. The lines between Kara and the boys in back began to slacken as they caught up to her, and Keith called back, "Step on the brake! You have to keep the lines tight."

"But the lines *are* tight between us and the first dogs!"

Keith nodded amiably. "Right, but they need to stay tight between all the dogs. If Hughie and Mason run over Kara's lines, they'll get tangled." He felt the drag on the sled, then, as Spencer braked. The boys slowed down, and for a moment Sam outpaced them all, glancing back over his shoulder as if he were getting away with something. Keith chuckled, looking down at the paw prints as they slid by. Sam's front paws were nearly as big as Keith's hand -- and those weren't the biggest.

Reality intruded as the sled began to tip. Keith leaned toward the decline, putting weight on that rail to move it the opposite direction. Spencer was leaning against him, following the more obvious inclination to lean away from the hill.

"Spence!" he laughed, twisting to look around. "Lean *toward* the decline to move the sled away!" At this rate, they were both going to go over the edge.

Spencer adjusted his stance, frowning mightily, his whole face screwed up as he focused on doing the counter-intuitive. "Shit shit shit!" Spencer yelled as the sled began to drop.



Keith laughed, shoving a foot out to try and keep them from sliding down. It became obvious all too quickly that wasn't going to work. Hughie and Mason strained against their harnesses now, feet digging into the snow. "Dogs! Haw!" Keith bellowed, in the vain hope that if he got them all going downhill, maybe the sled wouldn't tip sideways. "Spencer, brake!" The metal hooks dug down through the snow, crunching into dirt below with an audible grind.

The dogs shifted, a wave of fur and muscle and flying snow as they turned and began barreling downhill. For a moment, Keith thought it was going to work. Then the sled hit a rock, shuddering down the length of the frame, and he felt Spencer's weight shift along with it. More than a hundred and fifty pounds standing on the runners had been forcing the sled to stay upright -- but when Spencer took one foot off to catch his balance, the whole thing tipped.

Keith dumped into the snow, covering his head as the sled fell over him and kept rolling. Spencer was cussing up a blue streak, dancing around nearby from what Keith could hear. He ignored Spencer, shoving up to his elbows to see what had happened with the dogs.

They'd apparently managed to outrun the sled, keeping enough lax in the lines so that even as it tumbled and wound one line around the other, it didn't drag the dogs along. Kara, Hughie, and Mason now all stood at the bottom of the hill, panting happily and looking up at their erstwhile humans. Sam stood at the top, trying to find a more careful way down, barking in between each step.

Keith twisted to look the other way and saw Spencer, one hand to his head, the other brushing snow off his pants.

"Well," Keith said with amusement. "That could have gone better."

"You didn't tell me sleds were deadly!" Spencer took his hand away from his head, glaring at his glove as if he expected to see blood. And maybe he did -- there was a clear rail-line against his temple, though it was already fading.

"I didn't think you'd be able to *topple* us!" Keith laughed, shoving up to his feet. He winced as half a dozen bruises -- not the least from having the sled roll over him -- announced themselves. "Hughie!" he bellowed as he caught sight of the dog gnawing on a line. "Don't chew on that!" Hughie gave him an innocently wounded look.

"Am I bleeding?" Spencer put his hand back to his head, pulling it away once more to examine it.

"No, you big wuss." A grin took the sting out of the words, and Keith brushed off the worst of his snow before heading down the hill.

"I'm not a wuss! I was accosted by a freakin' metal sled!"

"Aluminum!" Keith glanced back, watching as Spencer followed more carefully. "You're barely bruised!"

"I've probably got broken ribs!" But now Spencer was grinning, cutting along the hill to where Sam was struggling. With only two legs to brake with, the dog was having some trouble getting down. Spencer wrapped one hand around a top bar and slowed the skis, murmuring too softly for Keith to hear.

He looked away, skidding down to the bottom before he could think too much about Spencer. Anyone would have helped a crippled dog. It didn't make Spence unique.

It took ten minutes to get the dogs untangled and the sled righted. Eventually, Keith simply undid all the lines and reattached everything after getting it straightened out. It seemed the easiest way.

"You ride," Keith told Spencer, watching nimble fingers try to dig snow out of his jacket collar.

"Bullshit! It's still my turn to steer!"

Keith pointed to the hill they'd just toppled down.

Spencer grinned triumphantly. "Exactly. Now there's no place left to fall."

Laughing, Keith acquiesced and plopped himself back down in the sled. The slush he hadn't gotten off was melting, making his clothes cold and wet. It wasn't far to get home, which he was grateful for -- especially as there were clouds rolling in, blocking the warm sunshine.

When he felt Spencer's weight shift the sled, he called out, "Let's go, dogs!"

The leap forward this time was less enthusiastic -- except for Hughie, who was *always* enthusiastic -- but the break had been good for the team, and they kept up a better pace.

"Tell me how to steer them!" Spencer said, leaning down so he didn't have to shout.

"Haw is left, and gee is right."

There was a beat of silence, and Keith practically did a countdown before the expected question was asked.

"Why don't you just say right and left?"

Keith shrugged. "Haw and gee are traditional, maybe? And Josh always said that if we ran with other dogs, it was easiest if they all knew the same cues." Not that they'd run with other dogs very often, but occasionally they'd loan one out if they were camping with a group of mushers and someone needed an extra pulling dog.

A squirrel ran across the path, zipping up into a tree and chittering angrily at them. "On by!" Keith yelled, and the dogs all kept going obediently, though Hughie barked excitedly back.

Keith kept his head tucked low, trying to avoid the snow the dogs flung up in his face, trying to hide his skin from the wind they created. He was getting colder by the minute.

"That one sure is excitable," Spencer laughed.

Keith glanced up to see where Spencer was pointing, then followed the direction to Hughie. "He's the youngest. Just two and a half years old. That--" Keith pulled a hand free from where he'd tucked it under his other arm and gestured to Mason. "--is his dad."

"Really? How cool!"

Keith nodded. Not that Hughie and Mason acted like father and son, but he figured Hughie kept Mason young and fit.

Ahead, the path rose higher, the incline on the side lessening. The tracks they'd made before coming down were obvious. "You have to tell them H - A - W before we get to the turn."

"Okay!"

"And if they're tired, you might have to get off the sled and walk." Then they started up the slow incline. He felt Spencer get off and push, feet crunching through the snow.

At the very corner of the turn, about ten feet too late, Spencer called, "Gee! I mean, haw!"

Keith smothered his laugh, and when Spencer exclaimed at how cool it was that the dogs listened, he didn't point out that they knew the way home and would be taking it even if Spencer had remained silent.

When they got to the top of the hill, Keith called for them to stop and rolled off the sled, shivering so hard it wasn't worth riding. "When you get to the house, tell them 'whoa' to stop, and set the snow hook." He gestured to the metal hook hanging off the back bars. "Then unclip them before you do anything else."

"You want to steer?" Spencer asked, looking concerned.

Keith shook his head. "I'd rather walk. Hoping it'll warm me up." He smiled encouragingly and nodded onward. "It's not far. I'll meet you back at the house. The dogs know the way. Hike, dogs!"

They started forward again, though several times one or

more of them glanced back. But even at their slow speed they were faster than a walking man, and soon they were lost in the small hillocks and dense trees.

He hoped they didn't hang the sled up on a tree somehow.

Then, putting all thoughts of another wreck from his mind, he tucked his head and started to walk. It was barely a quarter of a mile home. The cabin would have been in easy view if it weren't for the forest and hills. He could still hear Spencer calling encouragement to the dogs, telling them how good they were, how cool this was. He chuckled, doubting very much that Spencer knew he was audible.

It was always nice to have someone who appreciated dog sledding. Most people wouldn't get near one, to Keith's frustration. Josh had shown him, and since then he hadn't found anyone else who'd go -- other than the mushing club, but there was no mushing club out here, and he didn't relish the thought of traveling more.

Home was a fifteen-minute walk, but ten minutes into it Hughie came racing up, his black and silver coat blending neatly with the shadows and snow. Mason was hot on his heels, almost solid black except for a bit of red around his muzzle.

"Hey, boys." Keith swiped at their ears, half-heartedly petting them with hands gone numb. "Where's Spencer?"

They look at him, bouncing in circles as he walked, tongues hanging out. Mason was still wearing his harness.

"Find Spencer!"

Mason began to dash back toward the house, no doubt recognizing the 'find' command, but then paused, looking back.

"That's right! Go on, find Spencer!"

Hughie barked and leaped around the other side of a tree, as if whatever he was being sent to look for might be there.

Keith laughed. "Spencer's not there. Where is he? Where's Spence, guys? Find him! Can you find Spencer?"

Mason, watching intently this whole while, barked once and went tearing off, flinging snow in all directions. Hughie turned and raced after him, obviously chasing Mason rather than on any hunt.

Keith kept trudging, listening to the happy yips up ahead. When he came to the top of the last little hillock, the two dogs were flocking around Spencer's legs, getting petted. Upon seeing Keith, Mason gave a deep, booming bark and came running back, stopping before he got the whole way and racing back to Spencer, looking over his shoulder to see if Keith was coming.

"Good dog!" Keith called enthusiastically. "Good dog, find Spencer!"

Mason bounded over to Spencer, excited at a job well done and the accompanying praise.

Spencer was trying to get the lines off the sled, and Keith hollered, "Don't untie them! They unclip!"

Spencer leaned away from the sled, hands held out as

though afraid to touch it. Those keen eyes seemed to examine everything, and then he smiled as he realized what he was doing wrong. He leaned in, unclipping the lines and tossing them back into the snow.

Kara was sunning herself on the porch, seemingly unconcerned that what sun was making it through the cloud cover was dim and watery. Sam had found a mound of snow that he could lie on without either leaving his ski-set or ending up at an awkward angle.

"So, what do you think of dog sledding?" Keith asked, grinning as he finally reached the house. He scooped up the rope and nylon lines and tossed them onto the sled, taking the whole thing and pushing it back under the eaves.

"That was awesome. Painful, but awesome. How long does it take a dog to learn that?"

Keith shrugged, hauling the tarp over the rig. "Josh taught the first dogs before we met, and after that the other dogs learned from the first ones, so I don't really know. It never seems to take the young ones long to catch on, though. Hughie's been running with the team from the time he could keep up, but he only started pulling last year. Josh--" Keith faltered, then continued on. "Josh taught him just before the accident."

There was a beat of silence. "Accident?" Spencer asked. Keith glanced toward him, but he wasn't looking. His gaze was fixed on Hughie, as if he could pretend that he hadn't uttered the word.

Keith took a deep breath. "Josh was in a car accident. The same one that damaged Sam's spine. That was how he



died." He waited for the inevitable apologies, the pity, the strained quiet that people always needed to fill.

Spencer just nodded once. "Oh. No wonder you're not dating." He turned away, calling Mason -- who ignored him to keep sniffing. "Man, he won't let me take his harness off."

"Mason, come!"

The shepherd turned and came trotting over, tail waving gaily. With a few quick movements, Keith had it off him. "Wuss."

"Hey!" Spencer laughed, shoving Keith with one hand as he walked by. "Just because I don't talk to the animals..." He banged up the stairs, earning a dismissive look from Kara.

"The only reason you don't talk to the animals is because they refuse to listen," Keith shot back, turning quickly to call Sam.

With a heavy sigh, Sam clambered to his feet and came toddling over, looking pleased with the world as a whole. Keith unstrapped him from the ski-set, leaving it in the snow, and looped the sling around his back hips. With Sam walking his front end up the stairs and Keith hefting his back end, they got up onto the porch and Keith set him down. Sam seemed to prefer lying in the snow to coming inside where it was warm. Given his heavy panting, Keith couldn't blame him.

The front door stood open, Spencer hogging most of the room in the doorway as he fumbled with his boots. Keith

planted a hand on Spencer's hips and pushed, nearly toppling the man. "Hey!"

Keith grinned. "You're in the way."

With a snort, Spencer plopped to the wooden boards -- out of the way -- and continued struggling with his laces. "I swear, my hands are numb."

"Yeah, me too." Keith pulled his gloves off, clenching and relaxing his fingers as if simple blood flow might restore feeling. He ignored his own snow-covered shoes and walked to the fire, flipping the gas on and using the long-handled electric lighter until flame whooshed across the grid. He added logs for heat, and held his hands out in the hopes that they'd warm up quickly.

It didn't take long for Spencer to join him, feet covered in heavy, checkered socks. Keith snorted, then glanced back toward the front. "You left the door open."

"You were the last one in!"

"You were the last one over there." From the corner of his eye, he could see Spencer's indignant look

"I didn't want to lock the dogs out!"

"They're already out, and they'll bark if they want in. Close the door. All the heat's escaping." Much to his amusement, Spencer got up and hurried across the cold floorboards to shut the door before hurrying back.

"You're getting water all over the wood floor," Spencer said, crouching down so close to the fire that he looked like

he'd combust at any minute.

Keith glanced at his boots, now creating a puddle from the melted snow. Grumbling, he sat back and pulled them off, putting them on the stone skirt around the fireplace where the water wouldn't matter. Not that there wasn't plenty of it all over the floor already from where he'd come walking over, and not that the dogs wouldn't bring more in.

His walk home had warmed him up, and it didn't take long before he was easing away from the flames, his toes and fingers still cold but the rest of him growing toasty. Spencer stayed by the fire, cuddling up close to its warmth.

"You want some cocoa?" Keith asked, pushing up to his feet.

"Cocoa? What are you, twelve?"

Keith's eyes narrowed. "Okay. I'll take that as a no. I'll have some nice, warm, chocolatey cocoa, and you can stay cold." He padded into the kitchen, ignoring the call behind him.

"Good point. I changed my mind, I'm twelve, too."

Keith pulled down one mug for himself and rooted around in the pantry for the mix.

"Keith?" Spencer's voice, coming from the fireplace, sounded almost forlorn. "Keith, can I have some cocoa too?"

"Nope." He pulled out Nestlé's and set it on the counter next to his mug.

"Oh, come on! I was just kidding!" Spencer appeared in the doorway, his cheeks pink from the cold and the fire, his short, spiky hair disheveled. He walked into the kitchen, looking pleadingly at Keith. "Can't I have some after all?"

Keith ignored him, trying hard to keep the smile from lurking at the corners of his mouth. He pulled milk out of the fridge and poured some into his mug.

"I swear, cocoa is like, the most grown up thing you can drink! Even -- dude, *Nestlé's*?"

Keith grabbed the container from Spencer's hand. "That's it. You *really* don't get cocoa now. Making fun of my purchases..."

"C'mon, I'll make you cocoa. From scratch."

Keith shook his head, but couldn't stop the quirk of his lips in response to Spencer's grin. Then Spencer grabbed for the container again, before he could spoon the mix into his mug. Keith twisted away, trying to keep it out of reach. "Hey! Knock it off, Mr. Cocoa's-for-kids-but-I-can-make-it-from-scratch!"

Spencer laughed, still trying to reach around Keith. "I never said it wasn't good! And it is for kids!"

Keith elbowed Spencer. "You have freakishly long monkey arms," he said, holding the mix tight to his chest when he realized that Spencer's arms were longer than his.

"I know!" Spencer wrapped both arms around Keith and groped at the container, but it was no good. Keith had it in

a football hold and wasn't letting go. Spencer jumped, trying to gain some height to reach down over Keith's shoulders, and ended up hanging off his back.

"God, you're heavy!" Keith grunted. He felt Spencer's sock-covered feet flail against his calves, a strong torso and chest shoved hard against him. One arm looped over his chest to hang on, the other reaching for the cocoa. He stretched out again, trying to keep it out of Spencer's reach. Long legs wrapped around his hips, locking in place and tightening as Spencer used him to climb higher and reach farther.

"Hey! I'm not a freakin' tree!" Keith laughed, feeling his own muscles bunch as he struggled to stay upright. He staggered and the cocoa cracked against the counter, spilling brown powder all over the floor. He didn't care, twisting to try and keep it away from Spencer as Spencer tried to grab his arm and pull it closer. More mix spilled, but it still wasn't in Spencer's hands and that was all that mattered.

They were both laughing and out of breath, Spencer trying to stay high on Keith's back, Keith trying not to fall over with the added -- squirming -- weight when the front door opened and a voice called, "Hello?"

They both froze.

"Keith?"

"Oh, shit," Spencer breathed. "It's Tamera." He leaped off Keith's back and darted to the walk-in pantry, yanking the door closed behind him. Keith watched with some confusion, but didn't have a chance to ask anything before Tamera was standing in the doorway, frowning at the mess

of Nestlé's cocoa powder all over the floor. Keith peered into the container. There was only half a spoonful left, if that.

"Are you okay?" Tamera asked after a long moment.

Keith nodded. They both looked at the mess. "I, uh, tripped."

"...On the floor?"

"On a dog." He winced. There were no dogs in the house.

"There are no dogs in the house," Tamera pointed out slowly.

"Yeah. Uh, there usually are, so I assumed there was and tried to step over one but, like you said, no dog, so..." How lame could this get? And he'd love to know why Spencer was hiding in the pantry.

Tamera stared at him for a long moment. "I... see. Is Spencer here?"

"Spencer?" Keith looked at her, attempting innocent and fairly sure he looked drunk instead.

"Spencer. The man who owns the truck out front."

"Oh. That Spencer."

She smiled expectantly. Then she glanced down, and her gaze seemed to catch hold. Keith glanced down, too, and snickered at the trail of powdery footprints leading directly to the pantry. It served Spencer right for bailing on him like

this, without any sort of explanation.

"Oh," Tamera said after a moment. Then, as if she'd just had some sort of realization, her eyes flew wide and she looked at Keith. "*Oh*." She backed away a step, a smirk forming. "*I see*."

"What?" Keith yelped. "No! I don't think you see. I mean, this isn't how it looks."

"You don't have to explain to me," Tamera said airily, waving one hand. "I completely understand. I'll just leave you two boys alone." She practically waltzed toward the doorway, glowing with pleasure. "I just love it when two people I set up come together, finally."

"We aren't -- there's no 'together'--" Keith followed her out, shaking his head and slicing his hands through the air. More chocolatey powder dusted the floor.

"Don't worry! I understand what it's like to be alone for a whole year!" She opened the door and stepped aside as Sam dragged himself in, cheerfully determined and ignoring Kara, Hughie, and Mason, who leaped past him.

"That's not--"

"I'll see you two later!" She wagged her fingers and slammed the door behind her. Keith flinched at the noise. Then he stared down at the dogs, all arranging themselves by the kitchen doorway and looking hopefully at the spilled cocoa. "You can't have that," he said firmly, then distracted them with, "Find Spencer!"

Mason leaped back up to his feet, followed quickly by

Hughie. Sam, with one interested look around, decided that was much too hard and flopped to his side to rest.

Mason, however, was on the hunt. He sniffed around, then whirled in a circle and made a beeline for the kitchen.

Spencer was just coming out of the pantry when Mason arrived. Keith stopped in the doorway, arms folded across his chest while Spencer praised Mason and Hughie, who was trailing along behind. Finally, Spencer looked up.

"What the hell?" Keith gestured at the pantry. More cocoa mix drifted out of the container. Unable to stop, he huffed a chuckle at the sheer insanity of it.

Spencer gave him a sheepish smile. "Sorry. She's just -- she and Brian are having marital problems, and she's decided we're best friends. I can't get *rid* of her. And on top of that, she's the worst busybody for setting people up ever -- especially if you're gay. She's like... like... a faghag version of Kathy Bates!"

Keith's huff of a chuckle turned into full-blown laughter. "You've gotta be kidding. You've got a straight, female stalker?"

Spencer smiled wryly and nodded.

Then the full import of it hit Keith, and his laughter cut off. "Now she thinks we're -- you and me--"

Spencer nodded again, dropping his gaze. He dug his fingers into Hughie's coat, seemingly absorbed in the task.

"Which means, if you're right, the whole town will



probably think--"

Spencer winced. "Sorry. I'll set about putting people right. I know you're not interested -- Josh and all -- and I'll make sure other people know, too."

Keith doubted very much that Spencer would be able to keep up with Tamera's rumor mill. Everyone would think he was sleeping around already. But he wasn't. He wasn't ready. Josh had only been dead fourteen months -- he really wasn't ready. The wind taken out of his sails, he plopped down at the kitchen table and stared at the box of cocoa. He felt *horrible*.

He was vaguely aware of Spencer hovering. When Spencer came close and took the container, he just handed it off without an argument.

"You and Josh... you were pretty good together, huh?" Spencer asked quietly.

Keith looked up, seeing the young man toss the empty container and root around in the pantry. "Yeah," he said dully. "We were. Didn't plan on either of us dying, y'know?" Josh had been only thirty -- a year younger than Keith himself at the time, though Josh had always seemed the older, the more put-together, of the two of them.

Spencer pulled a plastic container out of the back corner and kept rooting. "Were you two together long?"

"Seven years." Long enough to build a life together. Long enough to create a successful dog business. Long enough for Keith to forget how it was to live alone. He shook himself, focusing with difficulty on Spencer. "What about

you? Any serious relationships?"

Spencer shook his head. "Had a boyfriend in university. That lasted all of three months or something."

Keith frowned. "Tamera gave me the impression you were out looking for hookups all the time." He couldn't quite remember when, or how, but for some reason...

Long fingers plucked another bottle from the back of the shelves. "Tamera would like to live vicariously through me. And I think she figures anyone with dyed hair and tattoos must be a wild child. Where's your salt?"

Keith pointed to a cupboard. "You do look the part of the wild child."

Spencer snorted. "I like to think if I look anything, it's just me."

That, Keith thought, was youth speaking. His lips twisted into a small smile. "Society would disagree."

A wave of his hand seemed to indicate society could go screw itself. "I'd rather go hiking or -- or dog sledding." Spencer grinned at Hughie. Hughie wagged, watching him with adoration. "I spend most of my time doing metalwork, not listening to heavy metal."

"That was a terrible pun."

Spencer only grinned, going through drawers until he found the mugs -- he pulled out two more -- and the silverware. He filled two mugs with milk, putting them in the microwave to heat. Into the third mug, he measured

unsweetened cocoa, salt, and sugar.

"You don't put *salt* in cocoa!" Keith protested.

Spencer waved the spoon around imperiously. "Ye of little knowledge. A little bit of salt brings out the sweet." He hesitated, then, without looking around, asked, "Did you want to talk about it? Josh, I mean?"

Keith gave it a long moment's thought. "Not really," he said at last.

Tension that he hadn't noticed suddenly seemed to drain out of Spencer. "Oh, thank God. I mean, I don't mind if you wanted to. I just... never know what to say."

Keith chuckled. "Don't worry about it." He took a deep breath, pushing away thoughts of Josh or what others might think. He *wasn't* betraying Josh, no matter what rumors started. He was making a friend -- and as different as Spencer was from the man Keith had fallen for, he doubted it would be any more than that, no matter how physically attractive Spencer was.

It was nice to have a friend.

He focused on Spencer and what he was doing -- waiting for the microwave to beep -- and summoned up a smile. "I was under the impression you and Tamera were good buddies."

"Yeah, and I bet you got that impression from Tamera. I fixed some things for them, and Tamera decided I was her new pet project. Then I made the mistake of accepting a couple of social invitations. Now I can't get rid of her."

Spencer mock-shuddered, though Keith suspected he was only partially joking. "She has good intentions," Spencer admitted. "She's just... a little overbearing." The microwave beeped and he pulled the mugs out, skimming off the top film with the handle of his spoon and dropping it into the sink. Then he poured half the powder mixture into each mug, stirring them with a careful intensity that fit more with poisons than hot cocoa.

At last, Spencer deemed they were perfect, put the spoon in the stainless steel sink, and carried both mugs over to the kitchen table. He offered one to Keith, taking a seat. "Now, when I need to get rid of Tamera, I hide at Elizabeth's. She's awesome. Have you met her?"

Keith sipped, taking a moment to give the cocoa the same attention Spencer had put into making it. "This is good," he said at last, and was rewarded with a there-and-gone-again grin from Spence. "Elizabeth my new neighbor?"

Spencer nodded.

"Briefly." He smiled wryly. "She demanded proof that I actually did own this place."

Spencer chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds like Liz. She's a doctor over at Mercy. Drives an hour and a half on a good day to get to work every morning, which is insane, especially when it's snowing, but no one asked me." He shrugged, shoulders moving gracefully under cloth.

"Do you know many of the people here?"

Spencer nodded easily. "A good chunk of them. I mean, it's a small town; hard not to know everyone, right?"

Keith only smiled into his hot chocolate. "Josh was like that. Always knew everyone, what they were doing, what was going on."

"You weren't?"

Keith shook his head.

"Sounds like Josh and I would have gotten along."

He glanced up, gaze sweeping over black and red hair, the earrings, the spider-web tattoo just peeking around the edges of Spencer's slender neck, the thermal with the rock band T-shirt, baggy jeans soaked to the knee. "Probably not," he said at last, relaxing back in his chair. "Josh was a lot more conservative than you are. He'd have thought you were a punk."

"Well. I am a punk." Spencer grinned, sipped his cocoa, then asked, "How can he be gay and conservative? Isn't that an oxymoron?"

"Nah." Keith shrugged. "I didn't say he was *religiously* conservative. Politically conservative -- there is a difference. Believed in small government, keeping the IRS out of our pockets, that sort of thing."

Spencer continued to look doubtful. "But it's the government that okays or denies gay marriage. I mean, that alone--"

Keith just shrugged, drawing back slightly. "Josh would have said that it will come when the people are ready, and government doesn't need to force it."

It seemed Spencer had forgotten about his hot chocolate. He stared hard, dark blue eyes fixed on Keith, black brows -- were they dyed, too? -- drawn down. "But--"

Keith held up one hand, sorry now he'd brought it up. "Don't shoot the messenger! I'm just telling you what Josh would have said."

The tension slowly drained out of Spencer's shoulders. Muscles relaxed under his shirt. He sat back, legs sprawled in a distinctly careless way Josh would never have approved of. "What do you think? Do you have an opinion, or do you just tell people what everyone else thinks?"

It was an insult hidden in sarcasm. Keith stared at Spencer, letting his eyes cool, and allowed the silence to speak for him.

After a moment Spencer looked away. "Sorry."

Keith dropped it. "I think I try to stay out of politics. They just piss people off."

Once more, tension rolled through Spencer, and he opened his mouth as if to protest. Then he closed it again, slumping back in sullen defeat, and nodded. "Suppose that makes sense," he mumbled.

"Buck up. I'm sure there are *plenty* of rednecks around here for you to sharpen your arguments on." Keith grinned, nudging Spencer's foot with his own. Without shoes on, he could feel the shape of Spencer's foot through their socks. It was more personal than he'd meant it to be, and he pulled back self-consciously.

Spencer only grinned at him, though, as if he hadn't noticed. Maybe he hadn't. "Got that right. Especially when tourist season hits. In fact, this weekend the town ought to get busy with the snow. All those people who want to get one more ski day in before spring hits will flood our sleepy town."

"The shop owners will be *thrilled*." Keith grinned, and stood as Spencer did.

"Maybe we could start a dog sledding business." Spencer grinned and headed toward the sink, running water in his mug before setting it down. "I should head out. Let you get on with your day. Be sure to call me if something goes wrong with the ski-set, and otherwise..." He wandered toward the door, shoving his hands in his pockets only to take them out again.

Keith understood. He wanted to see Spence again, but asking felt odd. Too much like a date. How did people ever hang out?

"Well, call me if you wanna do anything. Or, y'know, if you want company sledding." Spencer grinned, bright and cheerful. "Or maybe I'll just call you. That was awesome." He shoved his feet into his boots, stomping to get them on.

Keith tucked his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. "Sounds good. You're always welcome to come sledding with us. It's more fun with company. Just -- not so early, next time."

Spencer only laughed and headed toward the door, pausing in front of it to look at the snow and water the dogs had

brought in.

"You know, we could glass off part of the porch. Make a mud room, so they didn't track everything in," Spencer said, looking at the fast-growing puddles thoughtfully.

It was exactly what Josh used to say. Keith chuckled, shaking his head, and at Spencer's questioning look said only, "Nothing. I'll think about it." Maybe they would have gotten along.

Spencer gave him a final wave and went trotting down the steps, back toward his truck. Keith watched until the truck had driven around the corner and vanished before he closed the door and went back inside.



## *Chapter Four*

Two days later, Keith was sitting at the Coffee Drip, Sam's wheelchair propped behind him, all four dogs taking up the sidewalk and the paper spread out on the little glass table. Coffee steamed gently at his elbow, the white cloud mingling with the fog of his breath every time he exhaled.

Spencer's prediction had come true, and skiers, snowboarders, and families renting cabins crowded the little town, showing off their attitudes about animals every time they came close to where Keith sat. Mason and Hughie were as far away as Keith would permit, sitting tall and eager to be petted, Hughie only barely able to restrain himself from leaping to his feet every time a friendly hand reached for his head. Other people skirted the dogs uncertainly, or stepped over and around them, laughing or giving Keith dirty looks. He didn't really care; his dogs could take up the sidewalk. They weren't harming anything, and the coffee shop owner didn't seem to mind.

Other people stepped into the street to avoid the pack, and a few parents took their children across to the other sidewalk. Keith ignored them all, focused on the classifieds section while keeping half an eye on his dogs.

Josh had supported them for the last seven years. Keith hadn't had a job in that time. His full-time occupation had been as a house-husband, and he'd been perfectly happy

with that. Josh's family had taken most of the money, though, and while their cabin was paid off, what he had in savings wouldn't last forever. His bachelor's degree in Poli Sci wouldn't help him here. He hadn't pursued the usual careers after he'd graduated; he'd only gotten that degree because his family approved, and it was easy. He was, in effect, starting over.

The pickings were slim in a little town, especially this time of year. Spencer's throwaway comment about starting a dog sledding business was looking better and better.

Keith went over the list for available jobs once more, frowning at the longer list of those available if he drove over to the city. An hour and a half drive wasn't appealing. Here, there was an opening at the restaurant. Another at the bar. A rental company wanted a building manager, the grocery store needed a clerk. Those seemed to be his only options. At the bottom of the page, a cheap three-line ad proclaimed you could make hundreds of thousands by working from home, online. If only.

"Another coffee?"

He looked up at the smiling girl poking her head out of the shop, a bottle of window cleaner in one hand and a rag in the other, obviously ready to wipe down the glass door. "No, thanks," he said politely. "Still working on this one."

"Oh." She hovered for a moment longer, then came all the way outside and made herself comfortable in the empty chair at his table. "Look, we all heard about Josh. We're real sorry."

It seemed Tamera's rumor mill was good for something. He

plastered a polite smile on his face and nodded. "Thank you. We're getting along."

Absently, the girl reached down to pat Kara. "We all sure miss him around here. If you need anything, you just let any of us know, all right?"

He wondered if he was supposed to know her name. She wasn't wearing a name badge; that would have made things too easy. Obviously, she knew who he was, and she knew Josh. Had known Josh. But then, everyone in this town had known Josh. Keith was just happy to be somewhere small enough that he recognized people: Josh had wanted to know their life histories. "I will," he said, only because it seemed the right thing to say.

Still she didn't budge. "It's just, you know, my grandma died a couple of years back, and it was real hard on my mom. Josh helped her out then, gave her a shoulder to cry on, so my mom told me if I saw you, I should invite you over to dinner, on account of you bein' like family and all."

He *was* supposed to know her. "Thank you. But I'm actually doing all right. It's been more than a year."

"Okay. Well." She smiled and hopped up, her commiseration of a moment before seemingly forgotten. "You let me know if you want any more coffee!" Then she turned and bounced back into the shop. She never had cleaned the front door.

Keith looked back down at his paper, sharing a quick glance with Kara. He imagined she thought that girl was as loony as he thought. The breeze picked up, winding through buildings and cars, skimming across the surface of

the lake. Keith shivered as it tickled the back of his neck, threading under his sweater. "Ready to go in, guys?"

The dogs all looked at him. Hughie hopped up and ran over, lowering his head to Keith's knee in the hope of being petted. Keith did so obediently, then folded up the newspaper and tucked it under one arm, standing.

The leashes were scattered all over the sidewalk. He didn't bother to gather them up, just hooked Sam into his wheelchair and whistled to the other dogs. They all fell into line behind him, a wall of heavily furred muscle. It was only a hundred feet to the SUV, where he opened the back door and let the dogs hop in, then unhooked and lifted Sam in to join the others. He tossed the wheelchair in back, then walked around and climbed in.

The drive up the hill was uneventful. He pulled up along the side of the road in front of his house, surprised to see a familiar red truck parked across the street. As he rolled to a stop, Spencer stood up at the foot of the stairs, from behind the rail that surrounded the porch. Spencer waved, then bent back down, hidden once more.

Hopping out, Keith opened the door for the dogs and lifted Sam. He grunted under Sam's weight, staggering toward the porch, past Spencer, and up the steps. He plopped Sam down, surprised to see the snow had been cleared away. He certainly hadn't done that; just shoveled a path to the door and enough room to get inside. It was a short walk back to the steps, where he stared down at Spencer. "What are you doing?" He could see what Spencer was doing, but he couldn't quite wrap his mind around it. What he saw couldn't possibly be right.

Spencer looked up, then down, gesturing to the long wooden slab he was bent over. "Making a ramp. I was going to put it by the house, but then thought the eaves on the corner would drip on that spot and make it icy."

Keith turned to regard the corner in question. "So instead you decided it would be better for me to slide on the ice and kill myself."

Spencer grinned around a mouthful of nails and nodded before lining one up and hammering it through the plywood with two sharp whacks. "You can walk down the middle. I left room." He spoke around the nails, not looking up.

"And you cleared the snow off my porch?" He hadn't meant for it to be a question, but he couldn't quite figure out why Spencer had done it. He wasn't sure he liked it, either. It upset his careful schedule, and it seemed overly forward. He didn't want Spencer making himself at home. It wasn't Spencer's home.

Spencer shrugged, nodded, and whacked another nail in. "There was a shovel."

"I could have done it myself." Keith's feeling of disgruntlement grew. Shoveling was the job of the person who lived in the house, not for some random friend who came by. In fact -- "I didn't ask you to make a ramp."

"I know, but you hadn't done it yet, and I asked around and you hadn't hired anyone to do it, and I had a free day."

Keith walked down the stairs until his feet were at Spencer's eye-level, then crouched and glared. "I didn't ask you to make a ramp," he repeated, quietly and firmly. He

hadn't asked for a ramp, or for someone to wedge their way into his life, forcing on him help he didn't want and making him indebted.

That got Spencer's attention. He rocked back on his heels, setting the hammer down and taking the nails out of his mouth. "I'm sorry." He looked vaguely amused. "Did you not *want* a ramp?"

Keith knew he wasn't in the wrong, and yet, when phrased that way, he felt like a fool. His mouth tightened. Josh used to do this high-handed crap, too, until they'd have a screaming match. He wasn't interested in another screaming match. "Whether or not I wanted one isn't the point. The point is, I don't need you to come over here and take care of me."

"I was just *helping*--"

"I know." Keith sat back, trying hard to ease his body language. Spencer probably didn't have a clue. "And I appreciate the help. But it's my house, and I don't really want you just *doing* things. Especially without even consulting me first. I don't need you to take care of me, Spencer."

Spencer wouldn't meet his gaze. "I wasn't trying to *take care of you*. I was just..." He waved his handful of nails at the ramp. "Helping."

"Thank you. But ask, okay? And then it's helping, instead of doing."

Spencer ducked his head and nodded. "Do you mind if I build this ramp?"

"Not at all. Thank you."

Spencer glanced up at him from under thick lashes, lips quirking at the corners. "You're welcome." Then he picked his hammer back up and whacked another nail in.

"Are you wearing eyeliner?" He'd been so annoyed he hadn't noticed before, and he couldn't decide if he liked it or not. His tone was sharp, so he supposed he didn't, but...

With a laugh, Spencer looked back up at him, eyebrows raised expectantly. He *was* wearing eyeliner. It shadowed his eyes, darkening his lashes into smudged black, making the blue irises more obvious. It made him sexy without making him pretty, and something tightened in Keith's gut. "Do you like it?" Spencer asked with a mischievous grin.

Keith opened his mouth to say *No*, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. "Girls wear eyeliner," he said finally, trying to sound disapproving. He suspected it only sounded petulant.

"Nah. Eyeliner is totally metrosexual. You don't even have to be gay to wear it now." Spencer's grin widened. "I like it. On me, that is. Goes with my hair."

It made his eyes look so much bigger, and seemed to emphasize rather than feminize his narrow jaw and high cheekbones.

Keith shook his head, dragging his gaze away, angry at his physical reaction. He wanted to reach out and whisper fingertips over Spencer's eyes, brows, cheekbones... "I have unpacking to do. Do you want some coffee?"

Spencer made a disgusted noise. "Do you have tea?"

"I do not." Keith was almost appalled at the suggestion.

"Don't tell me, you meditate and do yoga, too."

Laughter chased him into the house.

"Josh would have hated the way you're doing that," he called, walking into the kitchen and hollering through the open window.

"Good thing I only have to contend with his ghost and not the man, then," Spencer shouted back. His words were oddly muffled; speaking around nails again, Keith guessed.

"I don't think I like your implication." Scowling, he measured grounds into a filter and poured water into the coffeepot.

"You don't have to like my implication." Another hammer blow punctuated his sentence.

Keith was still mulling that over when he heard Tamera's voice float in. "Spencer! What are *you* doing here?"

"Hi, Tamera. Just putting together a ramp." Spencer's voice rose. "Since his highness okayed it."

Sam barked, and a moment later Keith heard the thump-thump-thump as Sam dragged himself down the stairs, quickly followed by Spencer calling, "We need to teach him to use the ramp."

"Who is this 'we' stuff?" Keith muttered to himself,



watching the coffeepot gurgle. Had his house always been this popular? If so, he'd blocked it from his memory -- or hid behind a book while Josh entertained. Now that he thought about it, that seemed more likely.

Outside, voices rose and fell, words audible often enough for him to know it was all polite pleasantries until Tamera launched into some story that had Spencer moaning, "Oh, God, Tamera, I don't want to *know*."

Keith decided to keep watching the coffeepot rather than go outside and be social. It was a wasted effort, though; a moment later Tamera came in, setting down a paper plate cling-wrapped in pink. "I brought you cookies!"

"Thanks, Tam." He smiled and found a mug, setting it on the sink.

"So, Spencer's over, is he?" Her tone was so knowing, he wanted to shake her.

"He was here when I arrived. Got some hair up his ass to build a ramp." Keith almost flinched at his own words: he didn't often swear, and he sounded too brusque.

Tamera didn't seem to notice. "Isn't that sweet of him! You know, Bette said that she was surprised you were seeing someone already, with Josh's death so recent, but I told her you'd had more than a year. That's right, isn't it? It's been more than a year?"

His headache bloomed hot and instant. "Well, yes, it's been more than a year, but Spencer and I aren't dating. We're just friends."

"Mm-hm. Best way to handle those busybodies. It isn't anyone's business. I'm so glad I introduced you two."

He was going to kill her. And she was leaning against the kitchen table, now, settling in for a chat. "You didn't--"

"Sam, don't--! Uh, Keith? Your dog just peed all over himself."

Of course. "Should have taken him out before I set him down," he muttered, brushing past Tamera and grabbing up the sling as he headed for the door.

Tamera followed, trailing him right out onto the porch, where they all stopped and looked at Sam.

Sam looked back, ears flat against his head as if he knew he'd screwed up, somehow. His legs had cleared a path through the snow behind him, marking his trail clearly. Around him the snow had gone yellow. He was sitting it in, unable to support his own weight.

Keith's heart fell.

"Oh, poor dear," Tamera said. He knew she was only trying to show support, but he wanted to slap her anyway.

He wanted to slap Spencer, too, who was standing at the bottom of the steps glancing uncertainly from Sam to Keith and back again. "Should I do something?"

"You could have grabbed him when he started to go," Keith snapped. It was unfair, and he knew it, but his day had just gone from vaguely frustrating to difficult. Sam would smell like urine now, unless Keith bathed him -- and bathing Sam

was no easy feat. He hurried down the stairs, feeling the awkward silence he left behind, and picked Sam up by the heavy fur on his hips. "Come on, buddy," he said quietly. "Out of the pee."

Sam peddled forward far enough that Keith could drop him in clean snow. Keith looped the sling under one leg, heaved Sam over to his other side, and looped it under the other leg, wincing at the odor. "Up we go," Keith grunted, and heaved Sam up. Sam turned and headed for the stairs, his tail hanging without even the little bit of lift he could give it when he was happy. His head was down, his ears slicked back. Keith nearly fell up the stairs, trying to keep up with the distressed dog as Sam dove for home.

As he went through the front door, he heard Tamera say something about leaving. He didn't stop to say goodbye; he couldn't -- Sam was too busy hurrying.

"Gee, Sam." They turned toward the downstairs bathroom, heading through the doorway. It had a shower, not a tub, but it would have to do. He didn't want to lift Sam up the stairs and end up smelling like urine himself.

The stall door was open. Sam climbed right in, and Keith let Sam's rear end drop.

"Stay," he said, and headed back out to find the dog shampoo and a pitcher. Spencer was standing just inside the doorway, hammer still in one hand, looking lost.

"Can I do anything?"

"Not really." Keith found the pitcher, dug the dog shampoo out of a box shoved toward the basement door, and strode

back to the bathroom. "Close the front door." He and Sam were both about to be wet: they didn't need to be cold on top of it.

Once in the bathroom, Keith shimmied out of his shirt and yanked his socks off, gave his pants up for a lost cause, and stepped into the shower. Goosebumps prickled across his chest as he turned the spray on, putting the pitcher underneath to catch the water. The roar of the pitcher filling drowned out everything else. He removed the pitcher, turning his head away and hissing at the sudden splash of water across his shoulders. Then he bent and poured the water over Sam's filthy hip and hind leg, frowning at the brownish-yellow liquid that sluiced into the drain. He tried to bathe the dogs on a regular basis, but he hadn't had a chance since moving back here. Sam always got the dirtiest, since he spent so much time dragging himself around.

Keith filled the pitcher again, now resigned to being soaked, and poured more water over Sam. From the corner of his eye he caught a shape in the doorway, and turned far enough to see Spencer hovering there. The hammer was still in one hand.

"Is there anything I can do? I closed the front door and the kitchen window, and turned the heat back on. It was off."

"Are the dogs outside?" He squirted shampoo all over Sam's hip, then decided he might as well wash the whole dog and squirted more over the rest of him.

"I brought them in. You want me to--?"

"No, no, that's great." He knelt, cringing at the way denim

clung and stretched against him, and began to scrub.

"Does this happen often?" Spencer sat hesitantly on the toilet seat, playing with his hammer.

Keith frowned. "Often enough." He tipped his head so the water ran down his hair and dripped free rather than running into his eyes, and kept scrubbing. Sam splashed with his front paws, lifting them and slamming them down in the draining water, sending more droplets flying. "Sam, knock that off."

Sam did it again, ears up and eyes happy again. Keith didn't try to make him quit, this time.

"Sorry I didn't stop him," Spencer blurted. "I just didn't know..."

Keith shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I shouldn't have snapped at you." It wasn't Spencer's job to look after Sam: it was Keith's, and for this moment he'd failed. It would take time to get Sam washed and dried, but it wasn't the end of the world. Already Sam seemed to have forgotten any distress.

"Can I help?"

He shook his head again. Finally, Spencer got up and slunk out. Keith rubbed soap over Sam's head, trying to think of something to say that would make Spencer feel better. He hadn't needed to snap at Spencer, for the ramp or shoveling snow or letting Sam pee. He could have found a way to address everything without getting annoyed, and he could have banked his annoyance when he realized his mood was souring. Now, he couldn't think of anything to make it

better, and his heart wasn't really in it. It was only a bath, but it was another notch in how he'd failed Josh. How he'd failed Sam.

Sam barked at the running water and Keith stood, picking up the sling and heaving him to his feet. "Other side, pup."

Sam scrambled upward, and Keith laid him back down on his soapy side so he could wash the rest of him.

\*\*\*

By the time Keith had finished washing Sam, dried himself enough to go get the dog blower, dried Sam enough so he wouldn't puddle all over, and let Sam out of the bathroom, he was feeling better. Still exhausted, still glum, but at least he wasn't ready to take Spencer's head off for no reason at all.

In fact, he really owed Spence an apology.

Keith tried to peel the dog fur off the walls of the bathroom, still wearing his soaked jeans, and considered what sort of apology he should offer.

When he headed into the main room, neither Spencer nor the dogs -- except Sam -- were there. He hurried up the stairs, found Hughie and Mason in his room, threw himself through a shower so he wasn't covered in dog hair, then put on some dry clothes and went back down.

He really hoped Spencer hadn't left. Especially since there was no sign of Kara.

"Hey, guys." Hughie and Mason flocked around his legs,

following him across the room toward the front door. "Where's Spencer?" Both dogs looked at him. Hughie pounced on a stuffed toy in passing. "Find Spencer," he told Mason, and smiled when Mason shot off toward the front door. 'Find' was an old command, but 'Spencer' was a new one. Seeing how fast Mason picked up on it left him with a feeling of pride. Kara and Sam had been just as quick before pregnancy and being crippled had slowed them down. Hughie was far more interested in being goofy, but that was all right. He was only two.

Keith opened the door and Mason streaked out, pouncing on Spencer, who was kneeling on the steps. Kara was sunning herself on the porch, looking regal.

"Hey," Spencer laughed, rubbing Mason between his ears. "How're you?"

Mason licked him in response, then ran back to Keith for approval.

Keith petted him absently, then shifted from stockinged foot to stockinged foot, wishing he'd put on shoes. "Hey. Look, I'm sorry about earlier. It's just been..." He'd been about to say a day, but that wasn't true. He offered a twisted smile. "A month. A year. But I shouldn't have taken it out on you like that, especially when you're out here trying to help."

Spencer shrugged awkwardly, not meeting Keith's gaze. "Hey, man, we all snap sometimes. Take a look at this and tell me if it works for you? I know it doesn't quite match the porch, but I left a little room so we could overlay wood on the top that *will* match the porch. I was thinking pine, and I could stain it and do some weathering so it looks

right."

Keith walked down to where Spencer sat, crouching to look at how he'd joined the ramp to the stairs. It was just plywood, cheap but sturdy. He'd built a side on it so that there weren't spaces between the ramp and the stairs where critters could hide, and so that it looked as if it belonged rather than had been added on as an afterthought.

Keith wouldn't have done a job that good. "It's great."

"You don't have to sound so surprised," Spencer laughed. "I thought I'd put some binding at the edges, really make it look like one piece. It'll be strong enough to hold Sam easily. And I wondered if a rail would be good -- I could make a miniature version of the one around your porch -- so that Sam didn't come off the side and topple down the stairs."

Keith nodded throughout all of it, impressed despite himself. "We could just paint it to look like pine," he said cautiously. "I mean, pine is expensive..." He had thirty grand in the bank. With property taxes, car payments, health insurance, groceries, dog food -- he figured he'd have to work to make it last. Josh's life insurance had gone to pay for the lawyers, who'd at least helped him keep this house and forty-five grand. Then the credit card companies had come after Keith, because he was signed on anything he could be signed on, while Josh's family got the estate in Tennessee. He found it highly ironic. He supposed being strong-armed out of the funeral was a blessing in disguise: he hadn't had those expenses.

"Don't worry about it. You didn't ask for this stuff, so I'll pay for supplies."



"Spencer--"

"*Keith*. Come on, this is fun. This is the best challenge I've had all year, and I can afford it."

"It's only February," Keith muttered.

"Then last year, too." Spencer laughed, reaching out as if he were going to brush the wet hair out of Keith's face. Keith braced himself, breath catching, unsure if he wanted it or not. Then Spencer's hand dropped away, and he didn't know if he were relieved or disappointed. "Besides," Spencer continued, "I'm an artist. It's a matter of pride that it looks *good*. Don't embarrass me."

Reluctantly, Keith nodded.

"Hey, there's this political rally in Devonsburg tomorrow afternoon for gay marriage. Don't suppose you want...?" Spencer shifted to sit on the ramp, twiddling his hammer between his hands and not meeting Keith's gaze. "I mean, not a date. Just--"

"No," Keith said dryly. "I'm not into politics. I'm not interested in getting into politics. Devonsburg is an hour and a half drive, and I have better ways to spend my afternoon." Plus, he didn't want to leave Sam for hours at a time.

The refusal broke Spencer's uncertainty, and he grinned brightly up at Keith. "Had to try."

Keith snorted. "Gonna fail."

Spencer only shrugged, unconcerned. "You should be interested in politics. It affects your life."

"Yeah, yeah. Build your damn ramp." Keith stood, heading back toward the door. For the second time that day, laughter chased him inside.

\*\*\*

The whole place smelled like dog shit. Keith stood in the doorway, grocery bags in his hands, and closed his eyes. Breathe. He just needed to breathe.

Except every breath smelled like dog shit.

Sam barked at him from the inset. The other dogs were nowhere to be seen.

Despite not wanting to leave Sam home alone for hours at a time, Keith had found himself gone for six hours. There'd been errands to run and a paper to buy and peruse. He'd stopped to talk to a few people, folks who'd asked how he was holding up or given their condolences about Josh. He wasn't sure he knew any of them, but they seemed to know him.

Six hours.

Sam barked again, whining and pulling himself away from the mess he'd left smeared across the wood floor.

"Hang on, big guy," Keith said, trying not to be angry, trying not to sound upset. Sam could hold it for eight hours -- just -- while he was sleeping, but the spinal damage had affected everything. He still had partial control. Full control

was beyond him.

It wasn't his fault he'd made a mess in the inset.

Keith put the bags down in the kitchen, throwing open the window to let in the outside air. Through the kitchen doorway, he could see Mason, Hughie, and Kara all bullet out the front, escaping the smell. He left the groceries on the counter, opening windows as he walked out into the main room.

Sam's bark was high-pitched and frantic, now. He rocked from foot to foot, scratching at the stairs as if he would try to drag himself up them. Keith grabbed the sling and went down, stepping carefully around smeared feces, heart sinking as he realized Sam would need another bath.

One thing at a time.

He looped the sling around and lifted, doing little more than supporting Sam as Sam made for the front door. Keith nearly crashed down the porch steps, trying to keep up while not stepping on back paws or Sam's tail. His shoulder slammed into the corner at the bottom, and he dropped Sam into the snow.

Sam dragged himself forward heedlessly, clearing a path with his legs. Keith left the sling there and went back inside to survey the damage.

It took a roll of paper towels and another thirty minutes, but at least the floors were hard instead of rugs. Then he gathered up dog shampoo and a change of clothes -- again -- and dragged Sam back into the shower.

He tried not to think while he washed the dog. Tried not to notice how a chunk had been taken out of his day, or to wonder if this was going to become normal. Tried not to let the should-haves run rampant through his mind.

Should have gotten home earlier. Should have called someone to come check on the dogs. Should have let them put Sam down when the accident had happened.

Sam licked his face, big nose snuffling wetly along his cheek. "Yeah, I know, buddy," Keith said softly, soaped up to his arms and still imagining he could smell dog shit.

By the time he'd dried Sam, washed and dried himself, cleaned out the bathroom, and gotten back to the kitchen, the ice cream he'd forgotten about had melted. He threw the container out and put everything else where it belonged.

Josh had never really liked ice cream, anyway.

Keith sat on the porch outside, watching the dogs frolic, Sam newly clean and hooked into his ski-set. The sun was falling toward the mountain top, casting long shadows across the valley. Only the far range still had splashes of light on it, but everywhere else the snow was blue and cold. Keith shivered, leaning his head back against the wall of the cabin.

It wasn't really so much. A few hours spent cleaning up after Sam wasn't that bad. A few hours in the morning to go jogging, a few hours in the day to clean up, twenty minutes here and there to get him in and out of his ski-set or wheelchair, to get him unstuck from wherever he was, to keep him from hurting himself more.

Put like that, it seemed even more depressing.

Twilight deepened around him. The sun fell below the hills, and only ambient light reached the valley. How was he supposed to work if he couldn't leave Sam for more than six hours at a time? At eight years old, Sam wasn't a young pup anymore, but there were still at least another three years left.

His phone rang. Frowning, Keith squirmed around until he could pull his cell out of his back pocket, peering at the display. He didn't know that number. He flipped it open anyway, pushing Hughie aside with one hand when the dog decided to come investigate. "Hello?"

"Keith? This is your neighbor, Elizabeth. I got your number from Tamera."

Elizabeth the doctor. He peered sideways as if he might be able to see her house through the trees. "Hi. What can I do for you?"

"Not for me, precisely. Spencer is here, in the hospital in Devonsburg, and I was wondering if you might be able to come get him."

Spencer, he remembered, was supposed to be at a rally. Keith sat up, alarmed. Doctors didn't call unless-- "Oh, God. Is he okay?"

"He's fine," she hurried to assure him. "Just a little bruised. But his ride was arrested, so he needs another one."

Small towns. Doctors might not call for patients, but neighbors would call to be neighborly. Why she would call

*him*, he didn't know but could find out later. "Yeah, of course. If you can give me directions, I'll be right there."

In twenty minutes he was on the road again, winding through town on his way to the other side. He hadn't been out of the valley since he'd entered it, and in the growing dark, the roads were treacherous.

It took him two hours to get to Devonsburg instead of the usual hour and a half, and when he finally located the hospital, it took another fifteen minutes to find Spencer.

Spencer was in a curtained-off room with three other people, sitting on the edge of the bed and swinging his legs as he talked with the woman beside him. He lit up when he saw Keith, his shoulders straightening, his blue eyes brightening.

"Hey! Thanks for coming. Tamera was at a school thing and we couldn't reach anyone else." He hopped off the bed, grabbing his wallet off the little tray table beside it. "We just need to find Liz to check me out, and we're all set."

There was a small bandage over one black eyebrow, and Spencer's lip was split. "What happened?" Keith asked.

Spencer gave him a wry smile, shrugging into a leather jacket with more buckles and straps than leather. "This guy started screaming about how all faggots were child molesters, and David -- who's a great guy but a little hotheaded sometimes -- started screaming back. Next thing we knew, there was a brawl going on. The guy's friends joined in, David's friends joined in, I got caught in the crossfire, and my ride was picked up by the police. A little more excitement than we normally see at these rallies, but

there's always a chance, you know?"

Keith looked at Spencer like he'd lost his mind. "And you wanted me to go *with you*? How is that fun?"

Spencer laughed sheepishly, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets. "Well, like I said. It's not normally this exciting."

"All right, guys."

Keith jumped and turned to see Elizabeth striding through the door, white lab coat swishing around her calves. She was scrawling something on a chart, glancing up at Spencer before looking down again.

"Hi, Keith. The nurses saw you come in. Spencer, you're free to go. Take it easy for the night, take some ibuprofen, and try not to get in any more fights." She tucked the chart under one arm and looked at Spencer. "Any questions?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Thanks for coming, Keith." Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and left the room.

"She's, uh..." Keith trailed off, trying to find a word that wasn't rude.

"Brusque, I think. Shall we?" Spencer grinned and headed for the door, a spring in his step.

"You're nuts," Keith called to Spencer's back.

"And bolts! But someone has to stand up for us, especially

since people like you won't."

Keith followed, eying Spencer suspiciously. "You're not going to start lecturing me on voting and getting involved, are you? Because if so, it's a long walk home."

Spencer laughed, glancing over. Despite the bandage, he didn't seem any different than he usually did. Still carefree, as if getting attacked in public hadn't wounded him at all. "Nah. To each their own."

The hospital doors whooshed open in front of them, the heater mounted above going on full blast momentarily to keep the cold from entering. Then they were outside, on a dirty sidewalk in a town that was almost a city. Nondescript buildings rose around them, concrete and glass, doing their very best to hide any small-town atmosphere that might develop.

"Hey, you mind if we grab some food?" Spencer asked, stopping on the sidewalk.

Keith looked toward his SUV parked on the curb just a short way down, and thought of going home to dogs. If they didn't head back now, he'd risk another mess with Sam. But Sam had emptied everything before Keith had left, and taking a break from the dogs was tempting. It had been a long day. "Yeah," he said finally, weighing each word he spoke. "That might be good." He couldn't remember when he'd eaten. Breakfast, he supposed.

"There's a gay bar down here--"

"Oh, God, no." They stood, four feet between them, and looked at each other.



Spencer hunched his shoulders to resettle his jacket. "That was... emphatic. Any reason? It's a good place. Quiet, they have good food. And it's just a short walk. Don't need to move the car."

Keith struggled for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it. He wasn't a crowd person anyway, and more than that, he and Josh had never really gone to gay-exclusive anything. They were people first, and the fact that they were gay shouldn't matter. Finally, he just shrugged. "I'm not really into the gay scene."

Spencer smiled slowly, as if he wasn't sure it was a welcome expression. "This isn't the gay scene. It's just a bar where the people don't care if you're gay or not."

He thought about arguing. Finally, though, he just shrugged. He didn't know where else they might go to eat in this town, and Spencer obviously liked the place. He could deal with it for an hour while they got dinner.

The bar was, as promised, just down the street. There was a bouncer at the door, examining ID before allowing people in. Once they'd passed muster Spencer led the way into a half-crowded room variously littered with booths, pool tables, skee-ball tables, and even a couple of arcade games in the corner. Spencer walked past all of it to a door near the back, where he knocked and waited.

A panel slid aside, exposing two dark eyes in an equally dark face. "Password?"

"Speakeasy," Spencer told him, and grinned back at Keith as the panel slid shut. "This is so cool. I love this place."

The door opened and the bouncer stepped aside, revealing a comfortably lit room with couches and chairs, a small dance floor to one side where a few same-sex couples slow danced to sultry jazz piped through speakers. There was a bar in one corner, all oak and mahogany, and wait staff dressed alternately in Twenties suits or flapper girl dresses. Sex didn't seem to make a difference as to what they wore.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Spencer grinned and walked inside, claiming a booth seat in the near corner.

"It's... not what I expected." Keith edged into the booth on the other side, running his hands over the smooth grain of the tabletop.

It was only a few minutes before a woman walked up to them, in suit pants and a white dress shirt, the arms rolled up and held in place with old-style arm bands. "Hey, guys. Can I get you some drinks?"

"Gin and tonic for me." Spencer glanced toward Keith.

"Coke, thanks. I'm driving."

She wrote it down, nodding, then handed them menus that had been tucked under one arm. "Be back shortly."

"So, see?" Spencer grinned, flipping his menu open but not looking at it. "The gay scene's not so bad, is it?"

Keith smiled reluctantly. "This isn't really what people think of when they say 'the gay scene.'"

Spencer shrugged. "That's their problem, if they haven't

looked into it or assume it's all the same. That's just a stereotype, and not one that's helpful."

Keith skimmed the menu without really seeing it, feeling like he'd just been chastised and vaguely annoyed by it. He wasn't buying into the stereotypes, and besides, he was gay. Except he *was* buying into the stereotypes, apparently, despite living life openly as a gay man. Hell, he'd had a partner for the last seven years.

He finally managed to draw his attention back to food, and found a burger that wouldn't make him worry too much about money.

The server returned and took their orders, then cleared off the menus and left silverware in their wake. Jazz continued to croon through the air, though the dancers were down to a single couple. Keith couldn't quite tell if they were feminine men or masculine women.

"So," Spencer said, breaking into his thoughts. "If you and Josh didn't involve yourself in 'the gay scene,'" the invisible quotes he put around that were practically audible, "and you weren't involved in politics, what did you do for fun?"

Keith relaxed back into the booth, his hands crossed over his stomach. On the other side, Spencer had taken off his jacket, exposing his usual thermal and T-shirt combination. This time the T-shirt was black, with a yellow music logo emblazoned across the front. It still hugged him, drawing attention to his muscular shoulders and flat stomach. A leather band was around one wrist, silver studs in it matching the silver hoops in his ear. His hair was black and electric blue today, the crimson seemingly vanished. He looked, Keith thought, comfortable in his own skin.

"We did dog things, mostly. Josh had a lot of friends, so we did dinner parties, movies. We were both involved in the local mushing group. We used to go dog camping with all of them, sled or scooter during the day, sit around and swap stories at night."

"Scooter?"

Keith grinned. "When the snow melts, you can hook the dogs up to a scooter or a kicksled. It's like a sled with wheels. That way, you can keep mushing."

Spencer chuckled. "Sounds fun. So were you guys in the closet?"

Keith snorted and shook his head. "No, we were just normal. We probably did more good for your gay politics than anyone else. We were ourselves. We were a couple straight people could relate to. We showed people there was nothing to be afraid of."

Spencer only looked amused.

Frustrated, Keith looked away. "We didn't have to prove anything. It was nice." And what he was trying to prove now, he didn't know. Maybe that he wasn't a bad gay man. Could you be a bad gay man? Hell.

"Okay, I'm sorry. You're right, there's more than my way of doing things."

He glanced back. Spencer looked genuinely apologetic -- for Spencer. "You're just young and full of energy. Young people are supposed to rail against authority."

"Oh, yeah," Spencer laughed. "Because you're so old."

They both sat back as their food arrived, and there were several minutes of silence as they dug in.

Spencer broke it first. "So you and Josh. You were really... he was it, huh?"

The familiar ache rose up, but it was getting easier. A dull throb now, instead of a stabbing pain. "Yeah. He was it. I think I was your age when I met him."

"He was older than you?"

"Younger than me." Keith grinned. "But he always seemed older."

Spencer picked at his food for a moment, then mumbled into it. "I'm sorry."

Keith only shrugged. There wasn't anything to say, really. Josh was gone, and he wasn't coming back. Keith had to move on with his life. "How long have you been welding?"

"*Metalwork*," Spencer said, laughing and sounding exasperated all at once. "It's an art. You make statues and things that people put in their family rooms."

Keeping his face straight, Keith said, "So, like DVD racks."

For one sharp moment, Spencer gave him a hard, annoyed look. Then he seemed to realize he was being teased, and he grinned. "Yeah. Like DVD racks. Bird cages. Sex toys. You know, normal stuff."

Keith chuckled. "And what do you do to pay the bills?"

Spencer laid his fork down on the edge of his plate and sat back, stretching his arms along the back of the booth as if claiming all the territory around him. "I do art," he said dryly.

"That *pays*?"

Spencer only looked at him, eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, the corner of his mouth tipped up.

"Damn." Keith ate the last bite of his burger and sat back, glancing over Spencer's half finished plate of Cobb salad. "Do you always eat so healthy?"

"Pretty much." Spencer looked at it but didn't take another bite. "I mean, what you put into your body is what you get out of your body, so..."

"Wow."

Spencer glanced at him, a question in his eyes.

"I thought that healthy-half-hippie thing was just a gay stereotype."

"Yeah, whatever," Spencer laughed. "You're gonna hit forty and your back is gonna give out and your knees will need replacing, and I'm gonna hit forty and still be snowboarding."

The server reappeared quietly, whisking their plates away, asking them if they needed anything else -- a coffee?

Dessert? -- and left the bill.

Both men went for their wallets. Keith eyed Spencer, who seemed unaware of anything, and darkly willed him not to try and pay for it all.

Spencer pulled out a card, waving Keith's hand away. "I got this."

Damn it. "It's not a date, remember?"

Expressions flashed across Spencer's face -- frustration, confusion, annoyance -- and then cleared away. "Okay. I only have plastic, so if you have cash, you can just pay me back. And if you don't, then you owe me. Deal?"

Keith pulled out a twenty and tossed it almost challengingly on the table. Spencer picked it up, challenge unacknowledged, then got change from their server and gave seven dollars back to Keith.

"Did you want exact change?" he asked superciliously. "Or is that good enough?"

"Wiseass." Keith pocketed the money again, waited while Spencer signed the bill, and then stood. Spencer was grinning.

The night got rapidly colder as they walked back to the car. The sky was clear, crisp and frigid, with bright points of light like glittering ice chips above. Keith paused at the door to the SUV, staring upward. "I missed this, living in the city."

Spencer paused, looking up as well. "What? The sky?"

Keith nodded. "Even as a kid, I liked the stars. I used to lie out in the back of my dad's truck and see how many constellations I could find." Josh hadn't liked the stars. Hadn't cared about them one way or the other, really. They were too far away, he often said.

Keith started to pull himself back to earth, only to see Spencer turn and lean against the front grille of the SUV, one boot propped up on the bumper, leaning back to look upward. After a moment's hesitation, Keith joined him.

Cars raced by on the road beside them. People walked down the sidewalk. It was a busy part of town, but in this pocket of space they had some breathing room.

"There weren't any stars in New York," Spencer said, tucking his hands in his jacket pockets. "I didn't miss them at the time. I mean -- little dots, what's it matter? Not like you can do anything with them. Besides, there were plenty of little dots of light in the city itself, if you just got high enough off the ground."

Keith chuckled, well able to imagine it.

"But before that, at home, I'd look at them sometimes. Sit on the roof and smoke and imagine big things for myself."

Eyebrows up, Keith glanced over at the young man beside him. "*You* smoked? Mr. Cobb Salad himself?"

Spencer grinned unabashedly, still gazing at the stars. "I know, hard to believe, huh? My grandpa died of emphysema, and that cured me. I quit before it got too hard to quit."



Spencer kept looking up, and Keith kept looking at him. At the line of his neck, the strong tendons shadowed and half-hidden by his jacket collar. At the web tattooed over the back of his neck, delicate and disturbing all at once. Keith couldn't see the bandage on the other side of his forehead, but the split lip was visible, the slight swelling where someone had struck him.

Reluctantly, Keith looked away. "We should head home. It's getting late."

Spencer rolled off the hood, sauntering around to the passenger side. Keith tried not to look at that, either, focusing on opening his own door and sliding in.

He managed to keep the conversation light all the way home, and the drive went faster since he didn't have to find the hospital. He rolled to a stop outside The Bagel Factory, craning his neck to see the dark windows of the apartment above it. "Which one is yours?"

Spencer grinned proudly. "Wanna see?"

He retreated slightly, shaking his head. "No."

"Come on! It's great. I can show you my DVD racks." Spencer opened the door and slid out, then hung in the opening and waited.

He shouldn't. He found himself turning the engine off anyway and climbing out, following Spencer up an outside flight of stairs. Spencer's jeans were old and artfully worn, going pale at the creases and across the butt. Keith tried not to notice that, either.

The door swung open easily -- Spencer didn't have problems with *his* locks -- and they stepped into a large, airy apartment. A single room that stretched the length of the building, cordoned off with Japanese standing screens.

"Wow," Keith said, eyebrows rising. The first space was obviously an art studio. Metal sculptures were scattered here and there, some of them sitting on tabletops with tools littered around. One long counter had tools both recognizable and alien. Plaster molds leaned against the walls, a small hand welder lay cast off to one side, and the floor was hard concrete.

"I don't do everything here," Spencer said, waving a hand around nonchalantly. "I mean, some of the stuff would be a fire hazard. I have a studio elsewhere, too."

Keith glanced at him, reading tension in his shoulders and pride in the way his chin lifted. The nonchalance was obviously fake. "Impressive."

Spencer grinned. "The rest of the place isn't as great, but I definitely have space." He walked straight through the bits of metal, past the first of the Japanese screens. "Make yourself at home! I'm gonna check out my face real quick."

Keith followed into a living area, and smothered a chuckle. Mismatched furniture, old and nearly worn through, was crowded around a large television screen. This was more what he thought a bachelor's place should be like.

The living room shared space with what he supposed was a kitchen: a two-burner oven with a short counter along one wall, a half-sized refrigerator/freezer, and a long pantry.

Another screen walled off what he assumed was the bedroom, and the only interior wall made a box around the bathroom, where Spencer disappeared.

Keith sat gingerly on the couch, wondering what he was doing there. He wasn't interested in Spencer. Or if he was, the timing wasn't right. He had to admit to himself that Spencer was attractive. Spencer was passionate and charming and downright sexy.

It was too soon.

Keith stood, feeling anxious. "I should--"

Spencer walked out of the bathroom, the bandage now gone. "It's not as bad as I was afraid. I expected it to be black and blue, but there's just a little cut. You'd have thought Liz could use less gauze..." He walked close and tipped his head, inviting Keith to look.

A small line ran from the top of his eyebrow less than an inch up, held closed with two neat butterfly bandages. There was some green bruising around it, but nothing terrible.

"Your lip looks worse," Keith said in oblique agreement.

Spencer ran his thumb over his lower lip, then licked once at the split and gave a halfhearted wince.

Keith resisted the urge to run his own thumb over Spencer's mouth, to feel the shape and texture of it. It was almost pretty, now that he looked, with lips that were just shy of full and curved just so. Expressive.

Spencer licked his lip again, tongue peeking out over the split before he sucked his lip into his mouth, easing it out gently.

Keith looked away. "I should go."

"Yeah," Spencer agreed, too fast. "Sorry. You have dogs to get back to."

Keith nodded, and didn't meet Spencer's gaze. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Spencer wasn't looking at him, either. He rushed out of the apartment, each of them mumbling goodbyes to the other, Keith banging down the stairs and back to his SUV.

The drive home seemed to take forever. He was aware of the air from the vents on his skin, the way cloth brushed across him, the way Spencer had licked that damn scab...

The dogs had gotten through the evening without any more disasters. Keith tried to focus on feeding them, taking Sam out, but instead he just felt tight in his own skin. It was unnerving.

It was that damnable tongue. Frustrated, he went upstairs, shedding clothes. He tossed his shirt on the bed, shivering at the slide of cloth, at cool air on his chest. He'd taken off his shoes when he came in, and unbuttoned his khakis while wandering into the bathroom. He turned the shower on, skimming out of his pants while the water warmed up. By the time he'd finished undressing, the water was hot.

It didn't help. He'd known it wouldn't; not really. It sluiced down his shoulders and over his chest, breaking into streams and running down his legs. He ducked his head

under the spray, closing his eyes and rubbing soap over his pecs, his stomach. With one hand braced against the shower wall, he put the soap back and ran his hand over his cock, already half-hard. It wasn't difficult to imagine a mouth instead of warm water, hands instead of liquid, whispers instead of the echoing spray.

It wasn't the first time he'd masturbated since Josh had died. He leaned his forehead against his arm, stroking himself slowly, letting heat coil in his gut. It was harder to imagine Josh, though. On his knees or standing up, quiet and intense like he got when they made love -- it didn't matter. Josh wasn't there.

Instead, it was sparkling blue eyes under short black hair. A lean jaw, a full mouth that wouldn't stop smiling, broad, callused hands on well-toned arms. It was all too easy to imagine that lithe body, breath hot against Keith in the instant before that frustrating tongue slid over his sensitized skin.

Keith sped up, shifting his legs for better balance. He bet Spencer would tease. Lick and kiss along the length of his erection, driving him nuts before Spencer finally opened his mouth and took him in. A little bit, at first. Then a little more.

Keith wondered if Spencer could take it all. If Spencer would groan and enjoy it, taking all of Keith into his mouth, smiling eyes open, looking up because he was bold and brazen and wouldn't pretend he wasn't sucking cock. He'd take everything and swallow, bobbing his head back and forward again--

Keith groaned. It echoed in the shower stall. His whole

body tightened, and he stopped stroking, holding himself while he emptied against the tiles so close to his body, pulses rocking throughout him.

When he could see again, when he could think again, he collapsed against the side of the stall, feeling body heat and steam trapped between his face and the wall.

Not Josh. Spencer.

"Fuck." The falling water swallowed the word, but the breath of it ghosted back across his face.

## Chapter Five

Keith jogged down the road, the leashes that were looped through his belt loose and swaying with every step. Kara had elected to stay home today, and he made a mental note to keep a close watch on her -- she was due any time now. As she became more gravid, she slept more. Mostly, from what he could tell, she slept in his bed, though she was never actually *in* it when he went up there. But he knew. There was dog hair on his pillow.

Sam ran beside him, thrilled to be out for his morning jog. His tongue hung out over sharp teeth, head and shoulders up while he wheeled along, proud as could be. Hughie and Mason both paced on Keith's other side, moving sleekly together.

The town was quiet this time of morning. Keith stuck to the back streets, where there was less traffic and he could duck off the sidewalk if need be. For the most part, though, other morning joggers saw him coming and went around.

Already, he was beginning to recognize folks. There was the woman with the long ponytail, and he always saw the teenager with the iPod Shuffle. Half a dozen people crossed his path each run. It was like a secret club, each member pretending not to recognize the others if they met during the day, but nodding once as they ran by every morning.

He ran through the white puffs his breath produced. Each

footfall was absorbed into the pine trees and snow between houses. The dogs' panting was a constant.

Keith glanced over his shoulder to check traffic, then turned to cross the road. The canine pack went with him easily, all of them moving together.

Fur brushed against his thigh as Hughie stepped too close and moved away again. Mason hopped a puddle, surging forward momentarily before dropping back. Halfway across the street, Sam screamed and fell sidewise. Pain cracked across Keith's leg. He slammed hard into the ground, nearly taking Hughie with him. Asphalt bit into his knee and both hands. Sam kept screaming.

Keith twisted, dragging himself clear of Sam's wheelchair. One of the wheels was lying several feet away. Sam thrashed, trying to right himself. Instead, he tangled further with his sling and the metal.

"Easy, guy." Keith scrambled over. One paw was hooked up and over the bar that went across Sam's chest, one crippled back leg twisted between metal and a tire. "Okay, relax. It's okay, pup." Keith's gaze skittered over the road, spotting the wheel that had come off. Maybe it had only come unscrewed.

A sound down the road didn't give him a chance to look. He glanced up at the rumble, cursing when he saw a beat-up old truck coming toward them. He yanked the leashes out of his belt, wrenching one from around his leg.

"Hughie, Mason, sidewalk!"

A little uncertain, both dogs turned and headed away.



"*Stay*." Sure that both dogs would, Keith grabbed the bars that arched over the top of Sam's wheelchair, using the frame first to push himself to his feet, then bracing himself -- one foot on the still attached wheel so it wouldn't slide -- and heaving upward. Sam yelped again as his world tipped. He struggled, the paw over the chest brace sliding farther through, twisting his whole body. One hind leg had gone through the spokes of the attached wheel.

Sam thrashed. Keith took a step to balance himself, but the wheel and Sam were in the way. Keith smashed to the ground, unable to muscle Sam and the wheelchair upright and balance it there. He braced again, ignoring the bolt that had torn open his pants, and hauled. He needed to roll the wheelchair forward, but couldn't with Sam's paw through the spokes. He hung, unable to move forward, unable to let go to push the paw back through.

Sam whined and tried to twist, to get himself untangled. The heaving weight was too much. Keith crashed over again.

Twenty feet away, the truck rolled to a stop.

"Hey! You all right?" A man leaned out of the window, sporting a tan cowboy hat.

"Yeah, I'm sorry." Keith glanced the other way down the road, checking for more cars. This was the only one, at least. "Give me a minute; we've had a small wheelchair accident." He bent to pull Sam's paw out of the way, then, whispering to Sam to *please* stay still, he yanked upward again.

Sam didn't stay still. The truck door opened and the

cowboy got out, swaggering across the pavement. "I had an old dog. Never seen one of these before." Without waiting to ask, the cowboy grabbed the other side of the metal frame, taking the place of the wheel. "That way?" He nodded toward the sidewalk.

"Yeah, thanks," Keith grunted. They stagger-walked over there, trying not to lean on Sam or pull the wheelchair too far up off him. When they'd reached the safety of the sidewalk, they lowered Sam and his wheelchair slowly back down.

The cowboy went back for the loose wheel, seemingly unconcerned about his truck idling in the middle of the road or getting to wherever he'd been going. "You okay?" He paused beside them, eyes never leaving the panicking Sam, heavy brows drawn down in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Quickly, Keith unclipped the sling and pulled the wheelchair off, laying Sam out across the sidewalk, trying to untangle him and calm him down. Keith took the wheel from the cowboy, flipping the rig over to try and figure out what had happened.

The axle had snapped, the metal giving under too much strain. There was no way to repair it here. He had no idea what he was going to do now; they were four miles from home, and he didn't think he could carry Sam that far.

"You have a car around here?" Apparently, the cowboy was coming to the same conclusion.

"No," Keith said at a loss, shaking his head. "I live up the road a ways..."

The cowboy looked at Keith and the dogs, then seemed to come to a conclusion of his own. "You want a lift home? There's room for everyone." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, at the truck behind him.

For an instant, Keith almost said they'd be fine. Then he came to his senses and nodded. "I'd appreciate it. Thanks."

They loaded Hughie and Mason into the back with the wheelchair, Keith giving them firm orders to *stay put* and hoping they'd listen. It took both him and the cowboy to haul Sam up into the cab. The truck was bigger than his SUV, or even Spencer's muscle truck. It was also beaten all to hell on the outside, but the inside was clean leather. Keith climbed into the passenger seat, overly aware of the muddy prints Sam was doubtlessly getting all over the nice interior.

"Straight up the road," Keith directed, pointing before he grabbed the handle above the door. He glanced in the rear view mirror, catching sight of Hughie and Mason standing with their heads hanging over the side. "And if you wouldn't mind driving slow...? Those two have never ridden like this before." Just what he needed was for one of them to jump out.

The cowboy chuckled. "My dogs all rode in the back of the trucks when I was a kid. Nowadays, you can't do that without some animal rights activist leaping all over you."

Keith nodded politely and thought that Josh would have had a panic attack if he'd seen his babies in the back of a truck.

"So, your dog back there -- he okay?"

Sam panted heavily, keeping the foreleg that had gone over the chest brace tucked close to his body. That wasn't what the cowboy was talking about, though.

"Yeah, he's okay. I mean, relatively. When his wheelchair doesn't break. Thanks for this. I really appreciate it."

The cowboy waved it off. "It's the Christian thing to do."

Keith nodded politely again. Shock was wearing off, and pain was taking its place. Scrapes he hadn't noticed before - and wasn't even entirely sure how he'd gotten -- were beginning to sting. "That's my house, there. On the right." He pointed out the cabin.

"You need help getting them inside?" the cowboy asked.

"No, thanks. I've got it from here. Thank you." He slid out of the truck, opening the back door and practically catching Sam as the dog lunged. "Hughie, Mason, come on." Both pups leaped over the side of the bed -- probably a bad habit to let them do that, now that Keith thought about it -- and trotted through the snow toward the house.

The cowboy had gotten out of the truck anyway, picking up the wheelchair with one brawny hand. "This is a pretty good contraption, really. I had a dog with bad hips, once. Had to put him down."

"The wheelchair helps," Keith said. He staggered up the porch steps, finally setting Sam down and opening the door. Hughie and Mason raced inside, and Sam scooted himself over the threshold after them. "Thanks again." Keith was beginning to feel like a broken record. He took

the wheelchair and the wheel, giving the latter a frustrated glare.

"No problem. Take care."

It wasn't until after the cowboy had gone that Keith realized he hadn't gotten a name. It didn't really matter: this was a small town. If the cowboy lived here, Keith could pass along thanks.

He went inside, wincing as his knee started to hurt worse, and set the rig and wheel down by the door. Hughie and Mason were lapping up water, spilling as much as they drank, while Kara sniffed Sam all over.

"Move, sweetheart." Keith brushed her out of the way, lowering himself gingerly to the floor where Sam had collapsed. "How're you, huh?" He reached out, carefully taking Sam's leg and extending it. Sam whined and nosed at him, licking rapidly as if begging not to be touched.

Keith let go and examined the back paw instead, looking for cuts or scrapes from where it had gone through the spokes. It looked all right, though. A little oily, and all of Sam was a little dusty, but that wasn't bad. He went back to the foreleg, feeling down the length of it, looking for broken bones. Everything *looked* all right, but Sam was still holding it close to his body.

"Well, buddy," Keith sighed. "Do we need to head to the vet?" He petted the thick fur on Sam's head, ruffling the large ears.

Sam looked elsewhere, panting heavily. Not just with exertion, Keith suspected, but also with stress. How much

stress, that was the question. That fall had twisted his spine: they could only hope there wasn't further damage to the nerves. Keith wasn't sure he could cope with further damage.

He pushed himself up to his feet, wincing at the sting on both hands, his knee, and one elbow. Doubtless he'd be black and blue in the morning.

It took only a few minutes to find his cell, call the vet in Devonsburg -- he just didn't trust the one here, not for spinal injuries -- and arrange to come in as soon as he could get there.

When he stripped off his jogging clothes to shower, he realized he'd bashed up his knee and sliced up his shin pretty good. There was gravel in the heels of both hands, and one of them was weeping blood. He didn't have time for this. He poured peroxide over everything, threw himself through a shower, dragged on some clean clothes, and by the time twenty minutes had passed, he was loading Sam and the wheelchair into the SUV.

He only knew of one welder in these parts, and even if he was a little anxious about seeing Spencer again, he couldn't leave Sam without the ability to wheel around.

The sky was clouding over when he pulled up outside Spencer's apartment. He'd done his best simply not to think about Spencer (or about jacking off) since he'd gotten up. It hadn't been too hard; he'd only been up for a few hours.

"Stay here," he told Sam, as if somehow the dog would grow opposable thumbs and hop out of the car. He pulled the wheelchair out, then hitched his brown leather jacket

tighter around his shoulders and started across the street.

Nothing had really happened the night before. Some mouth-staring, sure, but everything else had been in Keith's head. There was no reason to feel odd.

He banged up the metal stairs, looking warily toward the door above him. Music drifted down; some kind of loud rock. Keith made it to the platform -- deck? There was a twisted metal statue in the corner -- and knocked carefully on the door.

Nothing happened. He arched back over the rail, checking on Sam. Sam had apparently lain down; there was no sign of big ears in the SUV.

He knocked again when it became clear no one was about to answer. Harder, this time, pounding with his knuckles.

Still nothing happened, except that his hand hurt.

Any discomfort he had was washed away in annoyance. He put his hand on the doorknob, expecting it to be locked, and turned.

The door swung open easily. Keith leaned into the studio. It wasn't hard to find Spencer; he was in the middle of the room, scrubbing at something with a rasp. He wore only a tank top and jeans, his arms and shoulders bare. Muscles flexed under pale skin, and a tribal tattoo rippled on his bicep every time Spencer thrust forward with his arm, shaving bits of metal off the sculpture he was working on.

The music pounded through the room, the bass enough to make Keith's heart hammer in time to it. He cleared his

throat, eyes riveted on the fully exposed web tattoo painted across the nape of Spencer's neck. It was more extensive than Keith had expected, though it seemed to be only the upper half of a web. It fanned across Spencer's neck, one strand of it stretching under the tank top, across to the cap of shoulder muscle, and from there down to the tribal tattoo, as if it had attached to the twists and winds of black ink.

The other shoulder and arm were bare.

Spencer still hadn't noticed his presence. Keith dragged his gaze away, though it stroked all the way down Spencer's body first, noting jeans that hung low and framed his ass, and bare feet -- one of which tapped out the time to the music.

Spencer turned. Keith wasn't sure what had tipped him off, but it certainly hadn't been noise. Then he glanced at the door, said something -- Keith couldn't hear what, over the bass -- and gestured with his chin.

Keith backed out of the apartment, onto the tiny platform, and closed the door. Inside, the music cut off. An instant later, the door opened and Spencer beckoned him in, laughing.

"I just said close the door. It's freakin' cold out here!" He stepped back, inviting Keith in.

Keith smiled sheepishly, sliding in past Spencer, keeping as much distance between them as he could. Against the thin black material of the tank top, Spencer's nipples were hard. Keith tried not to notice. "I wondered if I could ask you--" He cut himself off, frowning into Spencer's gaze. "What did



you do to your *eyes*?" They were pale, and the pupils elongated.

"Contacts." Spencer grinned. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Keith shook his head in bemusement. "I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you."

"Ask away!" But Spencer had already noticed the wheelchair Keith clutched in one hand, and was reaching out to take it. "Aw, man. Is he okay?"

Keith nodded. "On the way to the vet to make sure, but I think so. He seems to have hurt a foreleg, but..."

Spencer looked up, and even with his strange contacts Keith could see the compassion there. Keith looked away, unable to deal with it. Instead of leaving well enough alone, Spencer reached out and put a single broad hand on Keith's shoulder. His palms were callused; when he squeezed once and dropped his hand away, rough skin pulled on Keith's shirt.

The show of support did what nothing so far had done: broke through the shock. Keith swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat, refusing to feel the prickle of tears. "It'll be fine," he said quickly. "If you think you could fix that, though..."

"Yeah, sure." Spencer took the wheel, comparing it to the rigging. "I'll strengthen both axles while I'm at it, too. You want me to bring it by later? You going to the vet here?"

Keith shook his head. "Devonsburg, so I won't be home until late. Maybe very late, depending on what's wrong

with his leg." Spencer glanced at him again, and something in Spencer's expression made Keith take a step back. He had a mountain to drive over; he couldn't afford to fall apart now.

"I'll drop it off later, then. Or leave it on the porch if you're not home."

"I can pick it up--"

Spencer shook his head, waving off the offer. "Don't worry about it. I have to head up that way for a client anyway." He brightened, gesturing with the tire toward the sculpture he'd been working on. "Got a special request for the Bernhart's thirtieth wedding anniversary. I need to double check Theresa's measurements, though; I think they might be off."

Keith nodded as if he had any idea what Spencer was talking about. "Okay. Great. So... I'll see you later then. Thanks, Spence."

Spencer grinned at him, strange eyes and all. "No problem. Take care of Sam."

\*\*\*

The drive wasn't nearly as tough as he'd expected. At the vet's office, he had to wait for twenty minutes before they were able to clear a room and get him in on an emergency basis, but even that wasn't so bad.

He'd had all of Sam's records faxed over, so everyone knew what to expect. They took Sam in for x-rays and checked his range of motion, getting an idea of what might be

wrong.

Eight hundred dollars later, they sent him home with painkillers and anti-inflammatories. Sam had sprained something in his leg, but the rest of him was fine. It was almost frustrating.

By the time he got home, most of his day was gone. The sun was edging back toward the horizon on the other side, and he hadn't done anything that he'd planned to do. His own knees had increased in tenderness, along with the skinned heels of his hands, and he'd discovered a bruise on one elbow. He couldn't even remember *hitting* his elbow.

Keith heaved Sam up into the house, trying not to think about his already long and growing to-do list (*To do: find time*), or the fact that over the last several days, he'd managed to do none of it. Mostly because he'd been occupied with Sam.

None of the dogs greeted him when he staggered through the door. He put Sam down and, half afraid of what he was about to discover, he poked his head into the downstairs rooms before finally heading up. Sam barked after him, annoyed at being left behind. He ignored it.

Hughie and Mason lurked in the hall outside the master bedroom, tails down and ears flat against their heads. Keith glanced at them, then warily poked his head around the door.

Kara lay on the bed, the duvet torn up around her and streaked with blood. Seven little puppies slept in the curl of her stomach.

"Of course," he said softly, and then turned and walked back downstairs. He supposed he should be glad about the puppies. Glad that, if she had to give birth while he was gone, nothing bad had happened. Instead, he sat down on the lowest step and stared at Sam, who barked frantically before scooting toward the door, then turning and scooting back.

He patted Sam absently. "It's fine," he said, feeling Hughie and Mason hover behind him. "It's great."

Hughie slunk by, dripping saliva. "Christ, Hughie!" Keith snapped, wiping his shoulder clean and then looking with disgust at his slimed hand. "What am I supposed to do--"

With one stomach turning heave, Hughie puked halfway between the stairs and the door. Keith watched in disbelieving horror.

Puke. Puke wasn't hard to clean up. From the tint of it, he'd been eating afterbirth, which was disgusting, but at least puke wasn't hard to clean up.

Then Sam turned and scooted himself toward Hughie.

"Sam!" Keith shouted, diving forward.

Sam twisted to look back around. His very twist dragged his back legs and tail through the puke, smearing it across the floor and into his fur. Trying to obey, he pulled himself closer to Keith. The floorboards behind were painted with streaks of vomit.

Keith stared, overwhelmed and exhausted, not sure what to do now. The three male dogs watched him, waiting for

further commands.

He walked right past them and outside, closing the door. Sam probably followed. Sam probably went straight back through the pile of puke.

Keith leaned against the porch rail, staring back at the house as if it were something to be avoided at all costs, and slowly slid down to the wooden boards.

He couldn't do this. There was no way. It was too much for anyone. Quietly, he brought his knees up to his chest and rested his forehead on them, wrapping his arms over his head to block out the world. No one could expect him to deal with all this -- and there was no end in sight. Now there would be puppies to cope with, too, and Sam was an ongoing project. It was *too much*.

He sat there long enough to start shivering. To clench his teeth against chattering from the cold. Long enough for the sun to sink below the serrated edge of the mountains, sending jagged shadows swarming over the valley.

He sat there past his neighbors coming home and an engine cutting out nearby. Footsteps crunched through filthy snow. They banged up his porch stairs. He could feel the hammer of them in the vibrations in the boards. He didn't look up.

"Keith?"

He still didn't look up. "I cannot cope," he said softly. "I cannot deal with -- with everything. I just -- I can't--"

"Okay," Spencer said, just as quietly. "It's okay."

A hand rested on his shoulder, rubbing little circles. He still didn't look up, and a moment later the door opened and the footsteps went inside. Keith braced himself for the dogs to lick him, but instead he heard Spencer call them and close the door, leaving him in peace.

It wasn't long before the door opened again, and a blanket draped across his shoulders. He tensed, waiting for Spencer to want something, but Spencer only went back inside. After a long while, Keith uncoiled far enough to pull the blanket down between his back and the rail, wrap it around himself. Then he buried his face in his knees again.

He didn't know what Spencer was doing in there. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. He should go in and look, be the host that Josh had always been. He couldn't bring himself to do it.

The cold seeped into his bones. With the light gone, the chill crept up to take over. A cold breeze, invigorating before, was just icy now. Keith gripped his blanket tighter and tried not to notice. It felt like hours had passed before the front door opened again and Spencer came walking out. Keith cracked his eyes far enough to see black boots, unlaced, and scuffed jeans. Then Spencer reached down, taking Keith's shoulders and tugging upward.

"Come on," he said gently. "It's warm inside. I got a fire going."

Keith didn't have the energy to argue. There was still puke to be cleaned up, *Sam* to be cleaned up, his sheets to be changed, puppies to be checked on -- it was too much.

He needed to find a job, too. Get groceries, sweep the dog

hair up, mop up muddy paw prints. Take the dogs jogging, clean up the yard, take them sledding, pay the bills. Fix the lock, buy a couch, do the laundry. Deal with Sam.

Spencer led him to the fireplace and Keith sat down on the floor. He looked around wearily, training his eyes toward Hughie's accident.

"I cleaned it up," Spencer murmured. "And Sam, too. Probably not as well as you'd have done, but..."

"You didn't have to do that." The words were automatic, though he felt intense relief. The relief was short lived, crushed by the knowledge that there was still so much else to do.

"I know. I'm just that awesome." Spencer left, and came back moments later with an oversized mug and a spoon, pressing them on Keith. "It's soup from a can, but I figured it was better than nothing. Kara's still in your bed. She won't let me near the puppies. But I found the other sheets and blankets, and if you like I can make you a bed down here." He reached out, fingers trailing along the edge of Keith's hairline.

"I should check on Kara."

"Eat your soup. She's fine, the puppies are fine. Kinda small. And... mewling." He sounded almost disturbed at that fact, and despite himself, Keith smiled.

"They do that." Slowly, he focused on the mug of soup in his hands. Heat radiated from it, soaking into his skin, through muscle and tendon and, finally, into bones and the little joints. He picked up the spoon and ate a bite. Then

another. It was mechanical, though he enjoyed the taste of it, the warmth slowly permeating his whole system. When it was gone, Spencer took the mug carefully and set it aside.

"You okay?"

Keith nodded wordlessly.

For a long while, Spencer was quiet. Then, uncertainly, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I can't do it all," Keith murmured. "I can't -- there's too much. When Josh was here, it was all right. He took care of the dogs and I ran errands. Sam wasn't--" A gesture took in Sam and all that he was. "I cleaned inside and Josh cleaned outside. He had a whole business breeding and showing, and we did it together and it was fine. But he's gone, and I can't..." He couldn't keep up.

Slowly, Keith closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the mantle around the fireplace. "He wasn't supposed to die. That wasn't part of the deal. He wasn't supposed -- and now there's *you*."

Spencer pulled back. He linked his fingers together and placed his hands on his crossed legs. "Sorry?"

"You're attractive and nice and not what Josh was *at all*, and I'm not ready for -- for--"

"I haven't asked!"

Keith shook his head as if he could shake sense back into his own mind. "I know. I know. I'm sorry. It's not that



you've asked or pushed or -- it's that I *like* you, and I don't *want* to like you. It's all wrong. It's the wrong time and I'm doing too much and he's only been dead for a little over a year!"

Spencer floundered for words. "I'm -- I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. Fuck me." Keith braced his head on one hand, trying to remember to breathe, to calm down. It wasn't Spencer's fault. Spencer had done nothing but be perfect. "I was going to bring the bed down here today. Set up a room in the den, so I didn't have to carry Sam up and down the stairs. I don't know if he's getting heavier or I'm getting weaker, but my back is fucking *killing* me." For a moment, he thought Spencer might reach out. But Spencer settled back, sitting on the floor and leaning against the loveseat, and just listened.

"I plan to do things, and then something goes wrong. I need to get a job because my money won't last forever -- hell, it'll barely last me the year -- but no one here is hiring and how am I supposed to leave Sam when it seems like every time I leave, something goes wrong? I keep thinking things will settle down, but ever since Josh died it's been one thing after another after *another*, and I'm just -- I can't--" He faltered, unsure how to continue. He couldn't cope anymore. It was too much.

"How about a night off?"

Keith glared up at Spencer. "I have too much to get done. I don't have *time* for a night off."

"I know -- I'll help you tomorrow. We'll get your room moved down here, and the puppies taken care of, and I can

even help with feeding dogs or whatever. You can look for a job while I take them jogging. Okay? I know you don't need or want the help, but I can give it. Would you let me?"

He wanted to say no. Instead, he nodded wordlessly.

Spencer seemed to relax, tension draining away. "Okay. How about you choose a movie, and I'll take the dogs out to go to the bathroom. And I can feed them, too. Does it matter who gets what bowl?"

Keith watched as Spencer got up and headed for the kitchen, where stainless steel bowls were stacked beside the empty water dish. "It doesn't matter. They need water."

Spencer picked it up and took it to the sink.

"Filtered water! Maybe I should just do it--"

"I can handle filtered water." He switched the tap off, turned the filtered nozzle on, and filled the bowl.

Keith walked Spencer through dinner time from where he sat, feeling the whole while like he ought to get up and do it himself, but at the same time grateful he didn't have to. Kara came down to eat, went out to the bathroom, and then took herself back upstairs.

"I need to put together the puppy pen," Keith mumbled, standing up with the blanket still wrapped around his shoulders and shuffling to the cupboards where the movies were kept.

"Can it wait until morning?"

He considered it, debating the likelihood that any of the puppies would fall off the bed. He should really go check on them himself. It was the responsible thing to do. Spencer didn't know what the hell he was looking at, after all.

Keith couldn't bring himself to do it. "Probably."

"I'll make little blanket walls for them, later, so they don't go rolling off. Okay?"

Keith nodded. It seemed to take him forever to choose a movie, and when he had he put it in and couldn't find the remote, Spencer found it, sitting on the mantelpiece under the wall-mounted television.

Keith curled into a corner of the loveseat, trying not to crowd Spencer.

Spencer set the movie up and sprawled out, arm stretched across the back of the seat. "You wanna lay down?"

He should say no. Instead, Keith found himself lying across the loveseat, his feet hung over the end. Spencer tugged at him until his head was on Spencer's leg. He lay stiffly, half waiting for Spencer to make a move. Spencer didn't.

Keith drifted off before the beginning credits had stopped rolling.

## *Chapter Six*

He woke with beams of sunlight coming in the front windows, wrapped up in blankets while the heater hummed to life. He was still on the loveseat. There was a crick in his back.

Keith sat up slowly, wincing with pain. Something niggled at the corner of his mind. Something he should be noticing. He looked around slowly, trying to convince himself it was just that he'd woken in an unfamiliar spot. There was no sign of Spencer. And, he realized at last, no sign of the dogs.

He looked around with more certainty, searching for Sam's wheelchair. That was gone, too, though he had a vague memory that it had been by the front door earlier. If the wheelchair was gone and Spencer and the dogs were gone, he had a good idea that they were all together.

"Kara?"

He heard her leap off the bed upstairs, then come trotting halfway down. She looked at him expectantly.

"How are the puppies?" Keith pushed upright, tossing the blankets over the arm of the loveseat, and stood. He felt downright creaky.

Kara turned and went back upstairs. He followed at a slower pace, still trying to wake up.

The upstairs was significantly cooler than the downstairs, which was unusual. He figured Spencer must have kept the fire going, and wondered how late Spencer had been up.

The door to the master bedroom was only open enough to let dogs through. Kara was already back on the bed, curled around her mess of puppies.

"Hey, guys," Keith whispered, treading softly as he walked into the room. Spencer had, indeed, made a small wall of blankets around the puppies. Given Keith also remembered that Kara hadn't let Spencer near the pups, he wondered how. Obviously, Spencer had figured it out.

Keith sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, looking over the small litter. He really should have checked them last night, but they looked no worse for the neglect. Kara's tail thumped on the mattress as he examined them without touching, making quiet, appreciative noises. Their little faces were still squished, eyes still closed. They looked more like aliens than dogs, but he knew that wouldn't last long.

When he was sure they all looked relatively healthy, and he was sure that Kara wouldn't take his hands off, he picked each of them up in turn to check them more closely. Three girls and four boys whined at him as he handled each, checking to see that all four legs worked and what sex they were before petting them gently and putting them down. One of the little girls bullied the others out of her slow-moving way, crawling over a brother to get to a teat. He'd have to keep an eye on that one. She looked extra assertive.

"You know, you guys can't stay in my bed forever."

Kara gave him a highly disapproving look.

"I know. I'm just saying, I'll need it back. Soon."

She kept looking disapproving.

Keith chuckled and ruffled her ears, then stood and left the room. He made it downstairs just as Spencer came in, bringing along cold air and three large dogs.

Spencer stomped his feet to knock the snow off his boots, whisking at the dogs' coats with his mittened hands as well. "Hey! You're up!"

"And if I hadn't been, I would be now," Keith said with great amusement. The dogs raced over, swarming around his legs for their daily petting. Only Sam had to wait while Spencer caught him and wrestled him out of the ski-set.

"That ramp works really well," Spencer said, finally letting Sam down. "I did cover it with snow, but he was able to ski up and down it, no sweat!" He unwrapped a scarf -- Keith's scarf -- from around his neck, tossing it up on the hook by the door. He did the same with the oilskin coat he was wearing, then yanked his boots off and padded into the room. Blue eyes sparkled, his cheeks flushed pink. "I didn't take them running, but we played fetch for a while. I was going to take them sledding, but I couldn't figure out who went where."

"You need a different rig if Kara's not on the team," Keith said by way of agreement. He petted Sam thoroughly,

scratching his fingers through the heavy coat and checking if his foreleg was sore. It didn't seem to be.

Spencer knelt in front of Keith, looping an arm over Mason's back and making faces when Mason turned to lick him. It went on and on, Mason getting more excited as Spencer didn't say stop, until finally Spencer laughed and shoved him back. "Geez, dog, have some self-restraint!"

Keith snorted. "He's a *dog*." He didn't mention that Mason had been testing. Mason knew better than to be a nuisance, but apparently Spencer had spent enough time here that the dogs were no longer on guest-behavior. Which meant Keith would have to give Spencer some quick lessons in how to be a dog leader... but later.

Spencer grinned up at him, looking fresh and smelling like snow and pine (and dog), happy with the world. "You feeling better?"

At the reminder of his breakdown the night before, Keith nodded and looked elsewhere. The dogs made handy excuses. "I'm sorry about flipping out on you like that. I just--"

"Relax. It's been a long year for you, from what you've said. And I'm sure you haven't told me all of it."

Not even half of it, Keith considered, thinking over the legal hassles with Josh's family. "Yeah. Well, if you want to head home--"

"You wanted to move your bedroom downstairs, right? And put up a puppy pen? I still wouldn't mind helping."

There was also the ramp to be built so that Sam could get up and down the inset, flooring to be replaced in the kitchen from the broken skylight, and general cleaning and errands to be run. "I wouldn't mind the help," Keith admitted finally. He could feel that same sense of being overwhelmed creep back. Maybe an extra set of hands would keep it at bay for a little while longer. He had no idea, though, how he would manage on his own. He'd figure it out.

Spencer grinned. "I won't take it too far. Promise. In fact, you only have me for today, and tomorrow I'm off back to Devonsburg. We're protesting gay partners being refused health benefits. Wanna come?"

Keith snorted.

Spencer seemed to take even that in stride. "Had to try. Now, where's this puppy pen?"

"God, Spence," Keith said on a groan. "Coffee *first*."

Spencer laughed.

\*\*\*

"No -- over there." Keith waved his pointing hand, as if he could point even more strenuously than he already was.

"Over where? I don't *see* it."

"That's because you're blind."

Spencer stopped looking and turned to give Keith a mock-glare. "You're hilarious."



Laughing, Keith melted onto the basement steps. Spencer was down in the gloom with the spiders and cobwebs, squirming past boxes in an attempt to get to the puppy pen.

"Whose brilliant idea was it to store it down here, anyway? At the *back of the room!*"

"Josh's." Keith sat down, making himself comfortable, and peered into the gloom.

Spencer only harumphed. "Is this it?"

Keith twisted his head to see, then nodded rapidly. "Yeah, that's it. Watch the box on top."

"Of *course* there's a box on top..." Spencer tugged, pushed the other box back, tugged again, inching the pen out from under whatever was resting on it.

"We had a better one at our other home," Keith said, watching the slow progress. "This was just a spare."

"So where's the other one?" Spencer spoke between grunts.

"Probably sold." Or maybe thrown out. His humor washed away, and he tried hard not to think about Josh's family. "His parents got pretty much everything in Tennessee."

Spencer didn't say anything. Whether that was because he was struggling with the box or had nothing to say, Keith couldn't tell. The box came down a moment later with a clatter, landing on top of a set of shelves. Josh hadn't believed in throwing anything away. He'd wanted to have a garage sale. He had it all planned out. He'd had it planned

out for four years.

Keith didn't offer to go down into the basement darkness and help haul the box free. He just moved away from the door, shuddering at the thought of spiders crawling over his shoulders. He felt a little bit guilty for it, especially when Spencer struggled and cursed getting the awkward-shaped box up the stairs, but he wasn't going to touch it until he sure it was spider-free.

"This is it, right?" Spencer asked as he came out of the basement, dragging the box with him. It was five feet long and three feet tall, but only about a foot wide.

Keith looked it over and nodded. "That's it."

"Thank God." Spencer leaned back against the door, clad now in his socks, jeans, and tank top. He was covered in dust. There were cobwebs on his head. He was breathing hard, slightly flushed, his skin damp with sweat. Keith grinned at the sight of him. Spencer looked up, looked nervous, and brushed his hand over his messy hair.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just look..." *Well fucked* came suddenly to mind. Fire whipped through him, and he looked quickly back at the box. "Dusty. Shall we get this into the den?"

It didn't take much more struggling with it to wrangle it up the last of the stairs and over into the small den at the back of the house. They'd stripped the room of its furniture already, built a fire in the fireplace because the vents had been closed, and given it a cursory cleaning. It had been mostly tidy to start with; Keith had scoured it all out after the window had been repaired. There was water damage on

the rug -- this was the only downstairs room with a rug -- but Spencer had helped him roll it up and throw it out. Now there was only the damaged wood floor. He needed to get new flooring put in, but for the moment he needed a room for the puppies and a downstairs place to sleep more than he needed unwarped floorboards.

"Can we just cut this box open?" Spencer asked as they set it down in the middle of the cold floor. The fire licked gold tones across his skin. Considering it was winter, there was a lot of skin.

"It's been opened already. Just grab some scissors, we'll cut apart the tape."

With a disgruntled mutter, Spencer turned and headed out of the room. Keith picked at the corners and tried not to think about flame-kissed skin while Spencer was gone, stripping a piece of tape off absently. When someone knocked at the front door, he jumped. The dogs began to bark, even Kara chiming in from upstairs. With puppies in the house, they were all a little on edge.

Keith poked his head out of the den as Spencer opened the door.

"Hi! I saw you boys were over here, and thought I'd check in. How is everything? Spencer, you don't have truck problems, do you? You were here all night."

He couldn't see Tamera's face beyond Spencer's broad shoulders and tapering back, but he didn't need to. She sounded cloying.

"No truck problems," Spencer told her politely. "Dog

problems. Kara had her litter last night, and Keith needed a hand." He hadn't moved out of the doorway, tactically barring her entrance. Keith smirked and ducked back into the den, working to open the box while listening to the conversation.

"Puppies! Oh, can I see? I love puppies!"

Everyone loved puppies, and everyone felt the need to state that they loved puppies. Josh used to traipse the pups out at the biker bar, just so he could watch all the tattooed leather daddies melt.

"Not yet. They're not old enough, and Kara's a little protective, still. In fact, I should probably stop letting the heat out. They get cold easily, you know..."

Keith chuckled. He listened as Spencer disentangled himself from the conversation and the door closed. He couldn't hear Spencer cross the wood floor, not in stockinged feet, but a moment later Spencer came into the room. "She says she's glad I took her advice and snagged you," Spencer announced, tossing the scissors toward Keith.

Keith dodged them, then picked them up when they'd landed. "And this gives you the desire to throw bladed weapons at me? Christ, Spence."

Spencer smirked, but it softened into a smile almost immediately.

"What?" The blade cut through the tape, and the box fell open behind it.

"I just like hearing you say my name. And, seriously, I'm not sure I ever want to snag you, thanks to her."

Keith laughed. He pulled the flaps aside, and Spencer reached in to drag out the hard plastic barriers. He'd been dreading doing this last night, doing any of this, and he was sure it would have taken him the whole day. But it was only just past lunch, and they'd gotten so much done. Between the two of them, they'd even managed to keep an eye on Sam and make sure he got out to go to the bathroom. There hadn't been a single accident.

"It looks simple enough. Tarp on the bottom, sides at the sides?" Spencer asked, putting the barriers near the fire and looking at the rest of it.

"We'll put together the sides first, and then the tarp drapes over them. That way it keeps it all clean -- and waterproof."

Spencer's nose wrinkled. "Okay, I could have done without that detail. I thought you were supposed to crate puppies or something..."

"Well, sure, but they're too young to have bowel or bladder control right now. When they're several months old, then you can start crating them. Right now, they can't even move around." He paused, remembering suddenly the first time he and Josh had set up a whelping pen. It hadn't been Kara, of course, and they hadn't been here. But Josh had explained the same thing to him, in different words, and they'd worked together smoothly and easily, joking and relaxed all afternoon.

It was a lot like this.

For a moment, he braced against the realization. He didn't want what he'd had with Josh to appear with Spencer. He didn't want Spencer to replace Josh.

But Josh was dead, and no one would ever replace him. It didn't mean Keith couldn't find happiness again. He took a breath and offered a smile, pointing to the baggie of metal clasps. "You want to grab those? We'll hook the plastic sides together with them. This is so much easier with two people."

Spencer hauled the box aside and picked up the clasps, grabbing a plastic barrier and dragging it over, as well. "Things are usually easier with two people. If nothing else, it makes the time go faster."

Seven years had passed in an eyeblink. Keith smiled ruefully. "You got that right. We'll put it in the corner, so I have room to get to the bed and Sam has room to sleep. Now, if you'll hold up that end..."

\*\*\*

Someone pounded at the door. The dogs leaped up, barking fit to tear the walls down, even Kara bulleting out of the den. She remained at the base of the stairs, though, protecting the back area of the house -- and her puppies -- from any intruders.

"All right. All right!" Keith called, swiping at tails as he made his way to the door. He couldn't see who it was outside: the sun had set, and the windows showed only darkness. "God, you guys. I hear it, okay?" He kneed Hughie away, pointed back toward Mason, and waited until they'd calmed down and cleared a space before he turned

and opened the door.

"Sorry," Spencer said, looking more unhappy than apologetic.

"I thought you were at your political thing today?" Keith backed away, giving Spencer room to enter. Spencer stalked inside, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his leather jacket, his shoulder hunched up to his ears.

"Yeah, I was. It ended a few hours ago." His words were clipped.

Keith closed the door and watched him warily. "You want some cof-- tea?" As soon as the question was out, he wondered if he even had any.

It didn't matter, though; Spencer shook his head sharply. Not even the dogs were approaching with their normal enthusiasm. Hughie danced just out of reach, and Mason slunk closer to sniff Spencer's leg. Spencer didn't even seem to notice. Keith was beginning to wonder if he needed to start a conversation when Spencer finally broke the silence.

"Do you know what Mike said to me?"

"...Mike?"

"The bartender at the Griffin." Spencer turned, pacing the floor toward the front door. "He says to me, 'I don't see why you do all that political shit, anyway.' And I told him, 'Because I want equal rights.' And *he* says, 'Gays already have most of the same things. I like you and all, but I just don't want my kid learning about this stuff in school. It's

not that I'm homophobic -- you're my friend and everything -- but it's a matter of values." Spencer whipped around, glaring at Keith. "*Values!* Because whether or not I can sit by the bedside of my dying husband is equitable to him having to tell his kid his family doesn't agree with what they teach in school!"

Keith managed not to wince, but only barely. "People don't understand--"

"I know they don't understand! But, Christ, you'd think they could try a little!"

"Did you explain any of this to Mark?"

"Mike. Yes. I stayed calm and everything." He went back to pacing, running his fingers through his black hair. "I explained to him about how hard it is when you don't have any way to stay with your dying husband, or you can't protect the children you adopted that were his, or you can't *adopt* those children in the first place, or you can't get fucking *married* and you have to worry about getting the shit kicked out of you if you hold hands in public. And you know what he said?"

Keith shook his head. Wordlessly, he petted the dogs as they came looking for reassurance in the face of this anger.

"He didn't say anything! He just smiled and shrugged and said we'd have to agree to disagree! This is my God-damned *life* and he wants to agree to disagree! And he's supposed to be my *friend*." Spencer turned, looking stricken. "How the hell am I supposed to be friends with someone who can look at how I'm being hurt, *and agree with it*? It's not personal. That's what people tell you, you



know. But of course it's fucking personal! It's *me* they're voting against! It affects *my life* directly! It's a judgment on me and what I do and who I do it with! How is that not personal?"

Keith didn't know what to say. He floundered, burying his hand in Mason's fur. Sam was still down in the inset, looking with distress from Keith to Spencer and back.

Spencer wasn't done. He began to pace again, gesturing broadly. "And, y'know, I can understand it when it comes from someone who doesn't know any gay people. It's easy to hurt a group you never meet, and say, 'Well, it's a matter of values,' or some stupid-ass moral superiority statement -- and I don't know how any morals ever include forcing your beliefs on another group of people, or hurting them in some way when they're not hurting anyone else, but fine, I can cope -- but when you *know* the person you're hurting and you do it anyway -- what kind of friend does that? That's not friendship or love for your fellow man or anything! It's selfishness, pure and simple, because other people are afraid and don't want to deal with it. Well, I call bullshit!"

Sam whined. Keith took a few steps back, down the stairs into the inset so he could pet the dog and keep him quiet.

The noise had attracted Spencer's attention, though. He deflated a little, looking at Sam. Warily, he walked over and sat down, feet in the inset and butt on the stairs. Sam scooted closer to him, licking both hands before demanding to be petted. Spencer buried his fingers in the thick fur, lowering his face until his cheek brushed the top of Sam's head. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I just... had to talk to someone."

Keith nodded and sat down gingerly beside Spencer. "I know. It's okay."

Spencer laughed humorlessly. From where Keith was sitting, he could see bright pink skin stretch where Spencer's lip was healing. "It's not, but that's nice of you to say."

"Hey." Keith smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "I was beginning to think you never got upset about anything. Good to see you do."

Spencer only snorted, leaning forward to rest against Sam's head, as if taking solace in the strong dog -- or hiding his face. "I just don't get it. And so many people do it in the name of religion. They say they're exercising the First Amendment by following their religion -- but if that's the case, I ought to be able to exercise the same damn Amendment by telling them all to fuck off, I can get married if my religion says I can. And I also ought to be able to point out that the First Amendment is to protect all religion, not to make it so they can make everyone else follow theirs. And when Mike tells me that God says it's unnatural, I just want to slap him. God also says do not judge and love others and treat people like you want to be treated."

Keith reached out, running his fingers through Spencer's short hair, smoothing it down. It was soft to the touch.

Spencer turned his head, still resting on Sam's, and looked at Keith. He offered a humorless smile. "Bet you'd never have guessed my family was crazy religious, huh? I can quote the Bible backward and forward."

"And yet you take the Lord's name in vain all the time." Keith grinned.

A wry smile was Spencer's only answer. "I used to spend summers at church camp. I came out as gay there before I came out anywhere else, and you know what the reverend told me?"

Keith shook his head.

"The reverend said God loved all His children. None of this condemnation stuff. It was just... no big deal." His gaze fell, drifting downward. Keith reached out again, trailing fingertips along Spencer's hairline. Spencer didn't object; he just kept speaking. "I don't get people who preach God's wrath. Or who try and force others to believe what they believe. And I really don't get people who say my rights are not as important as their comfort. That it's okay for me to be miserable, as long as they're not put out."

"That's not how they think about it," Keith said quietly.

Leather-clad shoulders rose and fell. "It's the message they're sending, whether or not they think about it that way."

There wasn't an argument that Keith could think of to counter that. He swept Spencer's hair back again, rubbing his thumb in little circles along Spencer's temple.

Blue eyes closed, thick lashes feathering over soft skin like charcoal smudges. Keith chuckled and brushed his thumb over them. "You're wearing eyeliner again."

One corner of Spencer's mouth kicked up, but he said

nothing. The anger seemed to have drained away, but it left behind the dregs of weariness and depression. Spencer looked beaten, and it pained Keith greatly. Spencer never looked beaten. He was always smiling, at the very least that dry little smile with an upward twitch of his eyebrows, poking fun without ever saying anything. Things didn't upset Spencer. He was a free spirit; Keith had come to appreciate that about him, even if he still didn't quite get the hair color and the eyeliner.

To see him so hurt was awful.

"Do you want to stay here tonight?" The words were out before Keith had a chance to think them through. Spencer's eyes opened, his eyebrows arching up. "Not -- like that," Keith stuttered. "We moved the guest bed into the den yesterday, and I'm sleeping down there with Sam. The master bedroom is furnished and available, though."

Spencer sat up wearily. Keith dropped his hand away. "No," Spencer said at last. "I'm going to go home. Listen to loud music and drown my sorrows or something."

Keith nodded, not sure what else to do.

"I'll... figure out what to do about Mike later."

"What to do?" News headlines about political retaliation ran through his mind. Crap, he hoped Spencer wasn't going to slash the guy's tires or something.

His thoughts must have been painted on his face, because Spencer looked at him and laughed. "I mean, how I'm supposed to be friends with someone who's okay with hurting me. Relax. I'm not going to TP his house."

"That's not quite what I was thinking," Keith muttered. He followed Spencer to his feet, then to the door. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Spencer shrugged. "I'll live. I've lived through worse." His face was slightly gray, and there were lines around his mouth and between his brows. "Take care. I'll see you in a few days."

Keith nodded, then stood in the open doorway and watched as Spencer shuffled to the truck and climbed in. A few minutes later, it had driven away down the hill, the taillights fading from sight among the trees. Keith frowned and went back inside.

## *Chapter Seven*

Over the next few days, Keith saw Spencer only when they crossed paths in town. Both of them were busy; Keith with the puppies, the dogs, and still trying to find a job, and Spencer with the sculpture due for the Bernhart's wedding anniversary.

They had short conversations whenever their paths crossed, and Keith took to looking for Spencer whenever he went into town.

He found him in the little grocery store one day, picking through small winter apples. "You seem happier," he said, parking his own cart and leaning against the fruit case.

"I am." Spencer shot him a smile. It did strange things to Keith's insides, but he was beginning to be all right with that. "I didn't convince Mike, but you know, people have to learn in their own times. The only thing that'll convince him is him, so I'll keep talking to him and letting him know that I'm a real person with real worries, and maybe that'll bring him to his senses."

Keith chuckled, amused at the combination of let-people-be and I-can-change-it mentalities. "You want to come up and go dog sledding soon? Sam's ski-set's working great, but I'm not sure how much longer the snow will hold." Parts of the forest had already melted out. The valley they'd run

through before was a creek, now, gurgling happily along between icy banks.

Spencer brightened. "Yeah! Though we're supposed to get another storm in the next few days; maybe after that? The sledding will probably be easier."

"It's the beginning of March!" Keith laughed. "And still snowing?"

Spencer grinned. "Probably until April. Though it's been a weird year -- lots more snow than usual. Welcome to the mountains, huh?"

Keith only shook his head in amusement, pushing his cart farther along when Spencer started to move. They wandered together down the aisles, Keith with his cart and Spencer trying to fit everything into an overloaded hand basket. It bowed with the weight.

"That how you stay in shape?" Keith asked. "Carrying that thing around?"

Spencer grinned and dropped it into the child's seat of Keith's cart. "Something like that."

They walked in companionable silence, picking up items here and there, detouring each other down different lanes.

"You're not vegetarian, are you?" Keith asked, picking up a platter of steaks.

Spencer gave him a disturbed look. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you drink tea not coffee, and you ate salad the other

night, at that place."

"*Cobb* salad."

Keith looked at him dubiously.

"It has eggs and bacon in it!"

"Okay." Keith looked away, pushing the cart forward. "Just checking. I mean, you do kind of fit the type."

The conversation halted as Spencer ducked around a display and caught up again. "Type? What type is that?"

"You know. Into gay rights, you drink tea, you eat salad..." Keith shrugged. "That type."

"You are *such* a redneck."

Keith looked up, surprised. "I am n--"

"No, really. All those years of living in -- where did you live? Missouri?"

"*Tennessee*."

"Exactly. They've caught up to you." Spencer shook his head sadly.

"I'm not a redneck!"

"You are."

For all his glaring, Keith couldn't so much as get Spencer to look at him. Instead a smile lurked at the corner of



Spencer's mouth.

"Keith!"

He jumped, gaze vaulting from Spencer to the voice. He vaguely recognized the woman waving at him; he might have known her last year. She worked in the hardware store, now that he thought about it. "Hi!" He had no idea, though, what her name was.

She glanced at Spencer, then back at Keith, then at their twinned grocery trip. "I heard about Josh. I'm so sorry. But you seem to be... coping well." Again she looked from Keith to Spencer and back, and there was a cold question in her tone.

"Yeah, well, I'm dealing. It was more than a year ago." This he said pointedly, hoping she'd carry that news around the rumor mill along with whatever she'd just decided about him and Spencer. There was a definite downside to living in a small town.

"Oh, of course. Well, I'm glad to see that you're doing all right, then. I just wanted to give my regards." She gave Spencer another considering look, then headed toward the frozen foods section.

"Wow." Spencer watched her go, his expression bland. "You get that a lot?"

"Two days ago, the guy who changed my oil asked me if it wasn't a little soon to start dating," Keith muttered. "I told him I'd keep his opinion in mind if I decided to start dating, and asked him when *he* thought the proper time was. He missed the sarcasm."

"Hmm." Finally, Spencer looked away from the woman. "I could give you lessons in sarcasm."

Chuckling, Keith shook his head. "To everyone here, Josh only died when I showed up without him. For them, it's still new."

"And that gives them the right to decide when it's okay for you to date again? Bunch of busybodies." Spencer took his basket back, carrying it on one arm even though he didn't leave. "You wanna go for lunch? We could really give them something to talk about."

"So when you said people would learn on their own time..."

Spencer shot him a disgruntled look. "I'm pretty sure that's not *exactly* what I said. And it didn't apply to small-town morons. Lunch?"

"Sorry." Keith grinned. "Much as I'd love to create scandal with you, I need to head home and check on Sam."

"He's probably fine," Spencer said nonchalantly. "It's not like he can go anywhere..." He tapered off at the look Keith shot him.

"No, but he could have an accident and then I'd have to clean it up and bathe him again. Or he could fall down the inset."

"I thought you were going to build a ramp for that?"

Keith snorted. "Yeah, right. With what time?" He frowned, leaning on the handlebar of the cart as he pushed. "I'll do it

eventually, it's just... I haven't been able to, yet."

For a long moment, Spencer hesitated. He picked up a bag of chips off an end cap and added it to his overloaded basket, balancing it precariously on top of the milk. "I could help."

Slowly, Keith nodded. "Yeah. I might take you up on that." The brilliant grin Spencer gave him was worth the capitulation.

"I'm busy tomorrow," Spencer said, "but maybe this weekend?"

Keith nodded again. "I'll be around." Unless he magically got a job, which didn't seem likely. Maybe he could hire someone to go check in on Sam while he was gone during the day.

"Cool. You provide food, I'll bring the tools. And the wood. We can even try to match it to your floor."

"What, unvarnished and scratched to hell?" Keith said on a surprised laugh.

Spencer grinned back, blue eyes sparkling. "Something like that. Though I'm thinking Sam'll take care of the scratched part for us."

Keith winced. "Got that right. I may have to tear all the wood out and put in tile, just to try and save the floors from his nails."

"And it would be easier to slide on," Spencer said cheerfully. "He needs an indoor wheelchair..." His gaze

turned thoughtful as his mind clicked along, trying to solve this newest problem. Keith reached out and grabbed him before he ran into an island stand. "Oh, hey!" Spencer said, apparently waking up. "Could I take him to a rally? He'd sure get attention!"

"You're not taking my crippled dog to a political function," Keith laughed in disbelief. "He's not a prop!"

"Oh, c'mon. He'd probably love it. Everyone would pet him. And you can't hate gay people who have dogs in wheelchairs. He'd be a hit!" Dark eyebrows rose and fell as Spencer wagged them, giving Keith a hopeful look.

"No!" Keith kept laughing, though, amused despite himself. "I'm done shopping. You?"

"Uh..." Spencer glanced over his packed basket. "No, I've got some more stuff. I'll see you this weekend?"

"Sure thing." Keith grinned and waved, turning his cart away and heading toward the checkout. Things with Spencer were never dull, that was for sure.

\*\*\*

"You have *got* to be *kidding* me," Keith said, staring at Sam.

Sam panted up, ears folded back against his furry skull, jaw open and tongue lolling.

"Did you see the snow out there?" Keith drew the curtain aside, pointing to the dark afternoon. The flakes were coming down so fast and thick the sky had been completely

blotted out, and the sun was losing its battle to shine. "Do you have any idea how cold it is out there?"

With great effort, Sam thumped his tail against the floor.

"For the love of God! I just *took* them all out, and you *said* you didn't have to go to the bathroom!"

Sam thumped again, weaving back and forth on his front legs with his attempt.

"You'd better not have to go out again in ten minutes," Keith muttered darkly, shoving his feet back into his boots and wrapping his wool scarf around his neck. He yanked on his winter coat, then hoisted Sam up with the sling and opened the door.

At least there was no wind. Fat flakes drifted down aimlessly, deceptively harmless. Already, though, nearly four inches had fallen. The storm Spencer had promised had certainly come through in full force.

Keith half-fell down the stairs with Sam, shivering as the cold hit his chest. It seemed to knife right through his thermal, turtleneck, and sweater. He wished he'd done up his coat. He wished he'd put Sam in the ski-set and let him go down the ramp and come out here alone, but that hadn't occurred to him at the time.

He jiggled up and down, bouncing from toe to heel in his loose shoes, wincing when snow fell into them. It melted almost instantly, the storm bringing wet mush instead of icy powder. At least it would make for good sledding later. Of course, anything made for good sledding with his dogs. They had the muscle to power through any kind of snow,

whether compact or fluffy.

Finally, Sam finished peeing and they staggered back upstairs, out of the gray gloom and into the warm house. It was almost too hot, with his skin already chilled from the weather outside. He scrubbed at his cheeks with his frozen fingers, trying to get blood flowing again. His skin prickled and then eased, and he once more shucked off his coat and scarf.

"I hope you're happy," he told Sam, who was already dragging himself toward the water bowl. "My feet are wet."

Sam seemed perfectly happy, lapping up water.

"Don't drink too much of that, either! I don't want to be taking you out again in an hour."

Sam ignored him.

Keith kicked his boots off and padded back down to the inset in his socks, flopping onto the loveseat by the fire. He really needed to get a new couch at some point. He picked up the laptop he'd finally unpacked, flipping it back open to the job website. He doubted anyone here used a website to find employees, but at least it made him feel like he was being productive.

The phone rang. "How does anyone get anything done around here?" Keith yelled to the world at large. "It's a snow day! That means dogs don't need to go pee, and phones don't ring!"

The phone rang again.

Muttering under his breath -- did no one respect snow days anymore? -- he put the laptop aside and got up, shuffling to the kitchen, running the last few steps before the answering machine kicked in. "Hello?"

"Keith, it's Tamera. Is Spencer with you?"

As if Spencer might suddenly appear, he glanced around the room. "No. Why?"

"His landlord said he left this morning to go hiking, but the storm blew in so suddenly--"

"No one's seen him?" Keith frowned out the kitchen window at the wall of white. "He's pretty wilderness savvy, isn't he?"

"Yes, but no one expected this storm this quick. Or this bad."

"Does anyone know where he was headed?" Keith kept staring out the window, half waiting for a shape to detach from the shadow of the trees a hundred feet distant.

"Up toward the Black Cliffs."

"That's behind my house." He twisted to look in the direction.

"That's why we'd hoped he'd stopped in with you. He had a radio, but he's not answering. We're assembling search teams, but..."

"Keep trying to page him on the radio. I'll do what I can from here," Keith said, and hung up before Tamera could

ask him what he was going to do.

Search teams would have to be careful themselves; there was only so far they could go, and they could walk right past a fallen person without even knowing it. Especially in snow like this.

The dogs would have a better chance. Not much of one, if Spencer had already been buried by snow, but at least Mason and Hughie wouldn't get turned around. They knew these mountains by instinct, better than Keith did, and Keith had studied them.

"Mason! Hughie!"

Sam perked up, too, but Keith shook his head. "Not this time, buddy." He walked to the cupboard and pulled out a can of tuna fish in water, dumping it into a sauce pan and adding more water to it before turning it on to warm. Then he filled the electric tea kettle, flicking the switch before running upstairs where his clothes still were. It only took minutes to change into warmer layers, then find thermal blankets and his snowshoes and bundle them all downstairs.

The dogs were sitting attentively at the oven, ears pricked and heads cocked, knowing full well that they were about to get cold-weather, hard-worker food. Keith left them staring and yanked on his snow boots, then headed outside to set up the sled.

He found the edge of the tarp under the snow, yanked it off amid a flurry of white, and packed the blankets into the secured safety bag, hooking the snowshoes beneath where Spencer's legs would go. Hopefully he wouldn't need the



shoes, but if they were gone long enough for the dogs to need a break, he'd strap them on. Then he grabbed the harnesses and carried them back into the house, where he dropped them by the door. Striding to the kitchen, he dug a Thermos and a hot-water bottle out of the cupboard, dumped the warm, watered-down tuna into Mason and Hughie's bowls, and filled the Thermos and hot water bottle with the boiling kettle water.

The liquid tuna would warm the dog's bellies, give them fuel to run on, and keep them hydrated for a long time to come. The rest was for Spencer.

Keith slipped the harnesses on while Mason and Hughie finished eating. Sam whined nearby, hopeful that he'd be allowed to go, too, and even Kara came up to ask. He hesitated, wondering if it wouldn't be a good idea to take Kara for the extra pulling power, then finally decided it would be too much for a new mother. He wasn't even sure how long he'd be gone.

"You guys stay here," he told the two of them, then led Mason and Hughie, frolicking, to the door.

Snow had already left a thin sheath of white over the sled. He brushed it off, stuffed the Thermos and water bottle as deep into the blankets as he could, zipped up the rescue bag, and hooked up the dogs to the two-dog rig, tossing aside the four-dog lines. He wrenched the ice hook out of the ground, settling it on the back of the sled, then checked his gloves -- heavy leather, pulled up over warm fleece -- and tugged his hat lower over his ears. Goggles fit snugly across his eyes, protecting him from snow and ice. He wished he had anything as good for his dogs, but they didn't seem to mind.

"Let's go, guys! Hike!"

They took off with a lurch, barking like mad creatures as they raced across the ground, gleeful at this unusual prospect to go sledding in the midst of a storm. When they finally settled down into just running, listening closely to his commands but finding the easiest way through the forest and over the hills, the world was silent. It was almost eerie, the rushing of the sled tracks over the snow, but without even the usual patter of slush and ice and grit hitting the sled from the dogs flinging it up. He didn't know why that was gone -- perhaps the snow was just too new, still -- but it was.

They took as straight a route toward the Black Cliffs as they could, though halfway there Keith realized he wasn't sure where they were anymore. But he'd set the dogs on the right course, he knew that, and one of their usual running paths went right past the cliffs. He trusted their sense of direction and held on, heart thumping in his chest. He hoped his faith in them was deserved, or they were all in trouble.

When they passed the twisted, fallen tree on the left, he breathed a sigh of relief that fogged up his goggles. "Whoa, dogs!"

They stopped hesitantly, both of them panting from their exertion, looking back at him. The fact that they'd been cooped up all day was working in his favor; they both still had energy.

Keith really hoped this was going to work. "Mason!"

Mason perked up.

"Find Spencer!"

For a moment, Mason didn't do anything and Keith's heart plummeted. Then Mason stiffened up, wagged twice, and began to course back and forth over the snow, leading Hughie on.

He wasn't a hunting dog, and it wasn't the most effective way to catch a scent. They went around trees, up and down small hills, zigging this way and that as Mason tried to catch a hint of Spencer.

It seemed they went in circles for hours. Hughie was flagging, no longer even pulling his share of the weight. Keith had no idea where they were. Every so often Mason would look lost and slow down, and Keith would repeat the command.

Snow kept falling. They passed half-buried trees and boulders that could have been men, hit spots that Keith was sure were paths until they veered off into great heights or nothingness, and all around them, everything was white white white.

Twice, Mason took off barking, Hughie perked up, and Keith felt a surge of hope. Both times, after just a few hundred feet, Mason would look confused again and slack off.

Eventually, Keith called a halt. "Just relax for a minute, guys," he told them, trying to muffle his sense of failure. It had always been a long shot that this would work anyway. Maybe Spencer wasn't even up here anymore.

The world echoed with the stillness. It was so quiet, he could almost hear the snowflakes land. He put one foot in the snow, the other still on the runners, and looked around at the eerily still world.

Mason lifted his head, ears snapping up. With a bark, he lunged forward, dragging Hughie with him. Keith nearly lost the sled, hopping on at the last minute, his balance all over the place. He gripped the handles tightly, determined he wasn't going to lose his dogs in this storm -- knowing that, if he did, he'd never find his way home.

They careened over the side of a hill, the dogs racing down it faster than the sled flew, veering to the left. Hughie was in on it, now, the team leaping through drifts and yanking the sled faster and faster.

And then they stopped.

Keith cursed and stomped on the brake as hard as he could, still nearly hitting the dogs. He missed Hughie by inches.

They were both digging furiously, rooting through the snow for--

He heard it. "Move. Move!" Keith jumped off the footrests and shoved the dogs aside, listening again for the scratch and squabble of a radio. It blared as he cleared it from the snow, shaking it loose. A man's voice was asking Spencer to come in.

"This is Keith," he said, pressing the button, scanning for any side of people on the upslope. "I've found the radio. Hang on." He let the button go, dropped his hand to his

side, and bellowed. "Spencer!"

The snow swallowed it. He took a breath to shout again, and then paused. Had he heard something? Whatever it was, the dogs heard it; they raced sideways, yanking the sled around until it tipped and dragging it along anyway. Snow crumbled out from under their feet as they neared the edge of a cliff, and they stopped there, barking furiously and backing away.

"Spencer!" Keith scrambled over to them, floundering through knee-deep drifts. "Spence!"

This time, he was sure he heard it. "Over here!"

He dropped to his belly and crawled toward the unstable edge, peering over. Fifteen feet down, Spencer stood in a little hollow of snow, on a ledge barely wide enough for a single man.

"Jesus," Keith breathed. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. I was up there," he gestured even higher on the mountain, "and the ground gave way. Snow and ice; I thought it was solid."

"Shouldn't have been that close to the cliff," Keith muttered, but looking up, he could see the softened edges where new snow had hidden the fall line, could see that it wasn't close to the edge at all. Just bad luck. "Hang on. I've got tools here, we'll lift you out."

He scooted away from the lip, rolling over. Lifting the radio while he unclipped the dogs from the sled, he spoke. "I've found Spencer. Hang on, I think I can get to him." He

tossed the radio onto the overturned sled, ignoring the demands for more information, and set to work fashioning something to pull Spencer out of the canyon.

It didn't take long to hook the dog lines together to make one long line, and tie the blanket to the end of that. He draped it down the side of the cliff. "Grab hold!" he shouted, glad Spencer wasn't any farther down. Then he took the link that kept the two dogs together, attaching it to their harnesses instead of their slip collars, and hooked the single line to it. He turned to the dogs, calling them forward. "Come on, guys. Pull!"

Mason and Hughie both threw their weight into their harnesses. Snow slid under their paws, but they found earth and dug in, determined and thrilled with a new challenge. The padded straps of the harnesses dug into their shoulders and chests, nylon straightening and growing taut, the dog line quivering with the strain.

Slowly, they began to gain ground.

"Good dogs! Keep going!" Keith encouraged, running back to the lip, inching forward on his belly so as not to fall himself, and reaching out a hand. As soon as Spencer was within grabbing distance, he did so, hauling on the heavy winter coat.

Spencer had looped the blanket under his arms and tied it around his chest. Good thing, too, Keith thought as he came clear. His hands were fumbling, his grip weak. His face had gone pale, with two bright spots the only color, and his lips were almost blue.

"Easy," Keith murmured, dragging him the rest of the way

up. "You okay? No major injuries?"

Spencer smiled at him, but as cold as it was, it looked more like a rictus grin. "Not since you last asked."

"Yeah, well..." Keith wasn't sure that, given how hard Spencer was shivering, Spencer would feel an injury. He untied the blanket and wrapped it around Spencer's shoulders, then righted the sled and hooked the dogs back up. Finally, he grabbed the radio and toggled it. "I have Spencer. We're headed home, everything's fine." Though that might have been an overstatement, he considered as he eyed the shivering man.

"Here, hop on." He held the safety bag open, the hot water bottle still inside.

"My stuff is scattered all over the hill--"

"We can get you new stuff. We can't get you new fingers if they freeze and fall off, though. Get in and get warm. There's a thermos in there." Keith shook the plastic material imperiously.

After another moment, Spencer crawled into the bag. Keith zipped it up, leaving a small bit open for air. "Just hang on. We'll be home soon." The heavy plastic ought to keep body heat in, and with the blankets, the water bottle, and the Thermos, he hoped Spencer would start to warm up. In the meantime, he'd go as fast as he could convince Hughie and Mason, already worn out, to go.

"Come on, boys!" he called, stepping onto the runners. "Go home!" Keith was hopelessly turned around, but the dogs had better directional sense. He'd have to trust them.

Snow whipped by under the sled, and flakes hit his face and melted, leaving him wet. It was impossible to tell where in the sky the sun was; everything was white. Even the trees they passed were only shadows, wraiths lurking at the edges of his vision.

He could see the tarp trembling with Spencer's shudders, and could only be grateful Spencer was shivering. It was a good sign, really.

There was no way to tell how much time had passed. He bit his tongue against trying to tell the dogs where to go, even when he was sure they were headed the wrong way. In this storm, he couldn't see where they were; he was going to have to trust his team.

But surely it hadn't taken this long to get out here.

Keith had practically worried an ulcer into his stomach by the time anything looked familiar again. Though it was entirely possible the dogs had taken them in a roundabout route, they'd still gotten home. It was more than he could say he'd have done.

Still, even on familiar ground Keith lost track of where they were. The dogs always seemed to know where to go. Mason and Hughie were lagging, dropping to a walk before easing back up into a trot, when the house finally appeared out of the white world around them.

Spencer hadn't said anything the whole trip, curled on his side around the hot water bottle, from the shape he made. Keith wasted no time in unhooking the dogs and unzipping Spencer, pulling him out bodily.



"I'm okay," Spencer whispered, words slurred through numb lips.

"Yeah, whatever." Keith didn't bother covering the sled or taking the dogs out of their harnesses. He dragged one of Spencer's arms over his shoulders and hauled him up the porch steps, then fumbled the door open and shoved inside. The dogs collapsed in the entryway, and Keith let Spencer sag down onto the chest beneath the front window.

The air felt hot against his freezing skin. He could only imagine how it felt to Spencer, who was so much colder. "We're gonna get your wet clothes off, all right?" He was already kneeling to pull off the hiking boots.

Spencer nodded -- at least, Keith thought that was a nod -- and clutched the blanket tighter. Keith unlaced one boot and then the other, stripping off Spencer's wet socks, too. "You really weren't expecting the storm to hit, were you?" He was unable to keep the disapproval out of his voice. But really, only idiots and ignorant tourists went up the mountain without being prepared for the unexpected.

Spencer's mouth twisted in what was almost a smile. "I had gear in my bag," he managed to stutter out. "Saw the clouds. Was heading back down the mountain. Stopped to grab my gloves from my pack. When I sat down to rest, the ledge gave out."

"You lost everything," Keith finished for him, wincing at the image. Pack going one way, Spencer going the other -- yeah, it made more sense than Spencer setting out without any gear. "Come on. Let's get your pants off."

Spencer huffed an abbreviated laugh. "Keith, now, really..."

Keith rolled his eyes and opened up the blanket far enough to undo the button of Spencer's snow pants. He yanked the Velcro open, skimming them down. Underneath, thermal long johns were, at least, dry.

"Rub your chest," Keith ordered, and watched as, awkwardly, Spencer did so. He tossed the wet pants aside to dry, made Spencer pause long enough to strip off the lightweight jacket, wet sweater, and damp thermal undershirt before wrapping him back in the blanket. "How does the air feel?"

"Hot."

Keith nodded. Already his body had adapted so that the house didn't feel like fire, but Spencer had spent longer out in the cold. "Come on. We're going to put you down in the inset with Sam."

"Lucky me." Spencer hobbled up to his feet, limping down the three stairs and over to the loveseat while Keith guided him carefully, hand on his elbow.

When Spencer was seated -- still wrapped up -- Keith knelt once more. "I'm going to check your fingers and toes, okay?"

"How about my nose?"

"It's bright red. You're fine." Keith offered up a reassuring smile, as if he did this every day. "You won't be noseless."

Spencer smiled back. It looked a little forced, but with his

teeth chattering as hard as they were, that was no surprise. "Phew. Toes I can live without. My nose, though..."

Keith chuckled obligingly and lifted one foot, propping it on his thigh and pinching each toe in turn, watching them go whiter before blood flowed back in. "You have good socks," he said cheerfully.

"That's a relief."

With a wry smile, Keith took a close look at Spencer's feet, pushing up the hems of his thermal long johns. A bruise darkened the skin, creeping down from his ankle. Doubtless numb from the cold, but clearly an injury. Less important at the moment, though, than making sure Spencer wasn't going to lose digits to frostbite.

Keith sat up, drawing one of Spencer's arms out from under the blanket to examine his fingers. Despite the fact that Spencer had doubtlessly held them close to his chest and under his jacket, the blood flow in them was far more sluggish than his toes. A lack of gloves would do that. Still, they didn't look like there was going to be any permanent damage.

"You got lucky." Keith tucked the blanket back around Spencer.

Spencer nodded wordlessly. "The ledge had shelter," he mumbled, dipping his chin into his chest.

Keith rocked back down on his heels, carefully drawing Spencer's leg out once more. Spencer looked at him, worried, but he only waved the concern off. "Your ankle's bruised. It's not broken or you wouldn't have been able to

walk, but I thought I'd check it out." And the rest of him, while Keith was at it -- if Spencer hadn't felt this, there was no telling what else he hadn't felt. Nothing life threatening, or he wouldn't have made it this far, but...

Delicately, Keith probed the swelling flesh, feeling for unnatural movement or protruding lumps. Other than tenderness, it seemed all right. "Why don't you strip down, so I can check the rest of you," he suggested, sitting back and putting his hands on his thighs.

"Seriously?" Spencer looked at him like he'd suggested they play sex games. Keith only smiled humorlessly and nodded.

Muttering under his breath, Spencer squirmed and wriggled with the blanket still around him, slowly shedding his thermal pants. When he was down to nothing but his underwear, they shuffled closer to the fire. Spencer reluctantly exposed himself to scrutiny half his body at a time, trying to remain covered up as much as possible, still jerking and twitching with shivers.

It wouldn't have taken much more than a glance, except he was painted in scrapes and bruises. Keith probed carefully at a dark shadow along Spencer's ribs, trying to remain clinical and not notice how nicely toned muscles stretched over his lean frame, or the light smattering of soft, brown hair on his chest. Keith checked swelling around a cut on Spencer's calf, and finally, assured that nothing was greatly amiss, headed upstairs to get dry, warm clothes.

When he came back down, Spencer was curled around Sam, still wrapped in the blanket, eyes closed, and shivering. Keith walked over and added wood to the fire,

stirring the embers up into flame. Then he lay down behind Spencer, reaching out to rub briskly at the line of Spencer's body under the blanket.

"Feels like I'm never going to warm up," Spencer whispered through teeth he'd locked together.

"I know. You will." Keith cupped his hands around Spencer's ears, leaning in and breathing hot air over them when he realized how cold they were. Spencer trembled, and Keith wasn't entirely positive it was because of the cold. He leaned in and did it again, pretending like he didn't notice the way Spencer smelled -- even freezing, it curled around them, released with the heat of Keith's breath.

He didn't know how long they lay there, spooning together and around Sam while Spencer shivered. It slackened off to fits and spurts finally, tiny shudders that came and went. Keith kept rubbing Spencer's arm, his side, his hip, the shape of him under the thick blanket.

"I'm glad you came for me," Spencer murmured after a long while. "I kept thinking I'd be okay until I was found. Dig a snow cave to contain body heat, y'know? But, shit, even I could tell I was screwed."

Keith closed his eyes against the image that gave him, of Spencer gone so soon after he'd arrived in Keith's life, of a cold, still body curled in the snow, hoping long after hope was gone that someone would find him. "It was Mason and Hughie. Tamera said you'd gone hiking up in the cliffs. I just took them up and told them to find you." He craned his neck, looking for the two pups. The dogs had moved to go get water, but then flopped to the wood floor again, uncaring that they were still in harness. Both were sleeping

soundly.

"My heroes." Spencer shuddered again before stilling.

"Remind me to buy them... I don't even know. What would they like?"

Keith chuckled against the back of Spencer's neck, against that delicate, thin-veined spider web he'd so hated at first.

"I think if you just pet them they'll be happy."

Spencer snorted. "I'll buy them sirloin steak. Would they like sirloin steak?"

"I'm sure they'd love it." Another shiver wracked its way down Spencer's body, and Keith rubbed his hand along Spencer soothingly. Somehow, his thumb found the web tattoo, skimming along the nape of Spencer's neck. The skin was slightly ridged wherever ink lay, a faint scar from the tattooing process. Spencer shivered again, and this time Keith was sure it didn't have to do with the cold.

Spencer took a deep breath, back pressing against Keith's chest momentarily, and exhaled slowly. "You, uh... you ever date anyone other than Josh?"

Keith traced the outline of Spencer's ear, considering the question and his answer. "I had two boyfriends before him. Both were pretty serious, but in the end they didn't last." He'd never been one to date unless he was already sure it was a good thing. Dating had been too difficult, and he'd usually been able to tell right off the bat if someone would last or not.

He'd been wrong about Spencer. He'd wanted nothing but for Spencer to get out of his life. Now he could imagine his

life without Spencer, all too well, and he was no longer interested in it. He rubbed his thumb along the web tattoo again, sliding it down to the edge of the blanket and nudging that just a hair lower, exposing more of Spencer's back and shoulder, the point of a shoulder blade. "How're you feeling?"

Spencer gave an uncertain laugh. "Just a little bit self-conscious, with you doing that."

Keith stopped, leaning his forehead against the back of Spencer's skull and trying not to chuckle. That hadn't been the answer he'd been expecting, though he'd been mostly expecting Spencer to claim he was fine. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Not especially," Spencer said slowly. "Though you've been pretty damn sure you didn't want anything... Not that I mind a lay without strings, but..."

Keith grinned in the shadow between their bodies. "I changed my mind. I'd like to seduce you."

There was a long pause before Spencer answered. "I wouldn't object. As long as I can stay under the blanket. And my toes are still cold." As if to emphasize the point, a long shiver traveled the length of his body.

Keith laughed, rising up on one elbow to look down at Spencer, who gave him a grin in response. "I think we can warm them up. Sam, move."

With a baleful look, Sam sat up and scooted himself away.

Keith hesitated, gaze skimming over what he could see.

Spencer's face and throat, the shadow between tendons and collarbones, the swell of deltoids. "I'm probably pushing, here. I'm not the one who almost froze to death."

"Ah, a little death just makes me horny." Spencer grinned. "You know. Wanting to celebrate life."

With a chuckle, Keith leaned in and tasted Spencer's mouth, wondering if it would be anywhere as good as he'd imagined.

It was far, far better. Spencer rolled over, worming one hand out from under the blanket to cup around the curve of Keith's skull and hold him close. Keith opened his mouth, tongue flicking across wind-chapped lips, tasting pine and, faintly, sunscreen. When he dipped his tongue past them, he felt Spencer's tongue stroke back, eager and ready. Keith rested one hand on Spencer's neck, feeling the hammer of another pulse against his thumb. Spencer's skin was smooth, stretched taut over his throat and the masculine curve of raw collarbones, the strength of broad shoulders.

Keith pulled away, visually devouring the gorgeous body under him. He tugged at the blanket, pulling it aside far enough to see a muscular chest, winter-pale, with dusky nipples. Then Spencer shivered, and Keith slid under the blanket, too, covering them both to keep Spencer warm, as promised.

All that skin was glorious. He stroked his hands up and down Spencer's sides, framing muscles with his palms and fingertips, memorizing the hard planes and sleek curves of another body. In turn, Spencer's hands were on him, feeling through cloth, leaving trails of heat despite the cold Spencer had suffered.



Keith let Spencer work at his shirt, hands sliding up under the hem, tugging at the button on his pants. He did his best to distract, leaning in once more to capture Spencer's mouth in a thorough kiss, tangling tongues and dragging teeth over sensitive lips. He pressed, chest to chest, until Spencer was pinned and could do little more than breathe, quick and hard, hands roaming. Keith nibbled on Spencer's jawline, sucking on the pulse in Spencer's neck, breathing into the shell of a perfect ear. While he tongued the whorls, tracing the twists of cartilage, he found the hard length of Spencer's cock beneath plain cotton boxer-briefs and palmed it, feeling the shape.

Spencer jerked, breath breaking, his hands tightening momentarily on Keith's ribs. "Help me get this off," Spencer murmured. His voice was throaty, almost breathless.

Keith pulled away far enough to get his shirt off, then kept enough space between their bodies so that Spencer could work his pants down, too. He licked and sucked at Spencer's neck while agile fingers shoved at his clothes, then finally he twisted away to kick free of his pants and briefs. When he rolled back, they were skin to skin, electric and hot. Only Spencer wore anything now, and they took care of that in short order.

Every time he pressed down, Spencer squirmed against him, mute protest at being pinned. Spencer's muscles flexed and legs shifted, as if at any moment enough would be enough and Spencer would roll them both over. Except it never happened.

Keith shivered, though it had nothing to do with the cold.

He could feel his blood throbbing against his skin, taste the warm-forest scent that curled off Spencer. Catching one long-fingered hand in his, he nipped gently at the pad of Spencer's thumb, then licked the webbing between thumb and index, breathing into Spencer's palm and absorbing the answering tremble. Reveling in scent and taste, he sucked Spencer's finger into his mouth, tracing flesh with his tongue.

Spencer's breath broke, his other hand coming up to outline the edge of Keith's face, trail down Keith's throat and dance across collarbones as if learning every bit of skin he touched.

Keith hummed approval, aching with need as he rubbed against Spencer, feeling the sparks that seemed to fly between them. Desire coiled in his gut, in his groin, sinking claws into the very marrow of his bones. He banked it, trying to go slow, to enjoy the burn of want. He ducked his head to taste Spencer's nipple, to run his tongue around the hard nub and darker skin. In the blackness under the blanket, in the enclosed warmth their bodies created, the world was muffled. He could feel every moment of tension, every hitch of breath. He could focus on the way Spencer's fingers stuttered in their path when he sucked ever so gently. His need gathered, hard and heavy between his legs, teasing them both as he shifted and it touched, rubbed, slid along Spencer's hip and cock.

His hands formed and tested the muscles under him, following the hard lines down Spencer's abdomen, the ridge of Spencer's hip, the crease between thigh and body. Keith wrapped his hand around Spencer's cock, then stroked slowly from the base to the tip. Spencer groaned, head falling back while the rest of him tensed up. It was getting

harder to think past the fire in his veins, or the hammer of lust searing his mind. Harder to notice how, just above the line of hair, Spencer's skin was soft, trembling when he touched it with his tongue.

"Fuck," Spencer panted, "Keith -- condoms?"

Damn. Keith looked up, shifting to lean on his elbow nearer Spencer's face. "I... don't think I have any in the house." He and Josh hadn't used them in years.

Spencer laughed, lifting his head to bite gently at Keith's shoulder before easing the sting away with a wet kiss. "I do. In my wallet. Hip pants pocket."

"Thank God it wasn't in your backpack." Keith rolled out from under the blankets, shivering briefly despite the fire. He scurried over to where he'd made Spencer shed the wet pants, fumbling through the back pockets until he found the black leather wallet.

He couldn't help but wonder which of them was going to get off and which of them was going to go horny. And then he discovered there were two condoms. Eyebrows up, he turned and held them between his thumb and forefinger, fanning them out. "You expecting to get *really* lucky?"

"I'm expecting to have to cover for any idiots who don't practice safe sex," Spencer shot back, only his eyes and hair visible above the blanket.

"Oh," Keith laughed, stalking back toward the fire. "Now I'm an idiot?"

Spencer's eyes crinkled. "If the condom fits..."

Still grinning, Keith crawled back under the blanket, tearing open a condom as he slid down Spencer's body. Spencer sat up, lifting the blanket enough to see. Careful around Spencer's leg, watchful of his bruises, Keith slowly rolled the condom on over his erection. Keith chuckled, leaning down to kiss the line of abdominal muscle. "These condoms are lubed."

"Yeah?" Spencer sounded distinctly strangled.

"You're hoping to either fuck or get fucked?" Keith looked up in time to see teeth flash with the grin.

"It's always an option."

Wondering which was the preferred option, Keith moved up until he was straddling Spencer's lap. Spencer, he noticed, hadn't lain back down, but was studying him hungrily. Keith slicked the other condom on himself, pausing when Spencer reached between them to help, wrapping graceful fingers around Keith's cock and stroking firmly. Firelight licked across them, warming Keith and turning Spencer's skin golden.

Lazily, Keith stretched his arms out to rest them on broad shoulders, feeling Spencer's hands travel around his back, across his shoulder blades. Keith rocked in and up, sliding their cocks together.

Spencer took a deep breath and closed his eyes, running his hands down to Keith's hips. He drew Keith in and up again, guiding as Keith rocked back down. His lips parted ever so slightly, his mussed black hair catching and reflecting the light. Keith watched him, studied him, thrilling in every

little breath and muscle shift, loving the broad, muscular shoulders and the black threads of the tattoo just visible at the sides of his neck.

Keith pressed them together, cocks alongside each other, hard and slick. He kept moving, leaning in to capture Spencer's mouth in another kiss, thrusting his tongue slowly inside and swallowing the groan Spencer let out. Spencer fell backward and Keith went along, keeping them connected, thrusting harder now that he had a better angle. Longer strokes, supported by Spencer's hands still on his hips, speeding up the tempo. Keith broke the kiss, gasping for air, watching Spencer while driving ever closer to the edge.

Spencer's blue eyes stayed closed, neck and chest mottling. His fingers tightened, hips rocking up once, twice, and then stilling.

Keith thrust through it, feasting on the way Spencer looked mid-orgasm, before his own muscles flooded with spine-arching pleasure and he cursed, the world pinpointing down to a single white spot for a long, pulsing moment.

With a deep sigh, he leaned down to brace on his elbows, waiting for Spencer to stop trembling. Spencer's hands traveled up and down his back, lazy and sated. Eventually, Keith gathered enough energy to strip the condoms off them both and rise, tossing them in the kitchen trash. He thought about getting tea or cocoa or something, but wandering around naked was too cold. He went back to the blanket, crawling under it. Spencer had already pulled it up.

He was slightly damp from exertion, but Spencer didn't seem to be hot. If anything, Spencer was still chilled. Keith

propped his head on his arm, then draped the other one over Spencer's chest, sliding up against the lithe body to share heat. "Still cold?"

"Not as bad." Spencer glanced at him, and Keith couldn't help but notice that Spencer's gaze looked hooded. Cautious.

He smoothed his hand up and down Spencer's opposite arm, wondering what he could say that would make things all right. Wondering what was wrong in the first place. Sleep tugged at him, but he pushed it aside. "You have anyone you want me to call? I'm sure Tamera's let the whole town know you're safe by now, but..."

Spencer shook his head. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and frowned. "I was thinking about..." He hesitated for so long that Keith began to wonder if he was going to continue at all. Then he glanced up warily. "I was thinking about Josh."

"Oh." Keith didn't pull away, but it was difficult. As if saying his dead husband's name might bring the ghost into the room.

"It's just, you've been so... I don't know. In love with him. Still."

Propping his head up, leaning on his hand, Keith nodded. He watched the shadow that fell across Spencer's shoulder, where the blanket had wrinkled. Firelight made it twist and dance. "I was -- am -- very much in love with Josh. And I miss him, and I probably always will. But he's been dead for more than a year, and..." He floundered, not sure what to say. "Two weeks ago, I really thought I'd never be able

to see anyone else."

"Josh wouldn't want that, though, would he?" Spencer asked quietly.

Keith smiled ruefully. "No. Though I doubt he would have been thinking of someone like you, either." He traced Spencer's deltoid with his thumb, gaze focused on the middle distance. "I guess sometimes things happen we don't expect. And they sure as hell don't happen when we expect them to." He blinked, and saw Spencer again. "And I'm sure I'll have my freak out later, but right now... I'm glad you're here. And not frostbitten."

Spencer's smile lit up his face. "I would have looked pretty hilarious without a nose."

"Maybe it could have been a fashion statement. I hear Michael Jackson didn't have a nose."

"Get out!" Spencer laughed, shaking his head. "That's a myth."

"No, really!" Keith hiked himself up a little higher. "I heard that's why he looked so weird. He had attachable noses."

"Man, that is a rumor. Snopes it."

Keith stared at him blankly, trying to translate that into English.

"Snopes? They're, like, an online MythBusters?"

Keith shook his head.

Spencer looked horrified. "Snopes! Shit, you are so *old*."

"Hey!" Keith shoved him, under the blanket. "I am not! I'm just... computer illiterate."

With a heartfelt sigh, Spencer shook his head slowly. "I bet you forward all those lame-ass emails that aren't true, too. You're one of those people who doesn't check *anything*."

"I do email my family members," Keith laughed. "But I'm sure I'm not sending on lies."

"You totally are." Then Spencer grinned, reaching under the blanket to run his hand down the midline of Keith's chest. "You've never mentioned your family."

"They live in Michigan," Keith said obediently. "Both parents and my step-mom. They all get along. I have two sisters and a half-brother, along with a step-brother who's fifteen years older than I am. I don't know him very well."

"Why didn't you move there, to be with them, rather than here?" Spencer kept petting, hand sliding up Keith's ribs and down over his chest.

"We're not that close. I like it better here."

Spencer nodded wordlessly. "My family's pretty little. Just me and my parents, and they're in Austin. I think they found the only artsy community *in* Texas."

Keith chuckled. "That's good. I'm glad they're happy there - assuming they are. And they seem pretty accepting of you."



Spencer nodded. "If I told them I wanted to be a hobo, I think the most they'd do is ask me what I'm doing to be the best hobo I could be." His gaze drifted toward the shadows that covered Keith, where the blanket stretched from Keith's shoulder down to Spencer's chest. "I see them several times a year. They're talking about getting a summer house out here, since Austin gets insanely hot, but I don't think they ever will."

"Why's that?"

Spencer shrugged. "I doubt they have the money. It's kind of something they just like to talk about."

They lay in silence for a time, listening to the soft breathing of the dogs and the occasional whine of a puppy from the back room. The fire popped and crackled, a background soundtrack while snow fell outside. Keith watched as Spencer's eyelids grew heavy, each blink taking longer and longer. Finally, soot-colored lashes rested against his cheeks, and his breathing evened out.

Keith studied Spencer, from his glossy dark hair to his nearly unlined face. He was pretty asleep, in a way he managed to avoid when awake. It was balanced, though, by a long, muscular body and callused hands. He wore the tattoo and earrings as if they were a part of him, but somehow they didn't make him hard.

Josh wouldn't have liked him, even though in so many little ways he and Josh were very much alike. They both had the driving need to help, to make people see things their way. They were both highly gregarious and never met a stranger.

Except Josh was dead, and Spencer was here, warm and

alive. And he'd been so close to being gone.

Keith lay down, pulling the blanket up around Spencer even though he, himself, was starting to sweat. He listened to Spencer breathe beside him, and didn't go to sleep for a long time.

## Chapter Eight

Keith woke before Spencer in the morning, stoked up the fire, and with many whispered apologies stripped Hughie and Mason out of their harnesses, then fed everyone twice what they normally got. He couldn't *believe* he'd forgotten to feed them the night before.

He couldn't believe they'd let him.

Once the dogs were done with breakfast, he hooked Sam up in his wheelchair and got Kara, then took them jogging. The other two boys went back to sleeping off their excursion.

The snow had stopped falling, at long last, and the plows had already been through, clearing the streets but blocking all the driveways with mounds of snow pushed off to the side. Those people who'd already left for work were obvious: their driveways were clear.

Other than that, the world was white and silent as it only was after a hard snow.

Keith had things to think about. Josh, for one. A year of grieving, only to let it all go for another. When he'd arrived here, he'd been in a bad state, and it had only been a few weeks since then. He hadn't been ready for any sort of relationship, and now...

Well, now all he'd done was screw around with Spencer. It wasn't a *relationship*, certainly, but it was something. Something he wouldn't have done even a week earlier.

He'd lost Josh. He didn't want to lose Spencer. Was it just realizing he almost had that had triggered everything? Did he *really* want this, or was he just grabbing hold of something that had almost been taken away, and in another week he'd regret it?

He thought about it all the way into town, mind whirling in circles that took him nowhere except back to the same question and the same thought. Did he really want this? He enjoyed spending time with Spencer. Surely that was enough, for now.

By the time he went back up to his cabin, he had no more answers, but he did have a box of condoms, newly bought. Might as well be careful.

He walked into the house, sweaty and breathing hard, and let Kara go before taking Sam out of his wheelchair. The blanket by the fireplace was neatly folded and placed on the coffee table, and Spencer's clothes were missing. Keith had picked his own up that morning.

A yelp from the den told him they still had a metal-working artist in residence. "Kara!" Keith shouted, toeing off his running shoes and heading to the back of the house.

"I just wanted to see the puppies!" Spencer yelled back. Hughie and Mason came racing out, panting and wagging cheerfully. Keith stopped in the doorway, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Problems?"

Spencer stood in the back of the puppy pen with most of the little black and tan creatures at his feet, little fat balls of fur. One sable one he held cupped against his chest in both hands, while he watched Kara warily.

She stood between Spencer and Keith, her hackles up, growling quietly.

"Knock it off, Kara," Keith said firmly, and grabbed her collar to pull her away. She kept leaning toward Spencer, her legs stiff and unmoving. "Maybe you should put the puppy down. Give her another week or two, and she'll be less protective of them."

Gently, as if he were handling priceless antiquities, Spencer laid the little roly polly puppy back down. Then he edged around Kara and out the door. "Hughie and Mason didn't seem to mind," he said, sounding apologetic and put-out all at once.

"Hughie and Mason aren't the parents." Keith let Kara go, and she raced over to snuffle across her puppies furiously, making sure they were all there and in one piece.

"Then who's the dad?"

Keith turned to shoo Spencer down the hall, back into the main room. With one finger, he pointed at Sam.

"But he can't stand up!"

"I know."

"How did he--"

"I have no idea."

Spencer looked at him.

Keith just shrugged. "All animals like sex. I guess he really likes sex."

"Love will find a way?"

"I said *sex*." Keith laughed. He led the way into the kitchen, glancing out the window. "Looks like it's going to be a gorgeous day. They've got the streets clear."

"Probably buried my truck..."

"I can help you dig it out. You want some breakfast?" At Spencer's nod, he asked, "Eggs?" Spencer nodded again. "Is your truck at the head of the trail?"

"Yeah. At least it didn't fall of the cliff with me..." Spencer began poking through cupboards, then finally turned to Keith. "You have any tea?"

Keith snorted. "No, I didn't buy tea since the last time you were here. I don't *drink* tea." He pulled a frying pan out and set it on the range, then dug through the fridge for eggs.

"But you should have some for guests! They might drink tea!"

He glanced over at Spencer just in time to see a hopeful smile. Chuckling and shaking his head, he cracked four eggs into the pan and tossed the shells in the trash, then cracked another four eggs into the dog bowls, one each.

Even Kara came out to lap it up. "I don't have guests over, either."

"You have me over sometimes. I build ramps." A bag rustled, and Keith turned to see Spencer pawing through the grocery bag he'd brought home. Keith felt his face go red when Spencer pulled out the box of condoms and held it up, eyebrows shooting toward his hairline.

"You had a good point," Keith said stiffly, turning back to the range. "I should be careful."

"Huh." There was a beat of silence, and then Spencer added, "These rated really well in *Consumer Reports*."

Keith stared at sizzling eggs, trying to process what he'd just heard. "*Consumer Reports* did an issue on condoms?"

"Just an article."

"And you *read* it?"

Spencer laughed. "It seemed like a good thing to know! Not all condoms are created equal." He appeared in Keith's peripheral vision, leaning against the black marble countertop. "Some of them don't protect very well against STDs. Some STDs are smaller than others. You can't be too careful."

"You *can* be too careful, and it starts with reading up on condoms in *Consumer Reports*." He flipped the eggs, and, while they cooked, got down two plates. "There's other breakfast stuff, too. Cereal, toast..." He wasn't a big breakfast eater. Kept eggs in the house mostly because the dogs enjoyed them, but usually coffee was his morning

meal.

"This is great," Spencer said, taking a plate as Keith slid the eggs on. "I don't generally eat a lot of breakfast. Boy, I fall off a cliff and life gets better. Who'd've guessed?"

Keith laughed almost grudgingly. That shouldn't be funny. Spencer shouldn't be making jokes about nearly dying.

But it was funny, anyway. Besides, if Spencer had nearly died and he was the one making fun of it, that was all right, wasn't it?

He took his own plate and headed to the kitchen table, pausing for forks along the way. "Do you have plans for today?" Keith slid into a chair, watching as Spencer took the one opposite and promptly picked up the salt and pepper shakers sitting in the middle of the table.

"I did, but I think they're probably canceled. The swelling on my ankle's gone down. I think I just twisted it good; it's a little sore, but that's all. I have to dig my truck out, though, and I have a hunch I'm not going to be up for anything much after that."

"Falling off a cliff'll do that," Keith agreed, deadpan.

Spencer grinned. "Exactly." They ate in silence for a little bit, the ching of silverware against stoneware their only accompaniment. Spencer finished first, and sat back with his legs sprawled out and his hands linked behind his head. "I can't believe you don't have tea."

A snort was the only answer, as Keith's mouth was full.



"Tea is awesome."

"Hippie." Keith took his last bite, mopping up yolk with the whites before popping it into his mouth. "Hippie who eats way too much salt."

"Good cholesterol runs in my family." Spencer gave him a smile that was more smug than anything. "It's all that tea."

"Right." Keith picked up his and Spencer's plates, carrying them to the sink. "Shall we go dig out your truck, miracle tea man?"

Two hours later, they'd dug out not only the truck but the path up *to* the truck. Keith tried not to admire Spencer too obviously while Spencer leaned on the snow shovel, his jacket and sweater tied around his waist, his thermal doing nothing to hide the muscled chest and shoulders Keith had spend the night learning.

"I really appreciate the help," Spencer said, looking at his truck as if checking it for scratches. Then he glanced over, gaze sweeping Keith, too. "Are you sure I can't repay you?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked, and Keith was beginning to wonder about it. More than wonder, really; suspect.

"Why do you keep asking?" Keith eyed him narrowly.

Spencer ruffled a hand through his hair, ducking his face. "Well, come on. It was only a couple of days ago that you had a meltdown on your porch because there was too much to do."

It was hard to argue with that. "Things are better. I moved downstairs, Sam hasn't been driving me crazy. I was just

too tired." Even as the words came out of his mouth, he wasn't sure they were true.

Were they? Sam couldn't be that much of a problem, surely. And he'd figure out the money situation. It would all work out.

Just thinking about it made him feel slightly overwhelmed, though. Keith shook his head, rattling his worries loose. "Thanks for your concern, but it really will be okay."

Spencer said nothing, didn't even move, just kept looking at his back tires as if they held the answers to it all. "Did Josh's family really get everything?"

"Except for the dogs and this house." Keith nodded. "Yeah." He watched Spencer for a moment more, a smile tickling at the edges of his lips. "Spence."

Spencer looked up.

"Stop trying to solve it."

"I wasn't--"

"You were. You get this look." He walked over, crunching through snow, and stopped just in front of Spencer. There was only an inch or two of height difference between them, with Keith the slightly shorter, but on the snow he found he was a little bit taller. It was a nice change.

Gently, still unsure if it was allowed or not, he brushed gloved fingertips over Spencer's jaw, then leaned in to kiss him. "I'm all grown up. Really. I can take care of myself." The irony of saying that to someone seven years his junior

wasn't lost on him.

"Yeah, yeah," Spencer muttered back, but he was at least smiling now. He wrapped his hand around the back of Keith's neck, tugging him down and in for another kiss -- this one distinctly more heated than the last. His tongue slipped out, teasing along the crease of Keith's lips, and Keith opened willingly.

Christ, but the man knew how to kiss. Keith shifted, nearly slipped on snow, and felt Spencer stabilize him, dropping the snow shovel in the process. Somehow, they managed not to come apart. Keith figured it was because of young man hormones.

They broke apart when Keith, laughing, pulled away. "My *face* is getting cold."

Spencer mock-sulked. "Wuss." He hooked his fingers in Keith's front pockets, keeping him from leaving. "We gonna put all those condoms to good use, then?"

"You're impossible and oversexed."

Spencer grinned.

"I'll think about it." Would Josh care? He didn't think so. Did it matter? He wasn't sure. Josh was dead. Josh's family couldn't disapprove, because they'd never approved in the first place. Josh was *dead*, and Keith had to move forward with his life at some point.

He was sure of that much, at least.

"You should think about it a lot. And if you want to get

together, you know my number."

Laughing, Keith shook his head. "You're way too excited about this."

"I know. But, seriously, I'm not trying to be pushy or whatever. I'm easy."

"Yeah, I *know* that." From the look on Spencer's face, he hadn't realized the double meaning behind his words. Keith laughed harder. "Go home, Spence. I'm going to go get things done and check on my dogs."

Spencer let go of Keith's pants, taking a step backward. "Call if you need anything."

"I don't need hovering! I'm not the one who fell off a cliff! Go!"

With a sheepish grin, Spencer finally turned and went. Keith picked up the snow shovels and tossed them into the back of his SUV, climbing in and heading down the newly shoveled dirt road, out onto the street.

He wasn't sure what he thought about this thing with Spencer. It was interesting.

\*\*\*

"No, of course, that's understandable." Keith didn't look up, his gaze riveted on his resume. The edge trembled in his hands, a tiny vibration he hoped no one else noticed. It had been *years* since he'd had to get a job. He'd forgotten how stressful it was.

"It's just, we're looking for a full time position," the woman explained, as if making him understand would make it all right.

Keith nodded again, feeling like a puppet. "Well, thank you for your time. I should get going." He fled. Out the glass doors to the sidewalk, where snow was still piled up along the walls of buildings and the gutters were filled with slush.

He hated Devonsburg. It had all the downsides of a city, and none of the perks. But no one was hiring in his little town, and he was going to need money. Better to start job hunting now, right?

He stared down at his pitiful resume, with its lack of any recent employment or ability to work the computer programs everyone seemed to want. He could buy books on the programs, though, and get proficient. And then, maybe...

Oh, hell. He hadn't expected to lose everything at thirty-two, or have the things that should have kept him safe torn away.

Weren't they in a recession? Shouldn't people be leaping at the chance to hire someone part-time, anyway? What was *wrong* with businesses? He'd be willing to do anything. But he was too old for the usual part-time positions -- serving, making coffee, the things he was qualified for -- and too inexperienced for anything else. At the moment, he wasn't sure he could handle a full time position anyway -- but if he could get a part time one, then maybe when he got his life under control he could work his way up.

Maybe he could get a job in retail.

With a frustrated groan, he got back into his SUV and leaned his head against the steering wheel. If he got a job in retail, it'd probably be six-hour shifts. An hour and a half out, an hour and a half back, more if there was snow or traffic -- that meant leaving Sam for nine hours at a shot. For, what? Fifty bucks? He could hire someone to go take Sam out mid-day, but that'd eat into his meager earnings pretty fast.

He could sell Kara's puppies. She was still well enough known in the show world that they'd go for decent money, and he couldn't keep them all. At two grand each, they'd buy him a lot more time. But after that... even if he bred her again, soon enough people wouldn't want her puppies. If he didn't keep showing her, she wouldn't remain popular. Prospective buyers would go elsewhere for dogs who were proving they were still the top.

Keith shoved it all out of his mind, turning the engine on and putting the SUV in gear. He'd done all he could for the day; he couldn't keep beating himself up over everything.

The drive back into town passed in a blur while his thoughts windmilled around. He kept pushing them away and they kept coming back, leaving him feeling stressed and frenzied. It wasn't even a conscious decision to pull over at The Bagel Factory or head up to Spencer's apartment.

Spencer probably wasn't even home. Keith should really leave, go check on the dogs -- on Sam. He raced up the stairs anyway, smiling when he heard music.

He didn't bother knocking at the door; it was doubtful

Spencer would hear him over guitars and heavy bass. Instead, he tried the handle and found it unlocked. Keith inched his head in, gaze skimming the room for Spencer. He saw Spence, standing over one of the long tables, a pencil stuck behind one ear while he ran another over a sketchpad in front of him.

Keith had meant to get Spencer's attention, but instead found himself creeping into the apartment, closing the door behind him. He leaned against it, watching.

Spencer wore an undershirt that clung to his back like a second skin, doing nothing to hide the display of muscle that rolled over his shoulders and drew lines down his spine. His jeans hung off lean hips, straight until the floor, where they folded over the tops of his bare feet.

Keith pushed away from the door, pacing across the room, smiling slightly when Spencer bobbed his head in time to the beat of the music.

This was what he needed to forget his problems. It was so much easier to push everything aside when he had something to focus on. Something like a half-naked young man.

"Spence." He spoke quietly, undercutting the music, and wasn't sure Spencer would hear.

Spencer did. He whipped around, bringing his pencil up as if he'd use it as a weapon. Then he saw Keith and grinned.

Laughing, Keith closed the distance between them, batting the pencil away. "You going to draw me to death?" He reached up and swept the other pencil out from behind

Spencer's ear, tossing it onto the table.

"Wooden stake to the heart. It'd take care of any intruder," Spencer answered easily. He wrapped his arms around Keith's neck, leaning down and in to seal a kiss.

Keith allowed himself to be pulled in, hands resting on Spencer's hips, enjoying the simple kiss. Then he took it deeper, caressing Spencer's lips with his tongue, tasting the inside of Spencer's mouth and tracing the shape of that chipped tooth.

What started as hot rapidly became an inferno. Keith pushed, and Spencer moved, guiding them back through the studio, into the tiny apartment, to the back where the bed was. There, Spencer turned them until the edge of the mattress hit the back of Keith's knees. Keith sat down hard, rocking back when pushed, long-fingered hands on his shoulders and the weight of Spencer's body following him. He groaned, skimming his hands up lean sides, feeling the texture change from jeans to shirt to smooth skin.

Spencer ground their hips together and Keith thrust up, trying to find purchase so he could get better leverage, a better angle.

"Hang on," Spencer panted, drawing away. "Condoms."

Keith laughed. "Did you check these ones with *Consumer Reports*, too?"

With a grin tossed over his shoulder, Spencer fished two condoms out of a box beside the bed. Keith caught a glimpse of other things -- toy kinds of things -- before the lid closed. "I did. They rated first."



Laughter bubbled up again, but was quickly dispersed when Spencer started pulling at Keith's sweater, untying his shoes, tugging his pants down. It took no time at all to disrobe, though extra hands were more often a hindrance than a help. He sat up while Spencer stripped, tossing clothes every which way. Then Spencer knelt in front of Keith, and his heart nearly burst through his chest as Spencer rolled a condom on him.

Spencer's mouth followed, hot and tight, swallowing him down like it was the best, the easiest thing in the world. Blue eyes closed, lashes feathering over pale skin, and Spencer sank down, hands stroking the insides of Keith's thighs.

"Christ, yes," Keith hissed, curling a hand around the back of Spencer's skull, threading his fingers through soft black hair and pulling Spencer in closer.

This was, by far, better than what he'd imagined. He watched avidly as Spencer sucked him off, head bobbing up and down his length.

Spencer slid a hand between his own legs, and from the move and flex of his arm, Keith knew he was jacking himself off. It was painfully hot, knowing that he was getting off on giving a blowjob. Keith tugged on the back of Spencer's head again, drawing him in, reveling in the way Spencer reacted, groaning around Keith's cock as if it were perfect. Pleasure swept up the inside of Keith's legs, coiled in his stomach, and burst forth as the world went white and pulsing.

A moment later, Spencer groaned around him. Keith's toes

curled with the overload, and he dropped limply back onto the bed. It was several moments before the mattress dipped and Spencer lay beside him, both of them flat out, staring at the ceiling.

"That went faster than I meant for it to," Spencer said after a minute.

Keith laughed weakly. "You're telling me. One of these days, we'll have to try and last more than ten minutes."

He could almost hear the smile in Spencer's voice. "As long as we're both happy..."

"I am that." Much happier than he'd been even twenty minutes ago. He winced and tried not to think about everything that still needed to be done today.

Spencer rolled up on one elbow, smiling down. "So. What brought you by?"

With a snort, Keith shook his head. "Sex. Really. I just... didn't want to go home." If he went home, he'd have to face dogs. The puppies needed their pads changed, Sam needed to get out and play, Hughie and Mason needed a run, and he could only hope nothing had happened while he was gone. He didn't have the energy to clean up another mess.

"Hmm." Spencer traced patterns on Keith's stomach, eyes lazily following his finger. "You want a drink?"

He should *really* go home. "Sure."

"Alcoholic or non?"

Keith threw an arm over his face, as if by blocking out the light he could block out the world. "Non," he said finally, grudgingly. "I have to drive soon." He *really* ought to be heading home. Sam was at his limit, but... well, surely the last weeks had just been a fluke. Today it would be all right. For just a little while longer.

The bed dipped and bounced up as Spencer rolled off. A moment later, Keith yelped in surprise and looked up: Spencer had tugged off Keith's condom and was tossing it in the trash.

Spencer grinned at him wickedly. Keith snorted and flopped back onto the bed, arm over his eyes. He listened to rustling clothes, then the soft pad of bare feet on wooden boards. "What is it with the houses around here?" he asked idly. "Everything is wood. Wood, wood, wood."

"It's the motif. Soda or water?"

Keith grinned, eyes still closed, and answered, "Coffee," knowing full well there wouldn't be any.

"Very funny. *I* don't have guests as often as you do. I don't have to stock up."

"Soda." He heard the fridge open, the tab on a can hiss with carbonation as Spencer peeled it back, and the clink of a glass.

"Ice?"

"Sure." More clinks, then the glug of liquid being poured. It was nice to lie there and be waited on. He didn't move his arm, enjoying the solitude of darkness, until the bed dipped

again. Then he shifted his hand far enough to crack one eye.

Sure enough, Spencer sat there with a glass of dark soda -- Pepsi or Coke, he assumed -- watching with a small smile.

Keith pushed himself upward and took the glass.

"So. Crappy day?"

"Ugh." He took a tentative sip of the soda, tasted regular Pepsi, and swallowed more confidently. "No one is hiring. Not here, not in Devonsburg. Or rather, they are hiring, but not me. And even if I do land a job in Devonsburg, in all likelihood it'll take me away from home for too long." He really should be getting back. What was the point in saying he couldn't work because he had to check on Sam, if he didn't check on Sam when he wasn't working? Guilt ate at him.

"How much money do you need?" Spencer asked thoughtfully.

Keith glared at him.

"No, no." Spencer held up his hands, chuckling. "I can't afford to play sugardaddy, anyway. But if I know how much money you need to make a month, I can help find something."

Grabbing the edge of the blanket, Keith pulled it over his naked lap. "Not a whole lot, really. The house is paid for. I've got car payments, car and health insurance, dog insurance--"

"Dog insurance?"

Keith nodded amiably and continued, "Food bills, utilities, the usual. I could get by for now on twenty-five hundred a month, with what I have in the bank filling the gaps until I can make more. I can sell Kara's puppies; that'll cover a couple of months without pulling anything from savings."

"Why not just breed Kara again? Is she related to Mason or Hughie? They're both intact, right?"

Keith nodded and briefly explained why it wouldn't work unless he showed her. Show all of them, if he were going to breed her to his own dogs; both parents would need to be proven.

"What about sledding? Any way you can make money doing that?"

Keith shook his head, scooting around to slump back against the wall at the top of the bed. "It's a hobby, unless I want to run the Iditarod or something. I could run them more locally and then breed them out, but I'd be breeding to dogs that weren't king shepherds, and I think Josh would rise from the grave and shoot me. He spent..." Keith smiled ruefully, about to say 'his whole life,' but then thought of how young Josh had been. "He spent half his life trying to improve the breed."

"Okay, so... what about sled rides? We could even put together something with wheels for the summer tourists."

"It's called a kicksled." Keith looked up at Spencer, almost wishing they could stop talking about it. Spencer was staring at his own feet, a frown line between his brows as

he thought. "I don't think that would make me twenty-five hundred a month, much less grow within the next couple of years, and I'd have to pay for insurance."

Finally, for just a moment, Spencer looked as out of ideas as Keith felt. Then his face brightened. Keith's heart almost sank. "What about renting out a room? I mean, I doubt you wouldn't get twenty-five hundred a month, unless you wanted to make it a dog-friendly bed and breakfast..." He brightened even more. "What about making it a dog-friendly bed and breakfast? Those things make crazy money, and this is a tourist town. There's only one other B&B in town, and they don't like dogs."

Keith remembered. They'd suggested he leave his dogs in the kennel in Devonsburg. Still, it meant a parade of strangers through his house on a regular basis, and he didn't like people at the best of times... "I don't know," he said slowly. The very idea made his heart sink. "I was thinking I could get some books on computer programs and just learn some marketable skills."

Spencer nodded encouragingly. "That'd work, too! The library in Devonsburg probably has books on it, and they'll loan out to us. Or you could order some online."

Keith nodded, annoyed. "Yeah, I know how to get books, Spence," he said dryly. "I'm not a child."

Spencer looked vaguely abashed. "Sorry, sorry. I know. I was just helping."

Keith leaned forward, setting his Pepsi on the floor and wrapping his other hand around the back of Spencer's neck. He drew Spencer in until their foreheads touched, and he

was almost cross-eyed looking directly into Spencer's gaze. "I know you're helping. Josh liked to help, too, and it took him years to figure out I don't want it. I don't want to wait years more. When you help without me asking, all I hear is that you think I can't do it. Stop."

Spencer flinched. "That's not what I--"

"I know. Stop."

Silent this time, Spencer nodded.

Keith leaned back, picking his drink up again. "You fix-it types drive me slightly crazy. In my next life, I'm dating someone indifferent."

Spencer grinned easily. "You're just so rescue-able, Keith."

"For the love of God..."

Laughter tripped through the room, lightening everything.

\*\*\*

It was night by the time Keith got home, and the drive gave him plenty of time to chastise himself for being gone for so long. He needn't have bothered, though: the dogs did it better. As soon as he stepped inside the dark house the smell hit him. "Fuck," he muttered, and hit the light.

Hughie danced around his legs like nothing was wrong. Mason and Kara were nowhere to be seen, and Sam was caught in the inset, barking his head off. Sam had had another accident, and this time it was smeared over the bedding he'd left down.

The bedding, at least, he could pick up and throw in the wash. Sam needed to be bathed, too, and dog shit cleaned off the wood floor, and out from between each wooden slat. With the varnish rapidly disappearing, it soaked into the timbers. He'd have to soak it back out again.

Keith took a deep breath, ignoring the stench that made his eyes water, and shoved panic to the back of his mind. This was going to take hours to clean up. He didn't have hours, not if he wanted to be in bed at a decent time so he could be up tomorrow.

He shouldn't have gone to stay with Spencer. He should have come home earlier, at least to check on Sam, and then he could have gone back out if he wanted. He'd enjoyed himself at Spencer's house, but this much work wasn't worth that enjoyment. And on top of it all, Sam was distressed; Sam knew pottying in the house was against the rules, and to make it worse, it was on Sam's fur.

Maybe Spencer was a bad idea. Maybe he didn't have time for Sam and Spencer and finding a job and all the other daily things he'd never noticed until Josh was gone and Sam was crippled. Maybe everything would look better in the morning.

First things first. He got Sam's sling and went down the inset, looping it around the dog's hips and lifting him up the stairs and out the front door. "Mason! Hughie! Kara! Come out and go potty!" he called, slipping and sliding down the steps after Sam. He held Sam while Sam did his business, then turned and guided him back up the porch steps and into the bathroom. He left Sam in the shower and went to bring the other dogs in -- Mason and Kara had already



come back -- and closed the front door, then turned off the heater and opened all the windows. None of them would be able to sleep with the place stunk up.

He washed and partially dried Sam, took the bedding out into the dark to throw off the worst of the mess, then stuffed it in the washer and turned it on. Then Keith went back to clean up the floor and soak the ground-in crap out of the unvarnished parts of the wood. He found smears of it on the loveseat and cleaned that, too, scrubbing it with several different cleansers before the marks came out.

By the time the place was clean, it was also freezing inside. He sprayed air freshener everywhere, and closed up the windows -- much as he'd like everything to air out, his breath was puffing in white clouds even inside.

Scented candles dug out of a drawer helped a little bit more, as did starting a fire. Sam and Kara both whined at him until it was grating on his nerves, like nails on a chalkboard. Exhaustion and stress made the muscles in his back and shoulders wind up until he felt like they might rupture, and the constant dog crying wasn't helping.

"Would you *please* stop," he snapped, not for the first time, and then felt another pang of guilt when Sam lay down, his head on his paws, and Kara slunk toward the back room and her puppies.

It was eleven thirty. Keith sat on the steps of the inset and shoved Hughie away when the dog tried to come near.

If he'd been home earlier, this wouldn't have happened. He knew better than to leave Sam alone for more than six hours at a time anymore. He wanted to pretend like that

wasn't true, but it was. It wasn't fair of him to yell at the dogs for being distressed when he was the cause of it. Instead, though, he'd let himself sulk and lounge at Spencer's, ignoring what he needed to be doing in favor of pretending like everything would be fine.

He was an idiot.

Keith dragged himself back to his feet and trudged toward the back bedroom to check on the puppies. Kara was hovering over them when he entered, nosing them into a pile of fur. "How are they, honey?" he asked wearily, kneeling just outside the pen. He glanced over them, then frowned and glanced over them again.

One was missing.

"Christ," he muttered, and went in to separate the pile, count each puppy by hand. He checked the corners of the pen, under the blanket he'd put in there, but there was no sign of the little sable girl.

Keith hopped out and looked around the room, peering under the bed. Kara followed him, her tail tucked between her legs and her ears flat against her skull.

They ought to be able to hear a mewling puppy. He probably would have, if he'd come back here to check them as soon as he'd gotten home. Kara had even tried to tell him, whining while he'd been cleaning, but he'd been too upset to listen. He'd *yelled* at her for it.

"Little puppy!" he called, knowing she wouldn't answer. Sam scooted after him, and Kara stuck to his heels. Hughie and Mason were elsewhere, and Keith had a horrific

thought. They could have eaten it. Not all male dogs were good with puppies, and neither Mason nor Hughie had much experience. Hughie had none, but Keith had seen him hanging around in the house throughout the night -- with no sign of having eaten another dog. Mason'd had a couple of litters, but he hadn't been involved with raising them. They kept the males separate, just to make sure something like *eating puppies* didn't happen.

He didn't know what he was going to do if one of his dogs had eaten a puppy.

"Little puppy!" He checked behind the door, moving faster now, then headed out into the main room. He glanced in the linen closet, the bathroom, even opened the door to the basement stairs before telling himself not to be foolish. The door had been closed.

He looked in the kitchen, in the cupboards -- he didn't think the dogs could open them, but maybe he'd left one open by mistake -- under the chair and loveseat, under the kitchen table.

Christ, if the puppy hadn't been eaten but had somehow escaped, it was probably dead from the cold. He'd nearly frozen the inside of the house, leaving all the windows open.

He ran up the stairs, examining each one with a quick sweep of his gaze. A voice in the back of his head told him he was being foolish; the puppies could barely walk, much less climb a flight of stairs. He ought to go back down and look in the corners, under the furniture again. He went up instead, warring with the fact that he'd already checked downstairs. She wasn't there.

He got upstairs and glanced through the guest bedroom. The door had been closed, but he did it anyway. If the pup had been eaten--

Panicked, he called for both dogs. "Mason! Hughie!"

Mason slunk out of the master bedroom, while Keith could hear Hughie charging up the stairs. Keith grabbed Mason first, examining his jaws for any sign of blood. In the dark fur it was hard to tell, but Mason's muzzle wasn't damp or sticky. Would it be? He didn't know. They'd caught and killed a rabbit once, and it hadn't been damp or sticky then, either. Not even red to show what they'd done. He checked Mason's teeth, as if bits of fur might be caught between them. Nothing.

Hughie arrived and he went through the same ordeal, then released them both. The exam hadn't answered anything, only told him that they might not have, or they might have licked away all the traces. He felt sick. She had to be downstairs. She had to--

Something mewled. Keith froze. Mason tucked his tail between his legs, dropped his head low, and slunk back into the master bedroom.

The puppy couldn't have *climbed* the stairs. But he'd barely seen Mason all evening, and she could have been *carried*... He dashed into the bedroom. Mason ducked and laid down, halfway to the closet. His ears flattened against his skull, as if he knew he'd done something wrong.

Keith jumped over Mason, yanking open the closet door -- which was already open a crack. There, on his shoes, lay

the little female puppy. She wallowed around, half stuck in the opening to a loafer, front legs paddling ineffectually against leather.

Mason slunk past and lay down, curling around her. He nudged her closer to him and refused to meet Keith's gaze, acting as if Keith weren't there at all.

"You bastard dog." But there was no heat in his tone; he was too relieved to have found her alive. None of his dogs had eaten her. One of them was just too maternal. "Come on, little girl." He scooped her up in one hand, relieved all over again to realize she was warm. Mason must have lain with her the entire night. At least the dog hadn't stolen her and then abandoned her to freeze. He tucked her against his chest and, with Mason following anxiously, carried her back downstairs.

Kara was waiting, the very tip of her tail wagging hopefully, ears folded back on themselves.

"Here you are, Mama," he murmured, setting the puppy back down with its siblings. Kara paced circles around them, sniffing the puppy, rolling her over to check her entire pudgy body before being assured that she really was unharmed. Then Kara lay down and nosed the puppy in to nurse.

"You," Keith said, whipping around and pointing at Mason, "don't steal puppies!"

Mason wilted, as if he knew exactly what Keith was talking about.

Keith took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to

regain his composure. If he'd come home earlier...

Rubbing his face, he tried to push the self-recriminations away and got ready for bed.

\*\*\*

Six hours of sleep did not a restful night make. Keith staggered through his morning, cursing Sam, who'd woken him up to go out, and his inability to go back to sleep. He kept thinking one of the puppies had gone missing, and finally got up to check them. They were all accounted for.

The morning dragged on. He tried to hunt down books about computer programs on Amazon, but realized only belatedly that he had no idea what books would be helpful. The idea of researching it seemed impossible; where did he start? He couldn't just Google "books on marketable skills for someone who hasn't worked in the last seven years."

Or maybe he could. He tried, and got a host of "work from home" ads, most of which he guessed were scams. Weren't those kinds of things always scams? He clicked on one, just to be sure, and forty-five minutes later reluctantly concluded it wouldn't work and was probably illegal.

He was ready to tear his hair out. Or maybe go sit on the porch again and have a minor anxiety attack. This time, though, he doubted Spencer would find him and fix everything. He didn't *want* Spencer to find him and fix everything. Every time it happened, he was only reminded he couldn't manage it himself. He was a grown man, and he could live his life, damn it. All other single people managed to juggle everything, and they had full-time jobs on top of it all.

He decided to take a nap. Things would seem better after he'd slept.

He was partially right, at least; with a little bit of sleep under him, he was able to get up and think clearly about what he needed to do. He pulled out a piece of paper and dug up a pen, kicked all the dogs outside because they were driving him crazy -- even put Sam in his ski-set, and was grateful to Spencer for it -- and then sat down to think.

He needed to go grocery shopping. He was running out of the essentials already. He could also pick up a paper and see if there were any new job listings. He could post his resume on online job-hunting sites. He needed to find out what programs he should know how to work. Maybe if he stopped in at an office somewhere and asked, someone would know. It was a small town; they might make time to explain it to him, even if he felt foolish walking into ask something like that. Or -- better yet -- maybe he'd take another look at the want ads he'd skipped and see what he needed to learn. They usually said something like, "Experience with this program needed," right?

He'd figure out what to do about Sam later. He didn't know what to do about it now, and until he knew how long he'd be gone each day it seemed stupid to panic. Panic lurked anyway, like a chain around his heart. Maybe he should figure out what his options with Sam were first, so that he knew what kind of job or hours he should be looking at. But -- what *were* his options? Don't be gone longer than six hours, or find a dog-sitter. He couldn't afford a dog-sitter, and didn't feel right asking a neighbor to do it. Sam was too difficult; he wouldn't even feel comfortable asking them to let his dogs out daily, much less add in the hassle of a

crippled dog.

Groceries. He could handle groceries.

Keith pocketed his list, in case he thought of anything else he needed to add to it, then got a bowl of water for Kara and set it in her room, closing the door behind him so Mason wouldn't steal another puppy while he was gone. He called the dogs in, walking outside to see if Sam managed the ramp or not.

Sam attempted to go up the stairs, and dug furiously at the snow when his skis stopped him.

"Sam, go around." Keith pointed.

Sam paddled.

"Go *around*." He gestured broadly, hoping the dog would figure it out.

Sam paddled.

Keith gave up and walked down the stairs, grabbing Sam's collar and leading him over to the ramp. It wasn't easy, but Sam got up it, hauling the skis up the wood with blunt nails digging in as hard as they could. Keith made a mental note to find something that would give Sam purchase without totally stopping the skis. He had no idea what that might be, but...

Maybe he should just shovel snow onto the ramp. That'd probably work, as long as it stayed cold.

He took Sam out of his ski-set and locked all the dogs



inside, then glanced at the clock -- he wasn't going to be gone for more than six hours this time -- and headed for the SUV.

Groceries. Groceries were easy; you went, you saw, you bought. He even had another list, so that he wouldn't spend money he couldn't afford.

He bought his groceries and the paper, checked the clock, and decided he had plenty of time to sit at the coffee shop and peruse the paper, rather than heading right home. Besides, he didn't want to go home. Every time he went, there was another disaster.

Keith walked into the little cafe, gaze casting around for people he knew. So many of them had offered condolences about Josh, now, that he thought he recognized almost everyone, even if he didn't know their names. They knew his, which was a little disconcerting; he felt bad asking for theirs.

One of the shop owners was behind the counter by herself, tending to the trickle of business that came in around this time of day. He smiled at her, half hoping she wouldn't want to talk. He just wanted to drink his coffee in peace.

She glanced at him, but then turned back to stacking muffins in a wicker basket.

That was fine with Keith. If she didn't want to be social, it meant he didn't have to be social, either. He stood quietly at the cash register, the paper folded under one arm, and waited for her to finish her task.

It had to be his imagination that she was moving ever

slower, adjusting muffins as if trying to make the arrangement perfect. He squelched vague annoyance and kept waiting, a polite smile fixed on his face in the hopes that he might catch her eye.

She put the muffin tray in the glass case, then adjusted the one beside it. She leaned back, eying them, then leaned forward to return the tray she'd adjusted to where it had started out.

Maybe she didn't know he was ready to order. Or maybe she hadn't noticed him, and he'd just thought she had. Keith considered calling her name, but realized he didn't *know* her name. He glanced around the nearly empty cafe, as if seeing someone else might trigger his memory. Had he *ever* known her name? He wasn't sure. He couldn't remember. Maybe he'd just wait a bit longer.

She adjusted another tray, took tongs and moved around the two remaining croissants, and then finally closed the case and turned toward him. He'd never seen someone drag their feet so much when walking over.

Keith tried another smile. Oh, thank God, she was wearing a name tag. "Hi, Anne."

Anne nodded stiffly. "Keith."

He hesitated. This was a far cry from the woman who'd offered condolences and dinner several nights running. Had he done something? He didn't think so. "I was wondering if I could get a coffee," he said finally, hesitating over the words.

She pulled off a cup, her mouth a thin line, and walked to

the coffee maker. "I hear you're seeing Spencer." Dark liquid gurgled into his cup.

"Yes," Keith said, eager now to break the tense silence. "Casually."

She put the coffee on the counter, and took the two bills he handed over. "Seems awfully quick."

"I'm sorry?" *Quick for what?*

"What with Josh just dying and all." Her gaze was piercing.

Keith took a step back, rocked by surprise. "Wait, what? Josh has been dead for more than a year." He'd had other people asking, tentatively, if he was sure it was the right time, but nothing with this level of anger.

"You only recently got through all the legal stuff. But, man, you just moved away from that life as fast as you could, didn't you? Even got rid of his dogs."

"I couldn't take care of them all. Not alone." His voice rose, alarmed and defensive. And yet -- he shook his head. He didn't have to defend himself here. He hadn't done anything wrong. "I don't--"

"People *liked* Josh around here. I just--" She stopped, lips pinched together, and looked away. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I just don't see how you could love someone and cast them aside so easily."

"It wasn't *easy*," Keith protested. He blanched at his own words. "I mean, I didn't cast him aside!"

Anne's eyebrows rose. "You're dating someone new."

He didn't have a response for that. It was the truth, of course. But it had been more than a year; surely that was enough time. He'd loved Josh. He still did, and always would, but...

Was she right?

"Yes, but--"

"If my Charlie died, I don't know if I'd ever want to re-marry."

"Josh wouldn't have wanted me to be alone forever," Keith pointed out. His mind raced. After Josh had died, he *hadn't* wanted to see anyone else. But time had passed and that had changed. That's what happened when you healed, wasn't it?

"No. But I doubt he thought he'd be so easily replaced, either. You've only been in town less than a month, and you're seeing someone?"

He pulled back, horrified to hear his own fears and concerns out of someone else's mouth. He'd known it was wrong to see Spencer already. He'd known it was too early.

Leaving the coffee, he turned and fled. He had to get out of there. Get some air. What was he doing? If he'd loved Josh so much, why was he leaping into bed with a man he knew Josh would hate? And yet, should he spend his life waiting? A year. It had been a year. What else did they want?

He walked blindly down the sidewalk, his gaze on his feet.

It didn't matter. It really didn't. He shouldn't be seeing Spencer, anyway, that was obvious. It brought him nothing but pain: either he saw Spencer when he should have been home checking on Sam or dealing with the puppies, or he disappointed the people around him. People who loved Josh like he should have. Maybe they were right.

He needed air and time. He could barely keep up with his life as it was; adding another complication was just stupid.

"Hey! Keith!" As if thinking about Spencer had summoned him, Spencer pulled up to the curb in his cherry-red truck.

Keith nearly flinched at the call before turning to look. What was *with* this town? It was too small. He constantly ran into people he didn't want to see.

"You wanna get together later?" Spencer's hair was solid black today, shining almost blue in the sun.

Though it broke his heart, Keith shook his head. All he wanted was to get together later today. Lose himself in Spencer and not think about all the things going wrong in his life. But it was a mistake. He needed to handle his life, not hide from it. Wearily, Keith dragged himself toward the edge of the sidewalk and Spencer's truck. The passenger side window was down; he leaned on it, arms crossed. "Spence, look..." How to explain?

Spencer's expression turned uncertain, the smile lingering as if hopeful that it alone could change what was about to happen. "What's up? Are the dogs okay?"

Keith studied his hands. "Yeah, yeah, they're fine. Well -- sort of. I almost lost a puppy last night, and Sam had

another accident, because I didn't come home early enough. I just... I have a lot going on right now, and I don't think we're a good idea." He looked up at last, afraid of what he'd see. Spencer, however, still just looked confused. "We can be friends, but I think we need to stop anything else." Had he *really* just given an 'I want to be friends' speech? Oh, God.

Spencer's expression shifted rapidly, finally settling on tight-lipped and frowning. "How about I come over later and we can talk about it?" He put both hands on the steering wheel, checking his mirrors. Preparing to drive away.

"No," Keith said firmly. "Don't come over later. There's no talking about it."

"I'll see you tonight. I'll bring pizza."

The truck started to move, and Keith yanked away quickly as his perch became unstable. "Damn it, Spence, no! There's nothing to talk about!"

Spencer had already pulled away. Through the glass windows in the back of the cab, Keith saw him lift one hand in a wave. Resisting the urge to give him the bird took all of Keith's willpower. "You can't just get your way by refusing to listen to everyone else!" he raged at the truck, knowing Spencer was long past hearing him. "The world doesn't work that way! You don't just get what you want because you want it!"

The truck kept moving down the road.

Furious, and hanging on to it because it felt better than

panicking, Keith turned and stomped back to his SUV.

\*\*\*

By the time Keith heard the truck pull up outside his house, he was practically gunning for Spencer. He'd thought up and discarded a dozen different shouting matches, playing them through in his head to make himself feel better before carefully choosing the arguments that best summed up how he felt about things. How he felt about Spencer. If Spencer wanted to talk, they'd do it on Keith's terms.

Keith listened as the truck door slammed and footsteps tromped up the porch stairs. The dogs were waiting at the door, wagging furiously, by the time Spencer knocked. "Pizza!" he shouted through the wood.

Slowly, Keith stood and walked to the door, shooing the dogs away and opening it carefully. He wasn't going to get angry. He wasn't going to let Spencer convince him, either. He wasn't going to be bulldozed. He was going to hold his ground and be the adult here.

Spencer grinned at him from the doorway, a pizza box balanced on one hand. "Delivery."

Keith stepped aside. "Come on in."

If Spencer noticed the coolness of Keith's tone, he didn't acknowledge it. Instead, he pushed through the dogs, petting them here and there with his free hand as they followed him toward the kitchen, and set the box down on the counter. "Want to be civilized and use plates, or be bachelors and use paper towels?"

Remaining silent, Keith walked over and opened a cupboard, getting down two plates. He could see his solemnity wearing on Spencer already. Spencer's smile was strained, his eyes darting from here to there, his hands -- once they were empty -- never still.

The plates chimed mutedly as Keith set them down on the counter beside the box. "We need to talk."

"That's what I said." Spencer opened the lid and the smell of greasy cheese and pepperoni wafted out on a cloud of steam. "You wanna eat first?"

"We can do both."

Spencer nodded, putting two slices on a plate and moving away with it.

Keith debated not getting any food, to make sure this didn't seem casual or like a date at all. But Spencer had brought it, and it seemed childish to refuse. He took a piece and headed to the table, sitting facing Spencer. "I'm sorry I made you feel like you and I were a possibility. The truth is, I don't have time right now to start anything."

Spencer glared at his food. The smile had apparently given up. "It's not like I'm asking you to spend any more time with me than you were before. I'm not asking you to abandon your dogs or, hell, even be in a serious relationship. It's just hanging out. With occasional sex."

"I don't have time to hang out," Keith snapped, the control he'd been trying so hard for already frayed. "It seems like every time I leave the dogs, something goes wrong, and I need to find a job and find a way to take care of Sam and



pay my bills and in a few more weeks the puppies will be big enough to need more time and care and I'll need to find homes for them and interview people and I still haven't gotten a new couch and the floors need to be re-varnished - - Spence, I just don't have the time to *do* everything *and* see you!" Pizza forgotten, Keith leaned on his elbows and scrubbed his hands over his face. "That's not even taking into account cleaning this place or grocery shopping or vet visits -- I'm so fucking overwhelmed I don't know what to do, and adding you into the mix is *too much*." So much for his decision to stay calm. In his mind's eye, he watched it fly away and wished it well.

"So, what, you're just never going to take personal time? That's not healthy. Heck, Keith, I could come here and help!"

Keith shook his head quickly. "I don't want help. If you really want to help me, you can acknowledge that I probably know how to run my life better than you do, and honor the decisions I make."

Spencer flinched. "So, basically, I don't get a say in this."

"No. I'm sorry."

Neither of them had eaten more than a bite or two of pizza. They sat at opposite ends of the table, each staring at their plates. Spencer tore his crust into chunks, but didn't put any in his mouth.

"Can I even help you do things?" Spencer's voice was quiet, but frustrated. Almost sullen.

"If I ask. It's not like I'm never going to see you, I just... I

can't focus on a relationship right now. I don't have the time or the mental energy. I'm not even sure I'm ready, after Josh."

"Yeah," Spencer muttered. Keith wasn't sure what he was referring to, or if he were really even agreeing with any of it. He picked up one of the torn pieces of crust and offered it to Mason, who was lying nearby.

"Don't--" Keith began, but Mason had already hopped up and eaten it. Keith glowered at Spencer.

"What?"

"We don't feed the dogs at the table. It makes them beg."

A gesture took in the pack waiting patiently just a few feet away. "They're already begging. I mean, they're not looking at us, but why else would they lay there?"

"Just don't do it."

"But I have to give the rest of them something, or it looks like Mason got special treatment."

Keith took a deep breath and tried to convince himself it didn't really matter. And in the greater scheme of things, it didn't -- it was just something else he'd have to watch, that the dogs didn't start begging. Another way having Spencer around upset his precarious apple cart. "Fine. In their bowls."

Keith picked up bits of crust and carried them over to the dog bowls. The pack scrambled up and raced over, sitting politely as he dropped the bread in and stepped away. Only

then did the dogs descend on their treats, Sam flopping down to his belly to reach his bowl more easily.

They acted like they'd never been fed.

Spencer backed his way to the table, sitting down in his chair again. "I still don't see how dating casually is different than being friends."

"It is. It's a lot more stressful, and I don't need more stress." He could feel that he was winning, though. Spencer had lost that determined air and was staring glumly at the dogs.

"I could help with things. And then you wouldn't be stressed."

"I don't want to have to rely on someone else." He wanted to feel like a functional adult, not one that needed help with the simplest of tasks.

"You ask too much of yourself."

"I don't think so."

Spencer's mouth tightened again. "I'm kinda pissed at you, you know."

"Yeah." Keith smiled wryly. "I know." But it didn't change a thing.

## *Chapter Nine*

He still hadn't found a job. Two weeks of looking hadn't helped anything. He'd been spending every available minute with books from the Devonsburg library, learning computer programs that he still barely understood or remembered.

He did find homes for four of the seven puppies as soon as they were old enough to be weaned. He'd finally gotten the lock on the front door changed, too, so that it no longer stuck and threatened to lock him out forever. He still needed to get a new door; the old one was warped. His to-do list was shrinking slowly, only to have more things added at the bottom. To do: Find a job, figure out what to do with Sam, start working with the puppies, get a couch, get a new broom, strip and re-varnish the floors, replace the wood under the skylight and other damaged spots, call around to see if anyone would grade his land in the summer so Sam had somewhere to run... the list went on and on.

He hadn't seen Spencer.

It was for the best, Keith told himself over and over again. He'd wanted Spencer to go away, and Spencer had gone. And the nights when Keith found himself overwhelmed and wanting nothing more than to curl up and let Spencer take care of things, those nights he tried to just go to bed. He could manage on his own.

If those nights were getting more and more common, he ignored it. He would manage on his own. He didn't need someone to take care of him. He could do everything. People did everything all the time; he just needed to stop whining.

It seemed about half the time, now, he'd come home and find that Sam had had an accident. Six hours was true, but the drive to Devonsburg and back -- to the library or job hunting -- took two to three, round trip. Add in any errands he had to run...

Six hours was pushing it. He had no idea what he was going to do when he had a job.

Keith sat in the recliner, staring around at his house, too overwhelmed to get up and do the things that needed to be done. The floor needed to be vacuumed or swept, and laundry started. He had books to read on using QuickBooks, and he'd spent the day driving to and from Devonsburg, job hunting, and then cleaning up after Sam. He was too tired to do anything and had no idea when it would let up.

When Sam died, maybe.

He flinched when the phone rang, lost in a morbid haze. Numbly, Keith picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hey!" Tamera chirped. "Brian and I are going down to the pub. Want to join us?"

He rubbed his eyes. "I don't think so." He didn't want to come home and find another mess. "Maybe next time."

"That's what you said the last *three* times. Come with us, Keith. You can't just stay shut up there. It'll probably make you feel better."

He eyed the phone base and wondered how she knew he was feeling bad. Was it that obvious in the tone of his voice? Or did she just assume that anyone who wasn't coming out was depressed? "It'll probably make me more stressed and therefore not feel better," he said snappishly.

"Human company will be good for you. Come on, no one's seen you in days. We're starting to suspect you've been murdered and it's your killer answering the phone."

Keith snorted a laugh despite himself.

"Spencer will be there."

"That doesn't make a difference." Except it did. He couldn't deny the way his heart raced when she said it, as if the very name could bring joy into his life. He didn't care about Spencer. It was too soon.

"So, you wanna come out?"

He waffled a moment more, gaze straying across his dogs. The puppies were big enough now to be playing; he could hear them yelping and growling in the back room. "Yeah," he said finally. "I'll come out. For a little while," he hastened to qualify. He really should stay in. He had so much to do, and tomorrow he had to leave all day; he'd arranged for three job interviews, morning, noon, and afternoon. He still hadn't figured out what to do with Sam, though. He'd certainly be gone longer than the six hours he

could manage.

He was so busy thinking about it all over again -- as if he hadn't spent the entire afternoon thinking about it -- that he didn't even realize when he'd hung up, or stood to get his jacket. For a long moment he debated changing. He could wear those tan khakis, maybe with the blue shirt that brought out his eyes. Josh had always said it made him look like a sun god, all blond and gold--

He wasn't changing his clothes. He had no reason to change his clothes. He was trying *not* to give Spencer the wrong impression. It didn't matter how he looked. Resolutely, he plucked his coat off the coat hook and shrugged into it, calling the dogs to go out and go potty before he left.

Banging his shin on the corner of the house as he carried Sam's back hips in a sling was almost becoming routine. He had been putting Sam in his ski-set even for something as simple as going out to go to the bathroom, but the last few days had seen spring-like temperatures, finally. The snow was melting, leaving patches of mud. No good for skiing over. He couldn't wait until summer really hit, and it dried out enough for Sam's wheels to work again. In the meantime, it was an added stressor on an already stressful life.

By the time he got the dogs back inside and muddy paws wiped off, Tamera and Brian were sitting outside his house in their two-door Civic. Keith closed the dogs in and trotted down the stairs, poking his head in the car door. "You sure you don't want me to drive myself? I need to be home in a few hours." He couldn't afford to leave the dogs alone all night and have another disaster. It was too exhausting.

"We're sure! Brian has to head to bed early, anyway."

With a fatalistic shrug, Keith slid into the passenger seat, twisting to wave at Brian stuck in the back. Brian smiled wryly, his knees practically in his chin.

Keith hated to admit it, but it was nice to see people he knew. He didn't even like Tamera all that much, and it was still nice to see people he knew.

"It should be a pretty good group tonight," Tamera chattered as she pulled a U-turn in the middle of the road and headed down the hill. "Spencer will be there, and Mike, too. Johnny and Ashley said they're coming, and hopefully bringing Ruth and Mindy."

Keith nodded, recognizing names and even able to put half of them to faces.

The drive into town didn't take long. The streets were empty, the tourists gone now until summer. O'Malley's was the only bar open -- it was the only bar, period -- and the windows were lit up with hazy lamps. Tamera found a parking spot along the curb, and Keith got out as quickly as possible to let Brian out, too. "I can sit in the back on the way home," he offered.

Brian chuckled. "Then I'd just have to get out to drop you off. Don't worry about it." He sauntered toward the bar, thumbs tucked in his back pockets, keeping half an eye on Tamera. When she had locked the car, she traipsed around to her husband, taking his arm as he smiled at her.

A pang of jealousy hit Keith square in the gut. He didn't need that right now. He was doing the right thing. And he



definitely wasn't here tonight to see Spencer.

Nor had he been thinking about Spencer almost constantly.

With a deep, bracing inhalation, Keith walked into the bar.

It wasn't as loud as he'd expected. They'd kept the music low so people could talk, though all the tables were filled. A group in the corner waved -- three men, Keith noticed before he tuned it all out. Spencer was at that table already, tucked in the far corner, his chair tipped back and braced where two walls joined. His hair wasn't black anymore, but royal blue. He hadn't seen them yet; he was turned to the man next to him -- Mike, Keith recognized -- and laughing at something they were saying. Despite the smile, though, his gaze was intense and his head tipped in, as if he could convince simply by willing it so.

God, Keith had missed that smile.

Spencer gestured, long-fingered hands gliding through the air in front of him, punctuating whatever it was he said.

Mike looked unconvinced, shaking his head here and there as if refusing to hear Spencer.

*"Keith."*

He jumped, eyes snapping around to Tamera. She laughed at him, and he flushed, realizing it wasn't the first time she'd called.

"Have you met Ruth?"

"No." He smiled at her absently, noting a willowy frame

and straight blond hair.

"Ruth, Keith, Keith, Ruth."

Keith nodded politely, while Ruth was already directing them toward the table.

He tried not to look at Spencer as someone ushered him toward a seat, but somehow noticed the exact instant when Spencer saw him, anyway. The flow of words stuttered to a halt, and that gaze was like a caress against his skin. His heart raced, pounding so hard he imagined everyone in the bar could hear it, and surely even if that were an exaggeration, Spencer would see his pulse in his throat.

Then Spencer looked back at Mike, continuing his rant.

Keith sat down on Mike's other side, and was momentarily lost in the bustle of ordering drinks and shuffling glasses so everyone had room. It was a fairly large group, large enough that he couldn't easily converse with the people across the table, but he recognized most of them. He was proud of himself for that; it was a far cry from when he and Josh would go out together, and he'd be lost in a sea of strangers who knew him. He was getting better at remembering names and faces. More importantly, he was getting better at getting to know people. This was why he liked small towns: it was harder, though not impossible, to get overlooked.

And he was going for job interviews in Devonsburg. He'd lost his mind.

Still, it wasn't like he was *moving* to Devonsburg...

"No," Mike said firmly, catching his attention. Keith looked over, trying hard to keep his eyes on Mike and not look at Spencer, one more seat down. "If gay people are getting together, they already know there's not going to be benefits. They should just prepare for that. It's not like people are surprising them -- they can get individual health insurance."

"It's not a matter of whether or not they know, Mike," Spencer argued, still somehow keeping his smile plastered on his face. It was brittle, though; now that Keith was close, he could see the strain around the edges. "It's a matter of equality. Is it fair that heterosexual couples get benefits and homosexual couples don't? There's no real difference between them--"

"I don't get benefits at all! At least if one of them's getting benefits, they're doing better than me."

Spencer snorted and took a swig from a green glass bottle. "But if you had a job where you did have benefits, wouldn't you expect that your wife got benefits, too? It's like... okay, what if someone told Johnny he couldn't get benefits for his wife, because he's black? Would you tell him he should have thought about that before he got married?"

"Oh, well now, that's different," Mike mumbled. He glanced sidelong, trying to avoid Spencer's gaze, and caught sight of Keith. "For the love of God! They've got me surrounded. What is this, a conspiracy?"

Keith hadn't spoken to Mike long enough before to form an opinion about the man, but he decided then and there he wasn't impressed. He smiled. "Don't worry. Gayness is only contagious to people we kiss."

Mike gave him a slightly alarmed look, while Spencer barked a laugh.

"Right," Mike said finally. "So, how're you, Keith? Gonna try to convince me about gay rights, too?"

"Nope." Keith sat back as the server arrived, setting a pint down in front of him. "I'm just gonna enjoy my beer."

"Good man, good man." Mike smiled heartily and drank his own.

For a moment, their little section of the table was quiet. Keith itched to say something to Spencer, but his mind was a void. How was he supposed to start anything that didn't sound dumb? How are you? Too generic. What have you been up to? Still generic. Was there anything that wasn't generic? He supposed if he asked something personal -- maybe if Spencer had ever gotten the doctors to check out his fingers and toes. But that reminded him of that night, and he didn't really need the reminder. Neither did he want to remind Spencer.

At last, he decided to just ask *something*, and turned, opening his mouth to talk across Mike.

Spencer looked at him at the same moment, and their words collided and tangled into a mess between them. They both laughed uncertainly. "You go," Keith said.

"I just wondered how Sam was doing."

"He's good!" Keith nodded, too enthusiastic and highly aware of that, but having trouble toning it down. "He needs

something to get through the mud, if you have any ideas..." Except now he'd just invited Spencer back into his life, damn it, and he didn't need that.

"Nothing I can think of." Spencer frowned, leaning forward on his arms and looking past Mike. "I thought maybe really fat tires, but those seem to get caught in the muck, too."

"Yeah. Well, if you think of anything..."

Spencer smiled, and it nearly took Keith's breath away. "I'll keep it in mind. Did you ever get the ramp for the stairs built?"

"Into the inset, or upstairs?"

"Either."

Keith shook his head. "No. It's on my list, but..."

Spencer leaned forward, opened his mouth, then apparently thought better of it and sat back again. "Have you given any more thought to renting out a room?"

"No," Keith said quickly. Then he laughed and elaborated, "I mean, I'm not renting out a room. I don't think I could deal with someone in my house."

"You had someone in your house for years," Spencer said wryly.

Keith shrugged. "You know what I mean." Over his head, Mike struck up a conversation with someone several chairs away. Keith ducked lower, as if that would help sound travel. "What about you? Did that anniversary piece go

over well?" He couldn't remember whose anniversary it was, or what the piece had been, but he remembered that Spencer was working on *something*.

"They loved it." His face lit up, smile showing off his chipped tooth. "Told a friend in New York all about it, and now the friend wants one of my pieces. He's sending pictures of his apartment so I can get a feel for the place."

It was impossible not to grin when Spencer looked so pleased. Keith leaned more comfortably on his arms, mirroring Spencer's position against the tabletop. "I'm glad to hear it. Sounds like it'll be keeping you busy."

Between them, Mike stood up, grabbing his drink and edging around Keith's chair. Keith pulled it in, watching the big man maneuver to the other side. While he was looking away, Spencer scooted over and plopped down in the vacated seat.

"So how about you?" Spencer asked. They were able to speak without shouting, now.

Keith ran a finger through the condensation on his untouched beer, making patterns on the table. "I'm good. I'm busy."

"And you're frowning."

He glanced up, then away from those too-keen eyes. "It's the usual. Problems with the dogs, too much to get done, looking for a job. I have a couple of interviews tomorrow, so hopefully that'll help with the last one, at least." He still didn't know what to do about Sam, though.

"Good luck, then. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Keith grimaced. "I hope so. Now all I have to do is figure out how to fit everything else in around a job. Assuming I get the job." Which was probably a big assumption: he had no experience, even if he could say he was vaguely familiar with the programs. The job market was tight, with many people competing for a single position. He probably wouldn't get the job. The odds were against it.

Spencer laughed, leaning over to bump shoulders. "You look so *gloomy*. It'll be fine."

"Do I?" With a self-deprecating smile, Keith looked up at him. "I can't help it. My face sticks that way."

"You just need to smile more, that's all. Then your face will stick happily, and people will think you've got something up your sleeve."

Mike slid into the chair Spencer had left, leaning toward the both of them. "Hey, Spencer. Okay, I've been thinking about it, and I think there's a flaw in your argument. I mean, you say gays are equal, but they're not. They're a minority. And there's some people who say gays can be cured, so it's not even like it's biological *really*. And even if it were, that doesn't mean it's right. I mean, some people are pedophiles biologically, and we don't say they're right, do we?"

Keith watched as Spencer's smile grew fixed once again. "A pedophile preys on children, Mike. Gay people don't create victims."

"Except like you said, if you don't have benefits and

something bad happens, that's making a victim, right? Wouldn't it be better if gay people just stopped being gay? Maybe we could make a cure."

"It's not a *disease*."

Mike looked smug. "Well now, that depends on who you ask."

"Mike! Do you even *realize* what you're saying to me? That there's something inherently wrong with me, that it's my own fault if I get hurt, that I'm *sick*? You just compared me to a pedophile!"

Heads were starting to turn around the table. Keith sank back into his seat and glared daggers at Mike.

"Don't take it personally, Spencer. It's not that I don't *like* you, I just think maybe it's not natural like you keep saying. Maybe you should think about these things before you decide to be gay." In the face of Spencer's anger, Mike looked honestly surprised. Keith's opinion of him dropped another notch. "You said it's like being born black, but it's not. Black people can't make themselves white, but gay people can just... not date."

"Are you serious? You can look at me, sitting here, and tell me that I should just *not date*?"

"Or be aware that when you do, there are repercussions. You gotta take the good with the bad."

"Do you tell women they shouldn't wear short skirts, because if they get raped it's their own problem?"



Mike glanced at Tamera and Ruth, both of whom were listening now. "Well," he hedged, "no, of course not."

Tamera spoke dryly. "Heaven forbid those evil women tempt those poor rapists."

Mike frowned, looking flustered. Before he could speak, Spencer cut in again. "You're telling me that if a buddy of yours gets picked on for being ugly, you'll stand up for him because he was born that way, but if I get picked on for being gay, it's my own fault for dating."

Mike face twisted as he obviously tried to defend his logic. "Look, Spencer, it's different. I think you should just take responsibility for your actions, is all. If you get into a relationship knowing there could be problems, you shouldn't be upset when there are problems. It's just the way our world works."

Keith leaned forward, quietly catching Spencer's attention. He kept his steady gaze on Mike, though. "No, that makes sense. I got married by the church and everything, but I knew that it might not hold up legally. I might have trouble. So my husband and I went through the paperwork to get life insurance and put everything in both our names, but of course I should have assumed there would be trouble with that, too. That the judge might not be gay-friendly. That my husband's family would have more say than I did, even though my name was on all the papers and they hadn't spoken to him in years. I should have thought of that before he died and I had to start all over. I should have to think about the fact that someone might come and try to take more things away from me. I should have to worry that his relatives might come after the house I'm living in now -- again. I should live my life in fear, because hey, I knew our

country wasn't particularly gay-friendly and I decided not to hide anyway. That makes sense."

Mike flushed a dull red, eyes flicking from one end of the table to the other, looking for support, Keith guessed. The people who would have agreed with Mike were easy to spot: they were looking uncomfortable, ashamed. Keith was under no delusions that his little speech would do more than make them grumble before they put it out of their minds, but he felt better for having given it.

Gently, he reached out and touched his fingertips to Spencer's shoulder. "I'm going to get some air. Would you like to come?"

Spencer nodded wordlessly, scraping his chair back as he stood. They edged out around everyone else, some of whom had tuned into what was going on, others of whom were still chatting with each other, blithely unaware of the argument that had just taken place.

Keith led the way out of the bar entirely, pausing to one side of the door outside on the sidewalk. "I know he's your friend, but--"

"He's an ass," Spencer said, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. His breath plumed out in front of his face, coldly white. "I wonder, sometimes, why I even hang around him. I keep thinking I can convince him if I just keep at it, but..."

"People have to convince themselves."

Spencer shot him a wry smile. "Says the guy who doesn't get involved in politics. How will they get the information to change unless we give it to them?"

This time, Keith shoved his hands in his pockets. He shrugged awkwardly. They stood in silence, growing cold, for a long while. Keith scuffed the sidewalk with his shoe, glancing sidelong at Spencer.

Spencer still looked upset, glaring over the mountaintops far away. Staring at the low stars, bright out here, but still frozen chips of ice.

"I'm sorry he hurt you," Keith murmured finally. As a peace offering, he thought it sucked. It was the best he had.

As if surprised, Spencer glanced over. "Oh. Mike." He scowled and glared at his feet, then back up at the mountains. "He's got kids, you know. I've never met them. At first I didn't think anything about it, but after I'd been here a year and I'd met everyone in the town, it became noticeable. I know he's a homophobe, but I get to talking to him about anything else and it's like... it's like I forget. And then he says something so -- so--" Spencer choked off, looking like he was ready to throttle the next person who walked by. "He's an ass, and I'm surprised and hurt all over again. How can he be friends with me one minute, and like that the next? I just don't get it. It wouldn't be so bad if he were an ass all the time, but he's *not*. I get to thinking we're friends, and then he compares me to a pedophile. Tells me it's nothing personal and, I swear, he really doesn't get why that's upsetting."

He looked out again, over the lake, across the hills. There were lines in his face, faint traces of age around his mouth. Keith had never noticed them before. Spencer had always seemed so young and carefree. Now, though, his eyes were shadowed by more than the night. Keith resisted the urge to

reach out and touch him, just his elbow, to offer some kind of comfort.

"Enough of this," Spencer said. "Let's talk about something else. What has you so stressed?"

Keith startled, looking at him. "I'm not -- okay, I am, but it's nothing, really. Just... life stuff." Spencer looked at him expectantly. "I have this interview tomorrow, in Devonsburg," Keith elaborated. "Several, actually, and I'm not sure what to do about Sam. He'll need to be let out to go to the bathroom, and I don't have a fence, so I can't just leave him outside."

"You could ask a neighbor."

Keith shook his head. "It's too much hassle. And I might as well figure it out now, because if I get a job, I'm going to have to find something to do with him all day." He could almost *see* Spencer resisting the urge to offer help.

"You could just worry about tomorrow, and handle the rest when you land a job." It looked like it took all of Spencer's willpower to say just that.

Keith rubbed his hand back through his hair, sweeping it out of his face. Maybe he should just ask Spencer. Spencer knew how everything worked when it came to Sam, and the dogs liked him. He wasn't intimidated by them, which was important. Spencer obviously didn't mind, and Keith couldn't do it himself.

He wasn't so sure it was smart to invite Spencer back into his life. But he didn't see any other options, either. "Spence," he said, taking a deep breath and focusing on the

dip between Spencer's collarbones. "Would you consider coming by to let Sam out tomorrow? I'll pay you."

"I'd be happy to help out. For free," Spencer said, equally formal, but out of the corner of his eye Keith could see Spencer grinning.

"I'll pay you," Keith repeated.

"Tell me how it went afterward, and that'll be payment. Since I know how little time you have. The price is pretty steep, really."

Keith glared at Spencer. "You are not funny."

"I'm hilarious. And speaking the truth, too." Spencer rocked back on his heels, hooking his thumbs in his belt loops.

"All right, all right. I'll tell you how it went." Otherwise, he'd just try to force money on Spencer, and Spencer would refuse, and they'd end up spending more time arguing.

And besides, maybe it was nice to stand here and shoot the breeze after all. He couldn't deny that he was still attracted to Spencer, whether or not it was too soon or he was too busy. In fact, he wished it weren't quite so nice. Something in his chest had settled and calmed, in spite of the argument in the bar. He felt more at ease than he had in days, and he no longer had to wonder what Spencer was doing. Spencer was right here, and he could see for himself.

God, he'd missed Spencer.

Keith looked away, trying to banish that thought as soon as he'd had it. He didn't miss Spencer. Spencer was a bad idea.

Spencer was--

Incredibly sexy, with his newly colored hair and total disregard for what was considered 'normal.' His T-shirts over a pale thermal, his earrings and tattoo, all the trappings that should make him dangerous and somehow, didn't. Just made him unique.

"You'll be there tomorrow, then?" Keith asked finally, trying to drag his thoughts back to the current situation. "I'll make sure to have dinner, if you want to come back in the evening."

Spencer smiled, and Keith unraveled. "I'll be there. I don't have a key--"

"I'll leave the door open. Not like anyone is going to break in around here."

Spencer's mouth quirked at the corner. "Or with those beasts in the house."

Keith tried not to feel happy at the thought of seeing Spencer again the next night. It was just for the dogs. It didn't mean anything. He didn't have time for anything. "We should go back inside." Because if they stayed out here, he might do something reckless. Like drag Spencer down the alley and do terrible things to him.

"Yeah," Spencer sighed. "I guess." He looked toward the doors, but didn't seem thrilled with actually stepping past them. Just as Keith was convincing himself that the alley idea wasn't so bad after all, Spencer turned and headed back inside.

Thank God.

\*\*\*

The interviews had dragged on for far longer than he'd expected. The second one, though, had led into a third with their office manager. That had lasted a good hour, chatting over coffee in the lounge, everything very relaxed and informal. Which hadn't made Keith feel any less tense.

In the end, though, it had paid off: they'd hired him, then and there. He was to start in two weeks.

To celebrate, he stopped at a Chinese place in Devonsburg -- the closest they had to Chinese in their sleepy little town were the snow peas Sally put in her oriental salad, and the fact that it was called oriental was a sure indication it wasn't -- and picked up enough food to feed a small army. Then he drove as fast as possible to try and get home before it cooled.

As he picked the bag up out of the passenger seat, he felt the bottom. Apparently, he hadn't driven fast enough. He slid out of the SUV and came around to the porch, surprised to see Spencer's truck there already.

He had no idea why Spencer's truck would still be there. He started to run, mind ablaze with all the things that could have gone wrong. Spencer had fallen and smacked his skull. One of the dogs had been torn apart. Sam had fallen down the inset and snapped his spine. The puppies had gotten ill or injured.

He burst through the front door. All four dogs leaped to their feet, barking. Spencer, sitting by the fire and reading a

book, looked up in surprise.

"Hey," Spencer said cheerfully.

"You *bastard*." Finally, Keith remembered to breathe. He wilted onto the chest by the door, batting away the dogs. "I didn't expect you to be here, still. I thought someone had been hurt when I saw your truck."

Spencer started to laugh. "Sorry, no emergencies. I just thought I'd wait until you got home. How'd the interviews go?" He stood and walked forward, backlit by the fire. His hair was deep purple.

Shaking his head in amusement, Keith leaned forward and braced his hands on his knees. In his mind's eye he could still see the way firelight caressed the muscles under Spencer's thermal, the cloth almost see-through, so that he could just make out the shadow of an arm within. He tried to banish it from his mind. "The interviews went well." He sat up again, picking up the oversized bag filled with food containers. "I got a job."

"Keith! That's great!" Spencer cried, just as happy and enthusiastic as Keith could have wanted. Spencer dashed forward, scooping him up in an unexpected hug and lifting him right off his feet. Keith yelped in surprise, then laughed and whacked Spencer with his bag.

"Put me down, dork!"

Spencer dropped him, stepping back to grab his shoulders and grin madly. "So does this mean your worries are solved? No more stress?"



With a snort, Keith broke away and headed for the kitchen, tailed by the dogs. "Hardly. Now I have to find someone to watch Sam. Two days a week I can work from home, but that still leaves three. And soon the puppies'll need more care, and--" He stopped himself, feeling his anxiety rise. Firmly, Keith set the bag on the counter, trying to set down his worries as well. "I'll figure something out."

"Hey, you know, I was thinking about that." Spencer got down two plates, handing them to Keith.

"No. Don't start. Asking you to come over here three days a week is too much."

Spencer held up his hands, backing away a step. "I wasn't going to. I agree; I don't think I could do that. But... Keith, you have, what, three acres here?"

"One and a half. It backs onto the mountain," Keith said, food forgotten as he eyed Spencer suspiciously.

"Cause, I was just thinking, I spend about five hundred a month to rent out a place for my metalwork gear. But if you'd be willing to build a structure here -- say, a garage, which you need anyway -- well, maybe I could rent it from you. Maybe in trade for dog sitting?"

Keith turned to watch Spencer, trying to spot any hint of manipulation. But Spencer seemed honest, and it certainly benefited him. It wasn't giving for the sake of giving. It was more like Keith's desired business model.

And it meant Spencer would be here three days a week. Maybe more, if he had metalworking to do. Warmth curled in Keith's belly at the thought. "We could arrange

something like that," he said slowly, nodding. "I think that might work out well."

"Awesome! I figure it's good for both of us, right? I have some friends in construction, we can whip up a building in a couple of weeks."

"I want to approve the plans," Keith said quickly. "And you have to get permits."

Spencer grimaced, but nodded. "I suppose that's fair."

For a moment they stood, Spencer with his own thoughts and Keith mulling over the prospect. As much as he liked his space, the thought of having someone here again was seductive. And not just someone, but Spencer. Being overwhelmed had skewed his thoughts, and he'd made the mistake of listening to everyone else -- but everyone else didn't know what was best for him. What he was ready for. Only he did.

He'd missed Spencer, these last weeks. More than he'd expected. "I have another proposition for you," Keith blurted out before he could re-think things.

Spencer looked at him and simply waited.

Keith took a deep breath, turning to pull the take-out containers from the bag. "Maybe we could see each other again. Casually." His gaze slid over to Spencer.

Spencer wasn't grinning like a loon, like Keith expected. He looked solemn, and unsure. "Don't you have all the same things going on you did before?"

"I won't have to deal with Sam's accidents, now. And you'll be here, so it's not like..." It sounded wrong to say he wouldn't have to spend extra time driving to and from Spencer's apartment, but that was exactly what he meant. "It's easier."

Slowly, Spencer shook his head and wandered over to the table, sitting down in one of the chairs. "I don't know. If you get overwhelmed again, are you suddenly going to call it quits?"

Leaning hipshot against the counter, Keith stared. He hadn't expected to have to *convince* Spencer. "I--" He hesitated, wanting to give it serious thought, and spoke cautiously. "I can't promise I won't get overwhelmed and freak out. I have a lot to do--"

"You have too much to do," Spencer corrected, "and instead of admitting it and asking for help, you take it all on and then sequester yourself here. Will you ask me for help, or let me volunteer, so that you stay sane and I can see you again?"

"Harsh," Keith muttered. And, ironically, the same argument he and Josh had butted heads over on occasion.

Was it too soon since Josh? He turned, leaning with his back to the counter, Spencer to one side. He didn't think so. He'd believed it, for days he'd believed it, buying into what everyone told him. But it had been more than a year, and even if it hadn't -- how was he supposed to control his heart? He'd missed Spencer. More than he could possibly explain.

He'd missed Spencer, he realized with a jolt, almost as

much as he'd missed Josh in those first weeks after the accident. Despite himself, he was falling in love again.

"I have too much to do," he agreed quietly. "And I'm not very good at asking for help. But I think I might be falling for you, and I want to try." It was the best he could do. He hoped it was enough.

He heard Spencer get up from his chair. Saw Spencer step into his line of sight, feet encased in heavy socks, the hem of his jeans brushing the floor in back, frayed with age. He looked up slowly as Spencer came closer, close enough to touch.

It was Spencer who reached out, though, who placed his hands at the nape of Keith's neck, bringing him close to rest their foreheads together. "Trying is good." A smile played around the corners of his mouth. "Trying is really good."

In the instant before his mouth was caught in a soul-searing kiss, Keith grinned. It was wiped out, along with all thought, as their lips met, long and sweet and rapidly becoming demanding.

Sam barked.

They broke apart, both gazes turning to the crippled dog as he sat by the door, back legs strung out behind him. Spencer sighed heavily. "Okay. I'll take him out to go to the bathroom, and then we'll have sex by the fire. Sound like a plan?"

Keith laughed, cracking up at Spencer's sheer matter-of-fact attitude. "Deal!"

"Come on, Sammy-boy! Let's get you taken care of so I can have hot sex!"

Keith grinned, watching Spencer head toward the door and pick up Sam's hip sling on the way. Maybe he didn't have to do it all himself. And there was sex in his near future. Imagine that.