

A photograph of two shirtless men in a close embrace, with the title text overlaid. The image has a warm, slightly desaturated tone. The man on the left is facing forward, while the man on the right is in profile, facing left. Their bodies are close together, and their hands are visible at the bottom, resting on each other's hips/waists. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

# In From The Cold

Carolina Valdez

## IN FROM THE COLD

...Wendell froze. He forgot to breathe. Warm lips touched the hollow just beneath his right ear and a tongue slowly tasted, savoring him. He closed his eyes as the tonguing changed to a wet mouth trailing kisses with agonizing slowness down his neck to where his sleep top began. Fingers slid beneath the neck and slid across his bare skin, following its line.

“I wore your gift tonight,” Jon said in a voice as rough as gravel.

Mesmerized by the touch of Jon’s mouth and hands, all Wendell could get out was, “I noticed.” When a lack of oxygen threatened to cause a blackout, he drew in a long breath through his nose. Not my soap, he thought. Not my shampoo. Only Jon’s scent. His soap, his shampoo, his arms strong and familiar around me.

*His lips and tongue that I have missed so very much.*

He crossed his arms over Jon’s and became aware of the rock-hard cock pressing against his buttocks and his dick growing long and big in response. That, too, was familiar. He didn’t want to move, to stop the mouth at his neck or destroy the pleasures rumbling inside him. He just wanted to stand there and feel Jon in the stillness, with the blazing fire shooting flickering shadows around them, and convince himself Jon was real and this wasn’t a dream.

Jon released his waist and turned Wendell to face him as his lips brushed over the corners of his closed eyes and his tongue lapped at the tip of his nose before zeroing in to devour Wendell’s mouth. As the kiss deepened and their tongues intertwined in an imitation of penetrating sex, Wendell wrapped his arms around Jon and ran his hands up and down the broad back...

ALSO BY CAROLINA VALDEZ

*Avalanche!*  
*Dark Stranger*  
*Forbidden Desire*  
*Hangin' With My Window Man*  
*Hole In One*  
*In Passion's Thrall*  
*Inhabiting The Night*  
*Knight Of The Captive Heart*  
*Lure*  
*Night Train To Naples*  
*Night Train To New Orleans*  
*Passion's Sweet Ecstasies*  
*Portal To Darkness*  
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*Somebody To Love*  
*Sweet Chocolate Ecstasy*  
*Tears Of The Dragon*  
*Tie 'Em Up, Hold 'Em Down*  
*Twilight*  
*View From The Top*  
*Where Vesuvius Sleeps*  
*Woman In Black Lace*

# IN FROM THE COLD

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BY

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IN FROM THE COLD  
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*To Christiane for her  
information on raising sheep in Great Britain*

# CHAPTER 1

“And now, join me in welcoming the Grammy-nominated American rock band, Boyz Gone Badd!”

Cheers rose as the house lights dimmed and the maroon velvet stage curtain parted. The stage lights were on—smoky and soft. Jon Badd and Mark Winston walked around with their guitars strapped over their shoulders and chests, trailing cords like tails sprouting from Jon’s green Gretsch and Mark’s Fender. Hamilton Garr sat down at the drums, sticks poised. Jon strummed the opening chords, and Mark’s bass filled in as Hamilton’s sticks struck the drums. They were off and running. The amps blared, and Jon’s voice swelled as the music surrounded the fans with sound. They clapped and stomped. Then settled in and listened.

Wendell had heard the band perform in the early days of their

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success, and that they'd grown even better amazed him. Standing in the wings, one hand in his slacks pocket, his emotions soared. A mixture of excitement, pride and love rushed through him any time Jon took the stage, and it had never changed. He'd hoped feeling this way was over for him. Now he doubted it ever would be.

And therein lies my dilemma, he thought.

He watched Jon's muscles—probably toned and strengthened in gyms when they traveled—ripple beneath his tight, gray knit shirt and long sleeves as he played. Gold studs in his ears and a brushed gold-and-stainless steel man's necklace—one Wendell had given him—followed the round neckline of his shirt, reminding Wendell he knew how that same hard chest, naked and young, had once felt against his own. Skin to skin, hands groping and mouths devouring on Jon's bed in his room in his mother's garage, they'd discovered who and what they were.

The memory was sharp—painful—and way too far in the past.

Jon's hairstyle was casual, belying how much it had, no doubt, cost. His straight brown hair had natural blond highlights, and it fell boyishly around his ruggedly pleasing face as he moved while he sang. His music and lyrics touched emotion and mind, wrapping listeners in its magic. The audience swayed and sang along, and Boyz Gone Badd ratcheted the music up as the band and the audience rocked together like a ship on following seas.

It made Wendell ache to see how sensual Jon was without shaking his hips or thrusting his junk at the audience. He would never rip his shirt off or make any move that cried *sex*, and yet, lost in the music, he exuded it, and concertgoers responded to that sleek, unconscious sensuality.

This was the concluding night of the tenth reunion of their senior class at Brooklands High School, and tonight's audience



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was different from those the band would've met on their world tours. These were Jon and Wendell's contemporaries, accompanied by husbands, wives, dates or friends, renewing memories of a fellow teen that nobody had expected, least of all Jon, to find his way to worldwide acclaim.

Wendell sighed. He'd known. The first time he'd sat on the bed in Jon's room in his mom's garage and listened to him sing and play his early music, he'd sensed Jon had something special. At the school dances, the kids usually ignored the DJ or the musicians, but when Jon played, it was different. There were some who stopped and listened or who locked arm-in-arm and just shuffled along, pretending to dance in order to hear him.

Jon had been the kind of guy who drew people to him because of his talent and his energy and drive. In contrast, Wendell, who had worn thick glasses with dark rims, was reserved and loved school. His classmates called him OC for obsessive compulsive because most of them didn't understand someone whose talent was learning and thinking. No matter. It hadn't bothered him. He was who and what he was, and he enjoyed his life.

At least he'd enjoyed it until Jon had left. That had been rough, really rough for a time.

Wendell pulled himself back to the music, letting a foot keep the scorching beat. He agreed with the audience that it was over too soon. He cried a raucous "Encore!" with them, and the band played one more piece, then the curtains closed and the house lights went up. Jon and his band members gathered to talk as they removed their guitars and handed them to the crewmembers who took care of them. Hamilton packed his sticks away.

Someone tapped Wendell's shoulder, and he turned to find a young man in a suit who studied the identifying tag around his

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neck. "Mr. Sams? Mr. Badd would like you to come with me to the green room, please." When he'd opened the door and ushered Wendell in, he said, "If you'd like coffee or tea while you wait, they're here on the counter. Soft drinks are in the refrigerator. Please help yourself. There'll be food at the reception."

Surprised at himself, Wendell realized he was too nervous to drink anything. Five years apart, and he wasn't sure what this reunion with his former lover would be like. Considering how he'd just reacted when he'd seen Jon again, he hoped he wouldn't hurt too much once this visit was history. But he was older this time and more mature. Perhaps it wouldn't be too bad.

The nervousness disappeared the moment Jon and his band burst through the door laughing. Jon had changed into a fresh knit shirt, slacks and a leather jacket in a deep burgundy color. His face brightened and he smiled. "Wendell! Where are your glasses?"

"Lasik surgery," Wendell responded. *Why did my life have to light up at the sound of that voice and Jon's smile? Damn, damn, damn.*

Jon opened his arms, walked right up to Wendell and hugged him. Wendell could feel his muscular strength in that embrace, and he realized how much his once-upon-a-time lover had filled out.

With an arm around his shoulder, Jon said, "Wendell, I'd like you to meet Mark and Hamilton." To them, he said, "Wendell was my best friend in high school. He's a University of California at Davis grad. We haven't seen each other for four or five years, but he still lives here. He vetted everyone for the reception for us."

Wendell smiled as the other band members shook hands with him. "I don't think we'll have any gatecrashers. Especially with the police security you have. The police chief's son was in our class. And we informed everyone this is not the time for autographs."

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Mark and Hamilton laughed, and Hamilton said, “Speaking of autographs, periodically someone tosses their panties or briefs onstage and their owners clamor for Jon’s autograph.”

Wendell grinned. He could understand underwear tossing. Watching Jon perform created a sense of urgency in his dick that hadn’t been satisfied in years, and even as reserved as he was, he might consider tossing his shorts up there, too. Well, not really.

“How in hell am I or either of you supposed to sign autographs in the middle of a show? On someone’s dirty skivvies?” Jon said in disgust.

Hamilton continued to Wendell, “The last big town we were in, as we headed for the buses after a show, a young woman shoved a gel pen into Jon’s hand and yanked up her skirt. One round butt cheek was exposed by her thong. ‘Sign it,’ she ordered. Jon’s face was deadpan as he said, ‘I don’t do asses,’ handed her the pen and walked away.”

They laughed, and Wendell joined in, but he was thinking, You don’t do asses? Unless you’ve changed radically, you definitely do asses. He tried not to think of how many asses Jon might’ve been in, in the years they’d been apart. He pulled himself back to the moment in time to hear Hamilton again.

“You should’ve seen the stunned look on her face. It was priceless. Later, when we were on Jon’s bus drinking beer and eating pizza, Mark stood and pushed his pants down to expose his butt. He stuck it out at Jon. ‘Sign it, baby, sign,’ he mimicked.”

“He told me to pull up my pants if I didn’t want my fat arse kicked,” Mark said.

They all laughed.

Jon responded, “Then Hamilton handed around a can of cashews and said, ‘Nuts, anyone?’ We laughed so hard we almost

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choked on the damned things.”

They laughed again, and Wendell felt that at least for now he was part of the *in* group. He enjoyed the feeling and he felt comfortable with Mark and Hamilton even though they’d just met.

“Are we ready to meet the fans?” Mark asked.

“Lead the way,” said Hamilton.

As they left the room behind the others, Jon took Wendell’s hand and planted a quick kiss on his cheek as he whispered before releasing him, “I’ve missed you, man.”

The kiss not only surprised Wendell, it shot little prickles of heat and went through him. *Damn it again.*

They entered the banquet room through another door, joining the members of the stage and sound crews. After introductions, Hamilton led Wendell to a long table centered by an ice sculpture of an electric guitar. WELCOME BACK, JON BADD read a sign painted in the school colors of purple and gold that hung on the wall behind the table.

“Help yourself. We always eat before they let the fans in, otherwise we might leave hungry,” Hamilton encouraged. “Sometimes we aren’t in a town when the fast food and restaurants are open, and we starve if we haven’t stocked our little kitchens on the bus. Jon lost five pounds on the last tour.”

Jon was right behind Wendell as they walked the length of the table looking at mouth-watering selections of fresh fruits, salads, shrimp, crab and oysters. Living here where the river led to the sea, shellfish weren’t a treat for Wendell, so he filled his plate with deviled eggs, potato salad, tiny ham and cheese sandwiches, strawberries, pineapple, cheese and crackers. Knowing a champagne toast to the class was planned, he picked up a glass of red fruit punch. Its cool sweetness refreshed him. Jon took punch,

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too.

They stood around and talked as they ate.

The man in charge of transportation approached them. “Jon, they have to order the part for your bus. It may take several days.”

“Crap,” Jon said. His brow furrowed, expressing his unhappiness with the situation. He signaled Don, the tour manager, over and spoke to him in low tones.

Wendell heard the manager say, “I’ll get right on it. Maybe we can reschedule some of the places we won’t be able to make now.”

Hamilton’s voice rose over the conversations in the room. “You can sleep on our bus, Jon, but Mark and I won the coin toss and we get the beds. You can sleep on the seats,” he teased.

Wendell spoke without hesitating. “Jon can sleep at my place. My folks are in Europe, and I have extra beds.” Jon’s mom had remarried and no longer lived here, and the one hotel in town was booked due to the reunion and the crew members.

Jon clamped a territorial hand on Wendell’s shoulder. His eyes lit up and his grin was crooked with mirth as he eyed his colleagues. “I’ll take a bed over seats any day, thank you very much.”

That having been settled, talk and laughter resumed. Wendell noticed as soon as they discarded their trash, the bins were carried away and replaced with empty ones. By the time they let the guests in, even the table looked neat and untouched. Wendell saw a group of autographed photos of the band on a table near the door, but when he reached for one, Jon put a hand on his shoulder again and leaned in. “We have something special for you. You don’t need that.” So Wendell left it in its place.

Once the guests were inside, a hum rose in the room as people talked, squealed and hugged. Then he heard the clink of glasses

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and the smell of punch, coffee and wine as people settled in to eat and visit. Wendell enjoyed the event not only because Jon was here, but because although many of his classmates had settled here, some hadn't. He found himself in a knot of friendships being renewed, if only for the night, or with promises for continued contact. Meanwhile, Jon, Mark and Hamilton were the center of the real crush. From the corner of his eye, he watched them charm everyone with a smile, a touch or a laugh.

Anderson Beal, their class president, stepped up behind a speaker's stand and brought them to order. His reminiscences brought cheers, ribald comments and laughter, then he grew somber as they observed a moment of silence for the three classmates who had passed away.

People grew restless as their former principal, now retired, began to talk and talk and...

"He always was a lousy speaker," Jon whispered in Wendell's ear, his warm breath sending little sparks of desire through Wendell.

Wendell grinned because it was all too true.

When the principal had finished at last, the guitar caretaker brought in one of Jon's acoustic guitars, and he led them in the Brookside Senior High School song. Mark's voice rose with Jon's as their voices rang strong and true above those of everyone else.

Marianne Wilkins, class valedictorian and now a Stanford University professor, toasted the class. With a "Hip, Hip Hooray" and the muted click of plastic flutes filled with pale bubbly champagne or sparkling apple juice, they drank to the future and the past.

One of Mark's acoustic guitars had been brought in, too, and he played an introduction to "Auld Lang Syne" as everyone locked

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arms. Wendell reached around the waist of the woman on his right and felt her arm encircle his waist. The man on his left slid an arm around his waist, and as he reached for that classmate, he smelled leather and realized Jon had fought his way through the crowd to reach him. That was why Mark played alone. Jon had wanted to be with his classmates. With him. Wendell's pulse bounded in his throat and rang in his ears as he struggled to sing despite the emotion wracking him.

There were hugs, handshakes and manly back pats before the waiters ushered everyone out. The bodyguards and the police had insured the parking lot and building were secure and, at last, Boys Gone Badd filtered out to their buses.

Having settled where Jon would sleep, Wendell waited inside Jon's bus as he stuffed things into an overnight bag. Nothing on the outside of the sleek, metallic bronze bus would have signaled who traveled inside, and the interior was nice but not elegant. Hamilton had told him tonight that a famous country western singer traveled with his pot paraphernalia openly displayed in his, but there was nothing like that here. Jon was reportedly a heavy drinker, as many rockers were, but that was all. If he ever took a toke now and then, it wasn't advertised.

"Ready," Jon said.

Wendell stepped down onto the asphalt first, and Jon locked the bus.

"Brr," Jon said as they waited in the cold until the tow truck arrived, hooked the bus up and hauled it away to the mechanic's garage.

"My car's this way," Wendell said.

As they approached his vehicle, Jon stopped dead cold. "Car? That's a pickup if I ever saw one. Why in hell'd you bring a

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truck?”

Wendell laughed. “You expected a limo maybe, Mr. Boyz Gone Badd? I’m a farmer, Jon. Remember? And the truck’s warmer than the Jeep. Stop gawking, toss your bag in the back and get in. This is this year’s model and it was quite expensive, by the way.”

“So I should stop grousing, huh?”

“Yes. You’re tired and you’re cold. Get in, please.”

With Jon buckled into his seat, Wendell started the truck and drove out of the lot.

Jon crossed his arms and shivered. “I’d forgotten it can get cold here at night.”

“That leather jacket you’re wearing makes you look to die for, but it isn’t very warm, is it? You’re cold? You, who live in Manhattan and have played places colder than this? It must be sixty degrees here. Nothing like Times Square on New Year’s Eve the first year you hit the Top Ten.”

Jon groaned. “That was a real bitch. We were grateful we didn’t have any brass players because their lips would’ve frozen to their mouthpieces. We were afraid we’d leave the stage with frostbitten noses and fingers.”

Wendell was relieved to hear Jon sigh with pleasure when the heater kicked in. “How’s your mom?”

In speaking of their families, they connected as friends again. It was as if they’d never been apart—as if time had stood still when Jon had left and then resumed right where they’d left off on his return. Wendell smiled to himself.

Jon said, “It’s so easy to talk to you. You wouldn’t know we’d been apart so long, would you? But it has always been that way with us, hasn’t it?”



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“Yes,” Wendell said. *Even, sadly, after you left and you’d only call once in a while.*

The farm came into sight, and Wendell turned onto its drive.

“Your parents have fancied things up.” Jon sat up straighter as they drove through the wrought iron gates that read, Living The Good Life Farm. “That’s my song! You re-named the farm after my first big hit?”

Wendell smiled. “We did. We’re proud of you. My parents love you.” *To my dismay, so do I.*

“That rocks.”

“I know it does.”

“I take it farming brings in money.”

“Nothing like a rock star’s income, but raising sheep produces more than a decent living.”

He pulled up near his house and stopped. As they climbed out of the truck, two dogs came bounding up, tails wagging, bodies eager to jump. Knowing this wasn’t allowed, they controlled their exuberance as they’d been trained to do and stayed down. Wendell bent and scratched the tops of their heads and behind their droopy ears. “Good boys for not jumping. Hungry?”

“They’re so white. Are they labs? I’ve never seen dogs like this before.”

“They’re Maremma Sheepdogs. Great guardians. They stay with the sheep, even sleep with them, and drive off predators. They’re an Italian breed, especially good dealing with wolves, but so far wolves haven’t made it this far west in Oregon. We seldom have anything more major than a coyote or a rare cougar threaten them.

“Let me get you started in my part of the compound before I feed them. Pet them. Then if you’re out and about without me,

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they'll know I approve of you."

Jon let them smell his hands before crouching to scratch their heads and behind their ears.

Wendell placed his hand on Jon's shoulder to let the dogs know he accepted him.

"You're beauties, you know," Jon crooned to them. To Wendell he said, "Compound? You mean you have your own place?"

"I do. Come inside."

Jon whistled when they'd stepped inside a modern, low slung building. "This is new since we were in high school. A house all to yourself?"

"My folks bought more acreage after you moved away. Dad and I built this about three years ago. Gives me independence from my parents because I can come and go as I please. It's far enough away we don't have to interact if we don't wish to." Wendell turned the thermostat up, then lit a match and touched it to a gas burner that ignited a stack of wood in the stone fireplace. "Bathroom's that way, kitchenette's to your right. Make yourself at home. I'll be back in a few minutes."

\* \* \*

Jon had always felt comfortable in Wendell's parents home. Even then they'd had more money than his mother, who, as a single mom, struggled to raise her only child. His dad had been killed when he was little, and Jon had always known he was very special to her. She'd been a waitress in a nearby town, and he'd spent a lot of time alone, comforted and intrigued by his music, but he'd also spent many happy hours with the Sams.

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Now he was in a place that spoke only of Wendell and his tastes, a place that was neat but warm and comfortable. Just like Wendell, he thought.

Nappy woolen rugs, probably woven from the curly wool of the sheep Wendell loved, covered the wooden floors. Paintings of the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest hung on some walls, while shelves filled with books covered another one. Many of them were about sheep and sheep farming, but he spotted mysteries and even some steampunk among the titles.

The furniture was covered with brown and cream leather, and black-and-cream-colored cushions were tossed about on couches and chairs. He smiled when he saw a keyboard hugging a wall in the dining area. Wendell's guitar rested on a stand near it.

Nostalgia flooded Jon as he thought of the man who lived here and the teenager he'd fallen for—a much younger Wendell, sure of himself when the kids called him OC, unflappable when Jon lost patience with his inability to play the guitar fast enough or hard enough.

"Jon, I'm not as good as you. Live with it."

That had squelched Jon's impatience, and he'd shut up.

Eventually, Wendell's hands and tongue had explored Jon's willing body for the first time, pumping his cock as Jon rubbed and pulled Wendell's until they shot jism onto their hands and on bellies slick with the sweat of sex.

Jon smiled as he remembered how they'd rolled onto their backs in stunned silence until he'd said, "Oh, my God, Wendell, I'm gay. You're gay. What'll we do about it?"

In his thoughtful way, Wendell had said, "I don't think there's anything to *do* about it. It's part of who we are." Later, he'd turned and kissed Jon again, his mouth hot, seeking and moist, his fingers

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coaxing and toying with Jon's dick and stroking his balls until all of Jon was on fire from his head to his toes. "Let's just enjoy it."

Much, much later, those fingers had caressed Jon's muscled pucker, and then, lubed, they had slipped inside, one at a time, to stretch and toy, until Jon had exploded and cum spurted onto his belly. Wendell had put his cock to Jon's lips, and Jon had obliged. He'd licked the finely spun stream of pre-cum and sucked his way up the hard cock until most of it was in his mouth, and when Wendell had pumped and unloaded in that hot place, Jon had swallowed the thick deposit, tasting its sweetness.

Now the door banged open, startling Jon out of his reverie. For the first time, he realized his dick had swelled into a rampant cock. There's nothing like a first love, he thought as he shifted until the bulge was disguised.

Wendell stepped inside and stamped his feet on the doormat. "Getting colder out there." He slipped out of a sheepskin jacket and hung it on a brass rack near the door. "Hungry?"

His skin was flushed from the cold, his eyes dark and dilated from being out in the night. He'd grown taller in Jon's absence, and while he was still slender, he was no longer a skinny teen. He was a man full grown. He filled out his clothes in perfect portions. The dark green wool sweater with the crew neck he was dressed in had also probably been knit using wool produced on the farm. As Wendell's eyes adjusted to the light and returned to normal, Jon saw how the green in the sweater emphasized the green in his hazel eyes. Flashes of another memory came to him, of how he'd loved studying those eyes because the colors in them—brown, gold, mustard and green—fascinated him. His own eyes were an unremarkable gray.

"Jon? Are you hungry?"

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“Uh, maybe just a little.” It was difficult not to dwell on past sexual experiences and Wendell’s beautiful eyes.

“If you still like lamb, I’ll warm some up for us. I can open a can of soup and we’ll have lamb sandwiches or just heated slices of the meat.”

Jon, who’d warmed up by the fire, shed his jacket. “Show me the can and an opener.”

They sat on stools at the kitchen bar to a hot meal of soup and lamb. Wendell made coffee for them and sliced Fuji apples and cheese for dessert.

While they ate, they talked about the town and how it had changed, but mostly not changed. Jon wondered why people stayed here in this dull place. The saying was true, he thought, that after you’d “seen Paree,” you’d never come back to live here.

They adjourned with their coffee to the living room couch, and Jon felt his energy draining. He put his empty mug on the coffee table in front of them, leaned back and ran his hands over his face.

“Tired?” Wendell asked.

“Yes, but I’m not sure I can sleep. I work myself up to perform, then I give everything to the audience. Tonight, the reunion keyed me up, too. Sometimes we’re so beat from performing night after night that we don’t allow backstage passes except for relatives of the crew. We make it back to the buses to crash and then we can’t sleep. It isn’t just me; it happens to Mark and Hamilton, too.”

“Want some wine?”

Remembering the nightmare days when he drank too much, Jon said, “I cut alcohol out about two years ago. I stay away from the stuff now.”

“There’s a sunken tub in the master bath. Would that help you unwind?”

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Jon stared at Wendell's feet resting on the coffee table, and followed the line of his legs up to where they ended at his crotch. He swallowed because he wanted to see again what was hidden there. He cleared his throat, "That would be wonderful."

Wendell stood. "Good. I'll get it started and get some clean towels for you. You can sleep in my bed tonight. Once you close the door, you can bathe and sleep in private."

Jon grabbed his bag and followed Wendell into a large room with a huge bed. Wendell turned on the tub water and showed him how to make the jets work. Jon sat on a chest at the foot of the bed to remove his shoes, and Wendell left the room, returning with a stack of towels, washcloths and floor mats. On top was an unopened bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo.

"Think of anything else you might need?"

"I think that does it. Thanks." Something uncoiled inside him, and he thought this wasn't a good idea. The room smelled of Wendell, and the scents hadn't really changed since the days when making love and having hot, driving sex had been so new to them all those years ago. The furnishings in the house were too much like Wendell—understated, secure, and warm.

*And my life is hectic, exhausting and, now that I've been stalked, dangerous. Even though they caught the guy and he's in jail.*

After closing the door to the suite, he stripped, and sank gratefully into the hot, bubbling water. When he'd soaked enough, he bathed. He shampooed his hair and sank fully under the water to rinse off. Stepping from the tub onto a thick bath mat, he toweled off, squeezing the damp from his hair with a fresh towel.

He used the blow dryer.

Clean, dry and in fresh sleepwear, he brushed his teeth and

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tumbled into bed, expecting to be asleep by the time he hit the pillow. Instead, he tossed and ached for the next hour.

He gave up. Throwing back the covers, he found Wendell in his pajamas making up a bed on the couch. He slipped up behind him and slid his arms around his waist. As his lips nuzzled the tender skin beneath Wendell's ear, he whispered, "To die for, huh?"

## CHAPTER 2

Wendell froze. He forgot to breathe. Warm lips touched the hollow just beneath his right ear and a tongue slowly tasted, savoring him. He closed his eyes as the tonguing changed to a wet mouth trailing kisses with agonizing slowness down his neck to where his sleep top began. Fingers slid beneath the neck and slid across his bare skin, following its line.

“I wore your gift tonight,” Jon said in a voice as rough as gravel.

Mesmerized by the touch of Jon’s mouth and hands, all Wendell could get out was, “I noticed.” When a lack of oxygen threatened to cause a blackout, he drew in a long breath through his nose. Not my soap, he thought. Not my shampoo. Only Jon’s scent. His soap, his shampoo, his arms strong and familiar around



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me.

*His lips and tongue that I have missed so very much.*

He crossed his arms over Jon's and became aware of the rock-hard cock pressing against his buttocks and his dick growing long and big in response. That, too, was familiar. He didn't want to move, to stop the mouth at his neck or destroy the pleasures rumbling inside him. He just wanted to stand there and feel Jon in the stillness, with the blazing fire shooting flickering shadows around them, and convince himself Jon was real and this wasn't a dream.

Jon released his waist and turned Wendell to face him as his lips brushed over the corners of his closed eyes and his tongue lapped at the tip of his nose before zeroing in to devour Wendell's mouth. As the kiss deepened and their tongues intertwined in an imitation of penetrating sex, Wendell wrapped his arms around Jon and ran his hands up and down the broad back. Jon thrust his pelvis against Wendell's until they were so tight together he couldn't tell Jon's dick from his. It didn't matter. Melding into him, becoming one with him was all that mattered as erotic sparks shot through him and lust caused his body to quiver.

Someone groaned, and Wendell realized it came from his throat.

Jon must've taken that as a signal to slip his hand beneath the band of Wendell's sleep pants because he was there, and his hard knuckles stroked the tender flesh above Wendell's bush.

"Lower. Go lower," Wendell begged, hungry for and helpless against the sensual onslaught. He rocked his hips from side to side to increase the friction as the knuckles continued to rub.

Jon was trembling now. He slid Wendell's sleep pants down and took his cock in hand.

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“Not here,” Wendell warned, his voice thick and hoarse with what testosterone was doing to his vocal chords. “I’m on the verge.”

“Yes, here,” Jon insisted as he pulled down his own pants and wrapped Wendell’s hand around his tight erection. “I’ve wanted to fuck you for so long I’m not going to let you go. Besides, we have all night.”

Pleasure splintered Wendell, and he exhaled with a groan as he enjoyed those all too brief seconds when everything centered in his groin and drowned his entire body in feeling.

“Oh, God, Wendell. Wendell.” Jon moaned as he came, too.

Later, they wandered to bed, stripped, crawled under the covers and died to the world.

In the deepest part of the night, Wendell roused to the weight of someone, something on his butt, something hard and velvety gliding, sliding in and out of his crack. Something nipped at his shoulder. “Is that you, Jon?”

“Who else, lover?”

He started to turn, but hands captured his shoulders and kept him in place as Jon’s knees forced his thighs apart. Hands rubbed his back as Jon licked his skin, awakening nerve endings running the length of his body. Thinking he should only feel this in his groin, the sensations caused every nerve to spring to life. Awash in feeling, he decided to relax and enjoy it, not to miss even one little flicker of arousal.

As hands and mouth journeyed down his back and spine, muscles were probed and kissed. When the hands parted his butt cheeks and Jon’s tongue circled the tight muscle guarding his manhole, he tried to rise to his knees.

“Not yet,” Jon whispered against his pucker. He blew hot

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breath over the sensitive area.

When hands found his sac and stroked, Wendell begged. “Do me, Jon. Just do me. End this paralyzing torture.”

A low laugh rumbled out of Jon as he slid a hand under Wendell and clasped his dripping cock. “Ready, I see.”

Wendell heard the sound of latex being pulled over Jon’s erection, and he said, “Oh, yes. Yes,” when Jon’s hands reached under his hipbones and tugged upward. Wendell rose to his knees, grunting as he felt the tip of the full, lubed condom tease his pucker. He bore down and pushed back as the head of Jon’s cock slipped in.

“You’re so tight. Feels so good.”

“Not much action there lately.”

Jon pulled out and groaned as the tender underside of the head of his penis slid over the thick muscle.

Wendell tightened his anus to stimulate and increase Jon’s pleasure even more. “Deeper,” he begged, and Jon penetrated until the second muscle inside relaxed and allowed him in all the way.

They rocked together, Wendell pushing back as Jon pressed in, building up until they’d breeched the ramparts of sensation and need. Their balls tightened and bodies shuddered as they pushed and pressed until spasms sent spunk spurting through their cocks.

When it was over, when Wendell had felt the slam into his spine and experienced release throughout his body, they rested before rising to shower. Then they stumbled back to bed and slept.

In the hour before dawn, when he’d have to rise to start his day as a sheep farmer, Wendell wakened with his penis hard and raging. He rolled over and cupped his hands over Jon’s ears, knowing the heat would wake him. He swung a leg over Jon’s and began to fondle his nipples until he felt Jon stir. Rubbing his hands

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hard over Jon's hipbones, he took a nipple in his mouth and tongued it until he felt Jon stiffen and knew he was awake. He sucked, and when his teeth bit down and Jon gasped and lifted his hips in surprise, he grasped Jon's balls and dick and let them fill his teasing hand.

"My turn," he said, reaching for a condom packet and lube. His mouth journeyed down Jon's chest and belly, avoiding his now swollen cock and arriving to breathe on Jon's inner thighs and lick his way up to the spot behind his balls.

Reflexively, Jon drew his legs up, and Wendell pushed into that exposed hole with his fingers, one by one, until Jon pulled him up and guided his slick, sheathed cock in.

They couldn't get enough of each other, and there were oh so many more things they could have done to stimulate and climax, but when they'd reached the stars and the world had shattered around them, they were too worn out to do more.

Not bothering to wash, they fell asleep again.

At the last minute, Wendell forced himself to wake up again, dragged his sore body out of bed and began his day.

\* \* \*

Jon wakened to the smell of bacon and burning wood. A fire blazed once again in the fireplace, and there was a note on the kitchen counter.

*Bacon and omelet in the warming oven. Coffee's made. Bread beside the toaster. Cream, butter and jam in the refrig. I'm with the sheep. Come to me when you're ready.*

It was signed W, and a sketch of where he'd be was below it.

Jon smiled. *Thoughtful, organized and always at work.* It was

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Wendell all the way. He dished up a plate of warm omelet and bacon, poured a cup of coffee and popped bread in the toaster.

It had been so long since he'd had home-cooked food of any kind that he scarfed it down. His cell phone rang just as he'd finished. It was Mark.

"How's it going?" Mark asked.

"Great. Caught up on the town gossip last night, and my stomach's full after a hot breakfast. How long has it been since we had anything like this?"

"We ate at the pancake house—locally owned and not a franchise. It was terrific. Nothing beats small town cooking. We're kinda glad we got stalled here. We were pretty wiped out."

Jon's happiness welled up inside and he laughed. "I'm glad, too. We could've demanded they bring another bus, but that would've taken almost as much time to reach us, and I think the break will do us good. Don's working out a new schedule, and so far, no one's unhappy about our having to reschedule the gigs we're missing."

He approved of their idea to rent a car and do some sightseeing, maybe staying over a night or two somewhere not too far away. "Stay in touch. We may want to practice when you return. I'll see if Wendell can arrange for us to play somewhere and let you know."

After the conversation ended, he made calls to Don and the crew manager to check in with them. His calls finished for now, he plugged in his phone charger, rinsed his dishes and stacked them in the dishwasher, then brushed his teeth. Pulling on his warmest coat, he set out to locate the man who'd set his balls on fire last night. And this morning. And this morning.

He passed areas where the Maremmas were resting among their

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flocks. Their ears pricked up when they spotted him, and one even got to his feet to inspect him. Once he'd decided he wasn't a predator, the dog lay back down.

He had to climb to reach Wendell. At last, he spotted him with a beautiful Border collie whose black and white coat gleamed in the morning sunlight. They were working in hilly terrain, and Jon folded his arms and paused to watch Wendell, who was dressed in jeans, sweater and boots. The jeans cupped his pleasingly round ass— buttocks Jon had squeezed, pummeled and kissed this morning in the throes of passion before slipping into the pucker they protected so magnificently. His eyes and nostrils flared at the thought of it.

At work now with his sheep and the collie, Wendell was all business. Sunlight glinted off his dark hair, and Jon wanted to hug him just to feel his body against his again.

“Mornin’,” he said as he stepped up and kissed Wendell’s cold lips.

“Hmm, your mouth is warm and you taste like coffee,” Wendell said. His smile was broad and welcoming.

“Did you say coffee?” Jon offered a mug to him. “It’s black like you like it.”

Wendell took it and sipped. “Thanks. There’s sun this morning, but the air’s still chilly. It tastes wonderful”—he lowered his voice—“almost as wonderful as you taste, Jon Badd.”

Jon enjoyed the little sexual shiver that traveled down his back and settled in his hole at those words. “Hmm. Maybe we can find time for more tastes today?” Switching the subject, he asked what Wendell was doing and learned he was bringing this flock of sheep down from the more rugged terrain because it was getting colder there. “You said your folks were away.”

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“They’re in Cumbria, in the Lake Country in northwest England, to obtain Herdwick semen for artificial insemination. My mom loved books by Beatrix Potter as a child, and Potter lived in that area. Saved Herdwicks from extinction.”

“And Herdwicks are?”

“A hardy sheep believed to have been introduced there by Vikings in the tenth or eleventh century. The rugs in my house are from their wool, and their meat is mouthwatering—Queen Elizabeth II dines on Herdwick lamb.”

“So you have some here?”

“See the dark one over there, with the broad, square chest? That’s a young Herdwick ewe. Closing on ninety percent.” His eye on the Border collie as it herded the flock, Wendell emitted a sharp whistle.

Jon saw the dog shift its attention mid-stride to a stray and drive it back to the flock.

“You can’t buy Herdwicks from England because about eight years ago a disease wiped out a quarter of the remaining sheep. My mom came up with the idea to use artificial insemination on Soays—another ancient sheep perhaps introduced by the Vikings to one of the islands off the coast of Scotland. We raise Soay. In fact, many of the farms here raise them because they do well in this weather.”

Wendell paused to issue a verbal command to the collie before continuing. “With a little inbreeding, you can produce a pure Herdwick in a few generations. We just sold several ninety percent Herdwick rams for twelve-hundred dollars apiece. The ewes only bring in about two hundred dollars.”

“Ah, females. A dime a dozen.” Jon laughed.

Wendell chuckled, too. Then he made a chirping sound and

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again the beautiful collie rounded up a recalcitrant ewe.

As Wendell worked with the little herding dog among the sheep, Jon heard an occasional *ba-ah*, *ba-ah* from a goat somewhere or the bleating of the sheep he saw a parallel to how Jon and his band created music.

When Jon played, no matter what he did with his guitar onstage, Mark heard it, in the same way as the Border collie heard Wendell's signals, and went with it. Only a musical person could pick up the subtle nuances their guitars added to the songs he sang, could recognize the differences between the recording of that song on the album and what he or she was hearing live. If there was no vocal, sometimes he and Mark jammed, playing off the melody and off one another in something created on the spot, always new, always exciting.

Jon sighed. Wendell was amazing—smart in a way Jon could never be. Jon's heart filled up and threatened to overflow. And what he felt wasn't a groin thing; it was something in his chest, deep inside.

Maybe it was part of the atmosphere of peace he felt here on the farm...a peace he was beginning to connect with his boyhood in this place. And with what he felt for Wendell.

He waved goodbye as Wendell moved up and around the hill in a different direction. He hurried to the house and pulled Wendell's guitar from its stand. He was a vocalist, but there was an entire realm of musical literature without words. *Music is love in search of a word*. Poet Sidney Lanier, a flautist, had said that, and Jon understood it very well. Right now only music could capture all the things he felt about and for Wendell. He reached for the strings and began to tune the instrument that could express them for him.

Concentrating on the music, he forgot the time as it flowed



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around him, carried him along. Then the door flew open, and Wendell shed his boots at the door as he came in for lunch.

Jon stopped playing.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please don’t stop. I love hearing you play.”

Not ready to share yet what he was composing, uncharacteristic shyness swept over the competent, popular Jon. “I was just fiddling around. Something new I’m working on, but it’s eluding me.” He returned the guitar to its stand and greeted Wendell with a hug. They rocked together for a moment, and he felt Wendell’s slimmer tensile strength tight against his slightly shorter but broader frame.

“Hmm, you’re nice to come home to. Lord, how I’ve missed you. In the past five years, all we’ve shared is an occasional phone call across continents over lousy connections. I wrote you,” Wendell said as his lips brushed Jon’s cheek.

“And I seldom wrote back. You know I hate writing. I don’t have the patience for it. Also, touring doesn’t offer much down time or a place for using pen and paper.”

“I know. I forgive you; writing letters is me, not you. What would you like for lunch?”

Jon ran his fingers through Wendell’s hair. “But whenever we talked by phone, we picked up where we’d left off. We have a thing about that, don’t we?”

Wendell stepped out of the hug. “Yeah, we did and we do. Now, tell me what you’d like for lunch.”

They sat down to sandwiches piled high with thick slices of ham and cheese, lettuce and tomatoes. Afterwards, Wendell took him on a tour of the farm.

“I have a break now, so I’ll show you the rest of the farm. Some of the terrain is rugged, but we can take the Jeep this time.”

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They drove into the hills to a point where Wendell stopped and they got out and looked out over the farm from a small promontory.

"I had no idea it was so big. In high school, I hung out mostly in the house. At that age, it's all about yourself." Jon grinned. "Although it seems to me we had sex in that barn a couple of times." He pointed.

"Yes, the one farthest from the house. Or from wherever Dad was working."

"Remember how exciting it was—scary, too—to fuck in your bedroom while your parents were two rooms away watching TV?"

"God, we had to be so quiet and secretive about it," Wendell said.

"Forbidden sex always ups the ante. Made us wild for each other. Standing up with only our flies unzipped and our cocks peeking through the openings to our skivvies. At any minute, we could get caught, but if we'd had warning and weren't too close to spurting, I recall we'd planned to cover ourselves lightning fast. We were stupid enough not to use condoms to hide the scent of what we'd done. I remember we had to open the window afterwards to air it out."

"Remember how we used to jerk off to see how far we could shoot our cum?"

They laughed at their teenage antics.

"Did you know eight percent of sheep are homosexual?"

"You're serious? That's amazing."

"But true." He pulled them to a stop and twisted around to angle in and capture Jon's mouth as he flicked his tongue deep inside.

"You're making me horny, lover. Sorry. The digression was

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my fault. Must've been the sight of this sexy butt of yours filling out your jeans." Jon reached his free hand around to squeeze one globe. "Tell me more about the farm."

"Dad bought more acreage, but we always were one of the largest farms around here. We have a thousand head of sheep and about fifty goats. We sell goat milk to cheese makers."

Jon could see fences and rough patches of gravelly areas, which he'd learned helped keep the hooves of the animals worn down. Scattered throughout were barnyards and leans-tos where they could take shelter. He whistled. "This operation takes a lot of work, doesn't it?"

"It does. Dad and I can't begin to do it all, so we've hired people to help. I do the basic husbandry recording of the lambing, etc., and I order supplies and check and sign for deliveries. We have a bookkeeper who handles the financial stuff."

"But you could do that, too, couldn't you?" He had no doubt this smart, quiet man could.

"That's part of what I learned earning my agricultural degree at the university, but I don't have time for it."

"Or for your music either, I see. I had to dust off your Gretsch." He hadn't meant his voice to sound a little disapproving, but it did.

"Don't think it isn't special to me. I love it and I played it a lot in the early years after you sent it, but working here has taken more and more of my free time."

"And when I didn't write and stopped calling, it didn't seem like there was any point in playing it anymore, huh?"

Wendell squeezed Jon's ass in response. "Tell you what—tonight I'll play keyboard and you can play my guitar again, the beautiful guitar you sent after your first hit."

Jon wondered if Wendell realized the beautiful guitar had cost

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over four thousand dollars. He hoped not. The money had meant little to Jon. The gift had, in a way, been an apology for fussing at Wendell because he couldn't keep up when he and Jon played. Inwardly, he laughed at himself. Somehow he must have thought a better instrument would make up for slow fingers.

They drove back to the compound, and Wendell walked him through the different processes of sheep farming, greeting workers as they went and introducing Jon to them.

“This is where they perform artificial inseminations.”

Jon peered into room with a cement floor and only a little counter space. It didn't seem unique. “Will I see one?” He liked the idea of AI. It seemed very sensual, similar to a stallion mounting a mare.

“No. A professional comes in, and it's not a pretty picture. Trust me. You wouldn't be interested. There's nothing the least bit sexual about it.”

Jon threw his head back and laughed. “You just read my mind. You do that, you know.”

“I do, don't I? I guess it's okay as long as I don't start completing your sentences.”

## CHAPTER 3

Wendell had avoided using Jon's last name as he'd introduced him to the staff. It was well known that his band had played at the reunion, but Jon was here to rest, not to sign autographs or be bothered by questions. Besides, he admitted he wanted him all to himself. Soon his bus would be ready and he'd leave. *Maybe for always.* That thought was so painful he clamped down on it. He wouldn't allow it to ruin these precious hours with Jon. He would deal with the loss after he was gone.

"Come on," he said, "you can help me feed some of the animals. We let them graze from dawn to dusk, and there are salt licks in the fields, but we also feed them other minerals and grains they need."

Jon dug right in, taking directions easily, talking to Wendell as

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they arrived at the feeders. As Wendell expected, the Maremma livestock guardian dogs treated Jon with acceptance.

“We don’t play with them or become affectionate because they need to bond with their flocks in order to understand their jobs as guardians. They actually feel nervous if we take them away from the livestock,” Wendell said as they left the area.

As they walked back to his house, Jon took Wendell’s hand and squeezed.

Wendell squeezed back. “I’d like to take you out to dinner tonight. There’s a place in a neighboring town with scrumptious food where I don’t think you’d be recognized.”

Jon’s silence puzzled him. Releasing Wendell’s hand, he wrapped his arm around his shoulder and said, “Can we cook here and just hang loose? I’d like to spend as much time with you as I have.”

Chills raced down Wendell’s arms. “Now I think *you’ve* read *my* mind. I’d much rather be here with you, but I don’t have much food on hand. Let’s see what I do have. We could always raid my folks’ larder if necessary.”

Wendell heard cupboard doors opening and foodstuffs being moved about. Jon said, “I found three boxes of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese in the cupboard over the stove.”

Wendell frowned at the inelegance of boxed mac and cheese, an old college days’ staple, then brightened. “We’ll add more cheese. Look in the breadbox. I think there’s some sourdough for garlic toast. I have bags of lettuce. And here are tomatoes and some green beans from Mom’s garden that are in pretty good shape.”

“That’ll do it.”

He made a pot of strong tea, and while it was steeping, they

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slathered the bread with garlic butter and toasted it in the oven. Jon grated more cheese while Wendell added the pasta from the Kraft boxes to boiling water, then washed and snapped the green beans while it cooked. Jon cut up the tomatoes for the salad, and before they knew it, they were seated at the counter on bar stools again, stuffing themselves.

“Do you like it here?” Jon asked.

“Very much. My parents were thrilled that I wanted to stay once I graduated.”

Jon nodded without responding.

They worked side-by-side cleaning up and starting the dishwasher, easily talking together as they had in high school. Only now it was reminiscences, mostly funny things that had happened. Wendell noted how carefully they skirted around their breakup. Both were unwilling to revisit the unpleasant part of their past. When they'd finished, Wendell lighted the logs in the fireplace. Jon lifted the Gretsch and plugged it into the amp, while Wendell pushed the keyboard away from the wall and hooked it up.

Wendell let the music flow over him as they sang. They had always loved making music together. He was better on the keyboard than the guitar, and while Jon began with the hot rock 'n' roll songs he played onstage, he seemed to sense when it was time to morph into ballads, slower pieces with a tempo that made it easier for Wendell to keep up. As evening gave way to a soft darkness, Wendell stopped playing and just listened to Jon.

He watched the flicker of firelight across the highlights of Jon's hair, the inward and serious look on his face and studied his fingering of the guitar. Wendell remembered the rough feel of those fingers gliding across his body, then penetrating him, and he

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could almost taste the piercing sweetness of his orgasms with this one-of-a-kind man. A tide of love rolled through him.

Aware Jon was singing softly again, he turned his attention to the song and heard a new melody and new lyrics.

*“Come to me  
Sleep with me  
All night in my bed.*

*“Touch me  
Let me love you  
All night in my bed.”*

The notes ended and the music faded to memory in a stillness broken only by the occasional crackles of the fire.

Wendell walked to him, lifted the Gretsch and replaced it in its stand. Turning to Jon, he whispered, “Yes,” and opened his arms just as Jon reached for him.

\* \* \*

The quality of their coming together changed. Was it the threat of the end of what they shared in this interlude driving them to frenzied passion? They ripped off their clothes as their mouths clashed and their tongues dived into mouths to taste and drink the hot wetness, to know the essence of the other. Jon slid his fingers into Wendell’s ears, triggering a groan of excitement. Wendell’s hands clawed down Jon’s back from neck to ass.

There were no chubs, just fully filled, fat hard-ons as they grabbed butts and thrust to grind their cocks together against



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rocking pelvises before throwing themselves on the bed.

Jon broke the kiss and covered Wendell. He explored Wendell's chest with his mouth, licking its faint saltiness, glorying in its smooth skin. He squeezed and kissed his firm pecs, flicking his tongue across his nipples before grazing his teeth over them as they erected under his onslaught like sentinels of sensation from the dark encircling hairs. He took first one and then the other in his mouth and sucked.

Wendell lay still, and Jon laid his ear across that chest and listened to his heart as it beat wildly beneath him. The beats penetrated him, and tingling began, spreading through his arms and fingertips, through his gut and down to his very toes.

When he licked down and into Wendell's belly button, Wendell took Jon's hand and wrapped it around his cock as he grasped Jon's stiff and oozing dick. There was no longer any need to hold back. They pulled...one...two...three, four...five...six, and time ran out to fondle or suck balls as their testicles tightened and convulsed, shooting cum as Wendell and Jon exploded in orgasms that rolled and rocked them both.

Drained, they lay together, gasping from air hunger and the excitement that had brought them clashing to the crest of passion, driving them over the edge as their hearts thundered as one to ecstasy.

They separated and moved apart to sleep, all desire for sex erased. It was the kind of exhausted sleep no man had to explain to another man—only to a female partner, who saw it as a rejection instead of a primordial biological response.

Jon wakened to the sound of the shower being shut off. Naked, he left the bed and walked in on a nude Wendell, who was toweling off.

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“What?” Wendell said, his towel still in hand, his dark hair gleaming and dripping.

Jon crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. “I had a yen to see you in the buff. I know you’ve displayed the most important parts to me, but I was too busy at the time to view them well. I want to see all of you.”

Wendell straightened, dropped his towel and spread his arms, palms facing Jon. “What you see is what you get.” He did a complete turn. “Hope you like it.”

“Yum. I think I’ll take it. Especially that tight end.”

Wendell studied Jon. “You’ve always had more hair than I do. An interesting phenomenon considering my hair is darker.” He dropped his gaze to Jon’s groin. “You’ve filled out...especially in the dick department.”

“Speaking of pricks, I’d say you’ve grown there, too, Mr. Mouthful.”

“If you’re trying to seduce me into morning sex, Mr. Badd, I don’t have time, sad to say.” He stepped over to give him a quick kiss, picked up his towel, rubbed his damp hair and reached for the blow dryer.

Jon grinned. “Well, lunchtime’s always great for quickies. On the more serious side, when Mark and Hamilton return, is there a place we might rehearse?”

“Let me give it some thought. My place is probably too small, but I’ll find somewhere for you, providing I get to watch.”

“I can arrange that.” By this time, the sight of his lover naked had caused his dick to fill until it was standing straight out. Jon locked his hands behind his neck and tightened his abs. His cock jerked at Wendell as if waving goodbye. “Until next time,” Jon said.

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“Hell, I taught you that trick when we were fourteen.” Wendell burst out laughing so hard he had to double over to catch his breath.

“Best trick anyone’s ever taught me,” Jon said as he backed out grinning and closed the door behind him.

Throwing on some clothes, he decided to fix breakfast. The brisk morning air triggered the idea that hot cereal would be good for Wendell because he’d be working in the chilliness, so he rummaged through the cupboards and found a box of Old Fashioned Quaker Oats. The raisins in the Sunkist box he uncovered were pretty dry, but they’d puff up, he hoped, as they cooked. He tossed them in with the oats and sprinkled cinnamon over everything.

*Man, talk about domesticated.* He set up the coffee and punched the on button, then stirred the roiling oats in between emptying the dishwasher and setting the table.

Peace settled over him as he put out flatware for them. A new tune danced in his mind, and he hummed it as he worked, eager to get to the keyboard.

He hadn’t heard Wendell arrive until he squeezed his shoulder and brushed his lips across Jon’s neck. “Even unshowered you taste good, Jon Badd. And look at this breakfast. Having you is better than having a wife.”

Jon’s throat tightened at the last words as the kiss sent ripples of pleasure through him. A wife...in a nation where it was rarely possible for them to marry and be husbands together. Jon shook his head, poured the coffee into thick mugs and ladled cereal into bowls.

“There’s brown sugar in the cupboard next to the sink,” Wendell said. He pulled a carton of cream out of the refrigerator

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and cut up bananas to accompany their meal. “It’s a treat having you up so early sharing breakfast with me.” He leaned around and kissed Jon on the lips. “I don’t think I’ve heard that tune before.”

“It’s new,” Jon said between bites of cereal and sips of coffee that added to the warmth he felt because Wendell was beside him. “I’ll have a go at it until I come out to you, okay?”

They loaded the dishwasher together, and Wendell pulled on a lightweight jacket and left.

Jon showered and dressed, then spent a couple of hours working on the two new tunes he had in his head. Not long before lunch, he reluctantly returned the Gretsch to its stand and headed outside to find the guy he loved. For the first time he could recall, he was annoyed he’d let his music interfere with something important—the little time they’d have together until he continued with the tour.

Ten years of occasional one-night stands, broken attempts at maintaining any kind of a love relationship, and the stresses of touring had driven home with patient slowness the truth that Wendell—his first love—was the man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. This homey scene might not replicate exactly anywhere else, but its peace was what he wanted. It was a sort of *Stop the World— I Want to Get Off* thing, and he knew who he wanted when he stopped running on the damned hamster wheel.

All of a sudden, he’d needed to be with Wendell again. His music could come later. He mustn’t squander any time they might have together before his bus was repaired.

He found him in the hills again, alone with the Border collie and his sheep, bringing down what must be the last of those in the high country. Before Wendell noticed him, Jon stood and watched the tall figure, his dark hair covered by a hat. He was dressed in a

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turtleneck shirt and a heavy crew neck sweater under the jacket, and his butt and thighs strained his oft-washed jeans.

Talk about to die for, he thought.

The collie came to Wendell, who knelt to pet and praise the dog before signaling him away again.

Love flooded Jon's emotions and being. "Hi," he said.

Wendell turned and his face broke out in a wide smile. He extended his hand, and Jon walked up and wrapped Wendell in his arms. They kissed, and Jon held the kiss for a long time, licking the inside of Wendell's mouth, then tracing the line of his lips and slipping his tongue into the pocket between Wendell's lower lip and his teeth. He bit that lip with supreme gentleness as he slid hands around to grasp the firm globes there. "You have a great ass."

"Yours is pretty appealing, too," Wendell said. "Did the sunshine and added warmth today bring you out?"

"Just needed to be with you."

"Oops, here comes a ewe. Better get out of her way."

Jon looked at the big patch of green on the back of the creamy curls of her coat. "She looks as if someone has used food coloring on her."

Wendell laughed. "That's the mark of the raddle saddle. Have you forgotten?"

"And that is—"

"We put a chalked saddle on the chests of the rams so when they mate it leaves a color telling us the ewe has been bred and we can estimate when she'll have her lamb."

"Yes, I'd forgotten, but it's coming back now." The vision of a ram mounting the ewe blossomed in full color in Jon's mind, and he was instantly hard and in full lust cry. "I want *you*. Now."

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“What—”

Jon was already fumbling with Wendell’s button and zipper. He ran his hand over the growing bulge inside those pants and grunted with triumph. “I’m going to fuck you just like that ram did the ewe.”

Wendell clutched at his trousers. “One of the men might look up and see us.”

Jon couldn’t control the guttural sound of his throat. “Stimulating, isn’t it?”

“What about a plane or helicopter?”

“Let them look. Maybe they’ll come in their skivvies watching us or fuck their wives when they go home.” Grabbing Wendell’s hand, he yanked him around behind a large gray boulder. Pulling a packet out of his pocket, he said, “Help me get this damn thing on.”

Jon looked down on his cock, the engorged vein running its length fat and blue, his crown purple, and was suddenly proud of it length and breadth. A thin thread of pre-cum already dangled from it. He pinched the tip of the condom while Wendell rolled it to the base. The feel of those fingers sent a surge of excitement through his belly, through his package to his pucker.

“Get your pants down and bend over.”

Wendell pushed jeans and briefs to his knees and knelt with his ass high in the air, hands spreading his cheeks so Jon could see his bung hole.

Jon almost stopped breathing at the sight as he pushed his own clothing all the way down. “Shit. I don’t have any lube.”

“God, just do me, Jon. I’m so hot, I can’t wait...don’t care about easy. Rough will do.”

Jon knelt and reached under to fondle Wendell’s balls and

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cock, feeling as if someone had lit a blazing fire inside him. This was his man, and the sight of that waiting hole did it for him.

Through gritted teeth, Wendell said, "Hurry. Just shove it in."

As much as he wanted to slam it, he was careful. He wouldn't injure Wendell for the world. Wendell pushed back as Jon entered past the first muscle, then the second. He anchored Wendell to him by holding his hipbones, then he closed his hand around Wendell's dripping cock, tugging and pulling until he felt Wendell push hard several times and cry out, caught up in the throes of his climax.

Jon pumped and pulled back and pushed in several times in earnest until his own orgasm roared through him. He held onto his lover until their bodies had quieted, then kissed Wendell's neck as he slowly withdrew.

Wendell straightened his clothes and then stood to lean back on the boulder, eyes closed. "When you mentioned noon quickies, I didn't know this was what you had in mind."

"Maybe I should burst into song; the hills are alive with the sound of fucking?"

Wendell laughed, and Jon joined him on the rock. The sun was warm, and the sky was clear and blue. The sounds of their laughter mingled with the faint sounds of the farm and its animals below.

Suddenly serious, Jon asked, "Was that good for you?"

"I can't believe you're asking that. Couldn't you tell by how noisy I was?"

They laughed together again.

Jon pushed away from the rock and removed his condom, careful to keep its contents inside.

"Don't litter. That would be a terrible shock if one of my workers found it up here, especially knowing you and I were here together."

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They grinned.

"I confess I hadn't thought of doing you here until I saw the chalk on that ewe, but I seem to have so little control over my feelings for you that I did come prepared." He slid the condom back into the tiny packet, which he slipped into a small plastic bag. He drew Kleenex from his pocket and handed some to Wendell. Together they tidied up.

They stood for a moment enjoying the silken air and sunlight.

The Border collie began a frantic barking.

"A sheep's in trouble," Wendell said as he rushed out into the grazing area and headed around boulders to the sound of the bark. Jon followed.

The leg of a lamb was trapped among some rocks. The rocks were smeared with blood. From her black coat and broad square chest, Jon thought she was part Herdwick and so especially valuable to the farm's goal of developing a full-blooded Herdwick. She bleated, and the sound was so pitiful Jon ached for her.

Wendell knelt beside the injured lamb. "Good boy," he said to the collie, who continued to bark as the lamb bleated. Wendell spoke softly to both. Removing a tool from his jacket pocket, he used it to dig at the ground until he'd pried up the sharp rock that had trapped and sliced the leg of the young sheep.

Before the lamb could scamper away, Wendell scooped her up and put pressure on the open cut with one hand. He headed down the mountain.

Back in the farm's main yard, Wendell yelled to another worker to assist.

"I feel useless. Can't I help?" Jon asked.

"And risk injuring your hands? No, Cruz here knows what to do. Even this young, the hooves are sharp." He led the way into a



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large room set up like a veterinarian's exam room.

The men put on waterproof aprons and latex gloves. Jon watched them restrain the lamb, shave the wound area and wash it. Wendell evaluated the cut, and he and Cruz discussed using some kind of powder that kept flies away. He felt a little sick as Wendell stitched the wound, but, fascination with his lover's skill with the animals and how he related to the workers prevented him from turning away. It was a side to Wendell he hadn't experienced.

After the suturing came antibiotic ointment and dressing and wrapping the wound.

Wendell discarded his gloves and carefully washed his hands and arms at the big sink in the room. He removed the washed down apron and hung it on a hook.

Cruz carried the treated animal to a small pen in the barn.

Jon wanted to hold Wendell. To cradle him in his arms and tell him how amazing he was, but this wasn't the time or the place.

It was getting on toward dinner now, so they went back to the house and ordered two large pizzas.

After they'd eaten and cleaned up, they sat on the couch and held hands while they watched a thriller on TV. After their wild sexual congress on the mountain, neither felt the need for sex again.

There were two interruptions. One was a phone call from the mechanic informing Jon the bus would be ready the next day. The other was from Hamilton telling him they were back in town and asking if they were rehearsing tomorrow.

"No. I think we'll be on our way in the morning, so there's no need to rehearse before we hit the next gig and do sound bites."

After he hung up, Wendell said, "You're leaving tomorrow?"

"In the morning sometime. They'll bring the bus to the gates to

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pick me up.”

“You can do your laundry tonight. Start out with clean clothes.”

Jon sighed. “Well, I definitely want to start out with clean undies, don’t I?”

When the movie ended, they rose and undressed for bed. Jon lay on his back and pulled Wendell over on him so they lay naked chest to naked chest.

## CHAPTER 4

Wendell lay with his head turned to the side and only his chest splayed across Jon's. Jon's arms were around him, and his fingers rubbed his scalp as he toyed with the strands of Wendell's hair. The heat from Jon's chest, the stroking fingers, the closeness, all felt good.

He could feel the vibrations of Jon's voice through his chest as Jon said, "Come away with me. Live with me."

Wendell stiffened. "Whoa. Where did *that* come from?"

He could still feel Jon's voice resonate in his ear as his arms tightened about him as if to keep Wendell from escaping.

"I've thought about this a long time. I don't want to lose you. I'm sick of touring eleven months out of the year, of being a gypsy trying to catch some sleep on a bus, rarely getting a good shower

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or a decent night's sleep. I'm tired of long plane flights, food poisoning and worrying about my guitars and equipment being stolen, lost or damaged in transit.

"I have a friend in New York who's a concert pianist. Somewhere in one of the Latin countries they lost his Steinway when he was on tour, if you can believe it. If they can lose a grand piano, think what could happen to our instruments, amps and stage set. It's not easy to find a new guitar with the feel and sound you love...even if it's custom built.

"We fired our first business manager for stealing from us. We were young and inexperienced, and he tricked us into giving away the rights to two of our earliest and most successful songs."

"That's lousy. Any hope of getting them back?"

"We're in litigation, but so far the attorney thinks probably not."

"That sucks. It really does. As for this quitting thing, what do Mark and Hamilton think about it?" The idea was bad news in his personal opinion.

"We've talked about it a lot. They're as sick as I am of running like hamsters on a wheel. It blows our minds that Hamilton not only found time to marry someone, but to actually have a honeymoon. Mark and I have no one. We tease Hamilton that, because he married his high school sweetheart, so he didn't have to look."

Wendell's pulse hummed, then slowed as pain rippled through him. *And now you're with your high school sweetheart. You don't have time to hunt for someone else, so I'm it?*

Shutting down his disappointment, he said, "To be honest, I can't see you folding up the Boyz Gone Badd tent and stealing quietly off into the night. You're a musician, Jon. The stage is your

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milieu, just as I'm a farmer and sheep farming's mine."

"I've reached the point where I want a life of my own. Play occasional gigs, maybe even do short tours, but not this bone-jarring, emotionally demanding thing we've done for the last ten years. Don already has a few gigs scheduled for next year and before he arranges any more, we need to tell him to stop if that's what we want."

"If you cut back too much, people may forget you. It's the out of sight, out of mind phenomenon."

"With the bone weariness we're experiencing now, it's hard to care. We've made our fortunes, so money wouldn't pull us back into this."

No, Wendell thought, but missing the limelight and performing your music to a live audience would.

Jon's fingers stroked his back absently. He ran one fingernail from beneath Wendell's earlobe down to the hollow in his shoulder, and smiled as he sensed the electricity he'd created when Wendell's body reacted. "It's cold out there. Friendships are the hale-fellow-well-met kind—shallow and disingenuous. Did I tell you that for the past two years I was stalked by a real crazy? He's in prison now, thank the good Lord. I knew at any minute he could get to me despite our bodyguards. If I wasn't safe, then Hamilton, Mark or any of the rest of my crew wasn't either. I tell you, the stress almost drove me back to alcohol."

Wendell reached for his stroking hand and kissed the palm. "The thought of something happening to you terrifies me. So, okay, I understand why you want to cut back, but I can't move to New York City."

"Why the hell not?"

"What would I do in New York while you're off playing

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guitar? I'm a farmer."

"You can hear symphony, opera and great jazz in that city. There's theater, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Yankees, the U.S. Open, ice-skating in Central Park and a world famous art museum. You name it; New York City has it. Wendell, you're more than just a farmer. You turned down acceptances to Princeton, Dartmouth and Yale." Jon's excitement grew as he talked.

Wendell winced, then gentled his voice, as if explaining to someone too world-wise to understand. "I only applied there to please my parents. Of course I turned those universities down. I chose to study agriculture and animal husbandry at one of the best schools in the country for it because I love farming. Because it's as much me as your music is you."

He felt Jon's energy surge as a new idea came to him. "There are farms upstate. We could live in the suburbs, in New Jersey. I'd take the train into NYC if necessary. Everybody does."

"I think you've forgotten what the weather's like here in Brooklands. It can be windy and overcast, and we get a lot of rain, but it rarely dips below sixty during the day even in the winter. The winters can be terrible on the east coast. How people farm in the east's relentless blizzards, ice and snow is beyond me."

"New Jersey's much warmer than the city. We can take a tour and see what things are like. I'll buy a farm for you."

"Jon, listen to me. Hear me. This is my home. Unless your band is playing, I'm not a nightlife kind of person. My friends are here, and my parents and grandparents. I own part of this land, and my dad needs me. If you and I are to be together, you need to come to *me*. Live with *me*. Go off and do your thing when you need to, but come home here to me."

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In the long silence that followed, Wendell's stomach began to ache with dread. Jon didn't seem to understand who he was, what he was.

"I thought you loved me." Jon's voice was flat. Lifeless.

"I have loved you *forever*."

"Then why—"

"You left, remember?" Wendell tried to keep the edge of bitterness from his voice, to be calm and logical about something so important.

"Had to leave to follow my dream."

"Just as I followed mine, too. But later." *After seeing me grieve so deeply for a year after you'd left, my parents were eager for me to reject the other college offers and attend the university at Davis, desperate for anything that might help me recover.* He understood about following your dream, but he couldn't stop himself bursting out, "Okay, you made your musical mark in the world, but now you're here, burned out and exhausted. You don't have time to look for a life partner, so, like Hamilton, you decided on your old high school lover?"

"But—"

"I *know* how I feel. I'm not convinced what you think you feel for me is real or just an interlude. Look around and see who I am. Face it, Jon. I don't fit New York like you do. I can't risk uprooting myself from this place where I'm happy when I know I don't fit big city life."

He pulled away and left the bed. He went into the bathroom and shut the door, then doubled over, arms across his chest, against the agony ripping through him.

After a few minutes, Jon rapped on the door. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just attending to business here." He unrolled tissue

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as if he'd needed it, tossed it in the toilet, then pressed the handle and watched the swirling water carry it down and away. That's my love life, he thought, down the toilet. In washing his hands, he splashed cold water on his face and dried it with a towel, holding the towel up to dry the tears in his eyes.

Jon opened the door slowly and peeked in. "Wendell, let's not quarrel. It's tearing me up to know I have to leave tomorrow. Come to bed and sleep with me. Please?"

He reached for Wendell's hand. Wendell took it, threading his fingers through Jon's as he led him to bed. But a glum atmosphere had settled over them. Passion had fled. They slept restlessly in each other's arms.

Wendell slept until half past eight the next morning. He wakened to the sound of Jon singing in the shower. If there was anything he felt less like doing than saying goodbye, it was singing.

He forced himself out of bed and peered out the window. Wind shifted gray skies, hiding any hint of the sun. It was going to be chilly.

He stumbled into the bathroom after Jon had finished. By the time he'd showered and dressed, Jon had breakfast ready.

"The bus should be here about ten-thirty this morning." Jon left the room after they'd finished the dishes. When he returned, he presented a wrapped package to Wendell. "This is for you. I have one more thing, but it's in the bus."

He tore open paper featuring guitars in all sizes and colors, and a framed professional photograph of the band and crew stared up at Wendell. Everyone had signed it, and his throat tightened as he noticed the biggest scrawl of all—*Love, Jon*. His smile was a little rocky as he said, "It's wonderful. Thanks ever so. I'll hang it in



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this room. Where we played and you sang again.”

A strained expression walked across Jon’s face, as if his memories no longer brought the pleasure they’d shared that night.

A bus honked on the road just beyond the gate.

“Do you have everything?”

“I think so.”

“Let me check.”

A second bus could be heard as it rolled up and honked.

Jon, overnight bag in hand, wrapped his arms around Wendell and crushed his lips against his. Against his will because he was hurt and angry, Wendell responded hungrily, and they clung together until both horns burst out in tandem on the morning air.

Jon tried to pull him out the door, but Wendell shook his head. “I can’t watch you go. This way I can pretend you’re still here.”

Jon planted one last quick kiss on his mouth. “Think about New York.”

Then he was out the door.

Wendell listened for the pneumatic shoosh of the doors closing and the strain of the motors as the lumbering buses pulled away. Then he heard brakes, and Jon was yelling his name and bounding up the walk to his door.

“I almost forgot this!”

Wendell felt the damp heat of Jon’s mouth as it ravaged his lips, but before he could respond Jon was off and running again. Shooshing and straining, the buses continued their journey.

Wendell tugged the end off the long tube in his hand and a large poster of Jon sifted out. He was performing, dressed in snug, dark brown slacks, short boots and his to-die-for jacket, the black velvet strap of a mahogany Gretsch over his shoulder.

Jon had signed it. *Forever, man...Love, Jon.*

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“Yeah, sure. New York City, indeed,” Wendell said, setting the poster aside. His emotions were as dull and leaden as the sky, as he berated himself for reigniting something that couldn’t last. Well, he wasn’t eighteen and vulnerable anymore—he’d survive Jon Badd one final time.

Squaring his shoulders, he left the house, hands in his pockets. There was work to do. Work he loved.

Up again in the area where they’d last had sex, pain punched Wendell violently in the chest. “Oh, God.” He moaned as he stepped behind a boulder that blocked him from the view of anyone below. He sank to his knees and wept.

\* \* \*

“Can I talk to you?” Hamilton asked Jon.

It was after midnight and their final concert in Oregon. Tomorrow they’d head into California. Their guitars had been taken for safekeeping, the set had been broken down, and it was close to time to leave. The wind was bitterly cold.

“Sure.”

“How about on your bus before we take off?”

“That’s fine. What’s this about?”

“It’ll wait until we’re on the bus.” Hamilton drew his jacket close about him to block the chill.

The driver hadn’t boarded yet as they entered the sleek bronze tour bus. Jon slumped on the couch; Hamilton sank onto an overstuffed chair.

“What’s up?”

Hamilton’s face was serious. “The songs we’re playing. Mark and I feel they’re too wild and dark. All of them are so angry and

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heavy. That's exhausting for the audience. It's not like you not to break it up with at least one lighter song and at least one ballad for the evening."

"So?" Jon looked him right in the eye.

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Jon glared at his friend, annoyed at his perceptiveness. "No." His tone was curt.

"You know Mark and I are here for you should you need us."

Anger spilled over at this intrusion into his private feelings, and Jon surged to his feet, signaling the end of their talk. But as they stepped to the door, he regretted his attitude. It wasn't Hamilton's fault that he sensed something had gone wrong on the farm.

He wrapped an arm around Hamilton's shoulder and squeezed. "I know you are. Thanks. I'll lighten things up a little."

Hamilton slid an arm around Jon's waist and gave a quick hug as he left.

At the next concert, Jon sat on a barstool, the stage dark except for a soft light on him as he played the green Gretsch and sang "All Night In My Bed," the ballad he'd started to compose and had now finished for Wendell.

The house was silent as the last strains of the music faded, and embarrassment, rivaling disappointment, rushed through him at the response. He knew it was one of the finest songs he'd ever written. He'd risked exposing his heart and feelings to them, and they hadn't liked it.

As the guitar keeper was removing the green Gretsch and replacing it with an ebony one, a sudden burst of wild applause rocked the theater. Feet stomped and whistles rang in the air. Some people even stood up at their seats.

Jon smiled and bowed. The house was happy. Jon was happy.

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The lights came up and, with the serious moment over, Boyz Gone Badd rocked loud and hard once again.

\* \* \*

With a slight bump and the sound of straining brakes, the jet liner touched down at John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queens, New York, and rolled to a gradual stop. Jon and his cohorts walked through the terminal with quick steps and outside, where they boarded a limousine that would take them to their homes.

The sky was bleak when the limo reached his house in Chelsea. Jon, his spirits suddenly dipping to match the sky, signed for the bill and tipped the driver. He took the salmon-colored cement steps two at a time, and unlocked his door.

The stale smell of the cold house hit him like a miasma. In the emotional turmoil he'd gone through over Wendell's refusal to come and live with him, he'd forgotten to call ahead to arrange for cleaning service before he arrived. A fine layer of dust covered the furniture. Slinging his suitcase on the bed, he went to check the refrigerator. Calling to have groceries brought in had slipped his mind, too. The only thing in the fridge was beer he kept for guests. He shut his eyes against the powerful pull it had to draw him into oblivion against the pain of losing Wendell. The freezer was empty. He grabbed a heavy jacket and retraced his steps to the sidewalk outside.

Filling his lungs with the crisp air and the familiar damp scents of a big city between two rivers, he strode, willing limbs stiff from the plane ride to loosen up. Fall had hit this part of the country. The red and golden leaves on the trees on his street were already

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sifting dry and curled to the street. All the pleasant feelings Manhattan always stirred in him rose again. Surely Wendell would feel the same. If he gave it a chance.

He walked, setting a brisk pace, and headed for The Bent Deli a few blocks away.

The small delicatessen was almost empty as he stepped inside. From behind the counter, an unfamiliar bruiser of a man with a bald head acknowledged his entrance with a nod.

Jon glanced up at the artistic display of handcuffs, whips, feathers, leather straps, masks, straight razors and other items that formed a border just below the ceiling on the wall behind the man. He smiled. They were still there.

Unless you were into the bondage/domination or sado/masochism scene you might not recognize a sampling of the accoutrements of that kind of play. The big bruiser behind the food cases looked like a dom, but he might just as well be a submissive.

At one time, as a young and newly declared gay man, Jon had participated in BDSM, but disliked it. It didn't fit his personality or his sexual fantasies. Fact was he didn't quite understand those for whom it did. It didn't attract just gays, lesbians, transgenders, and bisexuals; he'd met straight paramedics, lawyers, housewives, CEOs and others who were into the BDSM lifestyle.

Maybe he was chicken, but it had seemed risky to him.

"What'll you have?" the man asked in a voice heavy with a New York accent.

Jon hadn't seen him before and, because he preferred anonymity, it was a relief the man hadn't recognized him. He ordered a ham and cheese on rye, and as his voice echoed in his ears, he realized he was already mimicking the New York accent. His just wasn't as broad as Mr. Baldy's there. While his sandwich

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was being assembled, he filled a large cup with hot coffee, capped it, picked up a bag of chips, an apple, a banana and a carton of milk.

As he paid for them, he said, "I've been out of town a while. What's new?"

The man stared at him for a moment. As if Jon had asked a personal question like, "How long is your dick?" At last, he said, "They're making the changes to Broadway in the theater district permanent."

"No cars allowed between Duffy, Times and Herald Squares, right?"

"Right. I heard Letterman made fun of it on *The Late Show*, but pedestrians and shop owners like it."

Jon nodded. Now there were cycling and pedestrian walkways on either side of a center meridian replete with chairs, umbrellas, potted plants and trees. Only the cross streets allowed cars. He envisioned impromptu jazz or rock music played by musicians on the meridian, or violinists playing classical music, their instrument cases open for donations. He liked the idea.

"What about you? How do you feel about it?"

The clerk shrugged. "It's okay. I don't get over that way much. Fewer pedestrian injuries, they say."

"Good enough," Jon said as he handed over correct change for his purchase. "Have a good evening."

The clerk nodded without making eye contact.

Walking home with his parcels, Jon mused over the taciturn response from the man. It wouldn't happen in Brooklands. If it did, you'd know something was wrong with the guy. Here, so many people crowded the streets of Manhattan you could easily be crushed. Or get your pocket picked without realizing it. He'd

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forgotten how residents tended to wall themselves off from others for self-preservation.

He sighed. He missed Wendell. Warm, thoughtful, sensual Wendell.

The heat in the townhouse felt good when he entered. Freeing his ham and cheese sandwich from the white, translucent paper, he sat down to eat without bothering with a plate. Not one crumb or peeling remained when he'd finished it and the fruit. Reheating his coffee in the microwave, he placed a call to Wendell against his better judgment. It had been six weeks since they'd said goodbye in Brooklands. They hadn't been in touch since that day. Still, his feelings were too raw to predict whether he'd lose his temper or make an ass of himself by breaking down.

The phone rang eight times before switching to voice mail, and the voice was canned. Even the sound of Wendell's was lost to him. Disappointed, he replaced the earpiece on its cradle without leaving a message.

After showering and slipping into his pajamas, he slumped on the couch to watch TV. When he realized he was drifting off, he trudged to bed and pulled the covers over his head. Wanting Wendell, needing sex, he wrapped his hand around his dick and began to play. Then, too exhausted and hurting, he abandoned the attempt to jerk off.

It was a cheap substitute for fucking someone you loved.

\* \* \*

It was fifty degrees when he emerged from his place mid-morning. Seriously doubting he'd be recognized, he took the Metro to a museum he wanted to see. Some musicians were playing jazz

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in the station, and he loved it. He'd forgotten this small plus for taking the underground. He arrived in short order at the Chelsea Art Museum, where he spent several hours wandering through its world famous abstract collections.

By the time he'd had a bite to eat and exited the surreal world of sculptures, paintings, rare books and papers, he had just enough time to reach his townhouse in daylight. The subway, even at dusk, wasn't something he wanted to experience.

The message light on his phone shone steadily. No messages. He sighed.

He'd ordered groceries that morning, and they'd been delivered and put away. He sat down to an expensive frozen dinner that tasted like saturated fat and highly salted cardboard. After a few bites, he tossed it in the garbage and made himself an omelet with mushrooms, chives, olives and a sprinkling of freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

Pulling out one of his acoustic guitars, he played for an hour, concentrating on the music, but unable to keep thoughts of Wendell from creeping in. By the time he'd laid it aside, he realized he needed to do some serious thinking about how Wendell might fit in this environment.

At first, he'd love exploring New York City, he knew. It was one of the most fascinating cities in the world, but you could only do so much touring. Two weeks and that would be it.

He'd discovered a sheep farm in Red Hook in the Hudson River Valley, but that was too far from the townhouse. And the daytime temperatures in the winter were about two degrees above freezing—providing a blizzard didn't hit.

He sat with his elbows on his knees, his jaws supported in his hands.



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"I can't take this anymore," he said aloud. He dialed Wendell's number and left a message, which he'd done several times while still touring without receiving a response. Then he called the Sams home. Mrs. Sams answered and was delighted to talk to him, telling him how proud she and her husband were of him.

When he asked after them, she assured him they were fine, and he listened to details of their trip to England and the results of the experiments with the sheep. When he asked how he could get in touch with her son, she hesitated.

After a long silence, she said, "Wendell's not taking calls right now."

Alarm shot through him. "Is he okay? He's not sick or injured?"

"Well...no." The *no* was long and drawn out.

"So he's just not talking to *me*." He couldn't hide how defeated he felt.

"I'm afraid that's about it, Jon. I'm sorry. I know how much you two cared about each other, and there's no one I'd rather have seen as his partner, but it just can't work out, can it? You with your career and Wendell with his. He's been dating a nice man from Portland whose interests are similar to his."

Pain laced through his chest, and he fought for control of his voice in order to sound steady and strong as he said, "Promise me you'll let me know if anything happens to him? Or if there's anything I can do for any of you."

"I will, Jon. I will."

He should have known this was coming. It was something he had hoped against hope wouldn't happen.

The phone rang, and he grabbed it, heart pounding in hopes it was Wendell despite his mother's words.

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

“Hey, man, wanna go clubbing tonight?” It was Mark. He sounded upbeat.

Upbeat he needed. He felt like shit, but it was time to move on with his life. If Wendell was dating, then he should date. “Sure.”

They took a cab to the g Lounge, but it was a bar, not a club. Mark was drinking, and Jon was tempted, but he understood one drink for him would lead to a drinking bout. Especially since his heart had just been broken. He tried to shake the leaden feeling settling over him.

“Isn’t there dancing somewhere?” he asked.

Someone there suggested Twilight, so they hailed a taxi and tried it. The décor was dark and dusky, intending to mimic actual twilight. The bartenders were dressed in thigh-high, black leather boots and harnesses. Their shaved and oiled chests and abs gleamed under the dim lights bouncing off the bottles lined up in front of a mirror. Their asses were round and firm, but they were eye candy, and the men deftly avoided any customers with hands that strayed.

The bouncers were dressed in white, crew neck tees and tight black slacks. Muscles bulged under those T-shirts, and it only took one look to make a customer think twice about fondling the help.

Jon stood with a virgin strawberry daiquiri in his hand as Mark excused himself to the restroom.

Mark returned chuckling. “Don’t go in there if you’re pee-shy. Two-way mirrors above the urinal. I could see you here at the bar, and if you’d known about it, you could’ve seen me at the urinal.”

Jon couldn’t help laughing. “Thanks for the warning. Think I’ll keep my pecker private.”

Upstairs there was dancing, and they wandered up to catch a floor show where bump-and-grind gave the Chippendales a run for

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their money. When the open dancing began, Jon was feeling mellow from looking at all those gorgeous, hot bodies. A handsome blond guy with green eyes danced up to him, and they played off each other's moves until they were exhausted. Jon enjoyed it.

Mark was off somewhere else in the room, so when in a lull the blond offered to buy Jon a drink, he agreed. He said he'd like a ginger ale, and the guy lifted his eyebrows slightly, but said nothing. No smart remarks. Jon liked that. They introduced themselves and smiled.

Brandon took his hand and tugged. "Bar's this way."

It seemed strange to hold another man's hand. Wendell's were bigger, the skin rougher. Stronger from carrying wounded lambs. Gentler from stitching up wounds. It was obvious this man didn't work outdoors.

As they sipped their drinks and talked, Jon noticed people drifting off into some private rooms. Finally, Brandon dipped his head toward one of the rooms. "You interested?"

Something jolted in Jon's groin. *Interested?* Since Wendell, the thought of casual sex with someone he'd just met appalled him.

"They have free condoms in the rooms."

"Uh, thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass tonight."

Brandon's jaw tightened. "Maybe you should pay for the drinks." He walked away.

When Mark located Jon, Jon grinned. "I just figured out how you get a stranger to fuck you in one of those private rooms."

"How?"

"You dance hot with them and buy 'em a drink." He told Mark about Brandon, and they enjoyed a quiet laugh together when he related how he'd ended up paying for their drinks when

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

he'd declined Brandon's offer.

They watched another floor show, and when the public dancing opened up again, he spotted Brandon on the floor shaking his bootie and doing pelvic thrusts with someone else. "See the blond in the green shirt? That's him."

"I wonder if the club pays him to do tricks," Mark said.

"Probably just hustles for himself. Hitting people up for money once they've finished, especially if he finds out they're in the closet or famous. Thank heavens he didn't know who I am. Let's get a cab. I'll fix supper for us at my place."

He made spaghetti, sliding pasta into salted boiling water to which he'd added a little olive oil. He opened a jar of spaghetti sauce and pulled a bag of Italian meatballs from the freezer. Mark split some French rolls and spread them with garlic butter.

When the spaghetti was ready and the rolls had browned under the broiler, they sat down to eat. He opened a bottle of beer for Mark, and poured a glass of fat-free milk for himself.

They watched highlights of some NFL teams, then Mark called for a cab.

"It's gonna be cold for the New Year's Eve gig in Central Park," Mark said.

"Buy flexible gloves and cut the ends out so we can finger our guitars."

"Right." They laughed, remembering doing so in the past.

Mark continued, "We need to get together to go over the music after you've decided what you want to sing."

"I'll get on it."

The cab honked, and they hugged at the door.

Mark surprised him with, "Sorry about that guy in Brooklands. Hamilton and I are here if you need us, you know."

*IN FROM THE COLD*

“Thanks. It’s tough,” Jon said. The familiar pain in his chest flared, and he slid one hand unconsciously across it to ease the pain.

“It’ll work out, man.”

Jon nodded, and Mark left.

After he’d cleaned up, he picked up his guitar and fought to pull some new melody, some new approach to his playing out of his creative mind, but there was nothing. At one in the morning, after an hour of fighting for inspiration that escaped him, he put the instrument away.

As he undressed, Jon couldn’t believe how empty the house seemed. Or how empty his life.

## CHAPTER 5

“Jon called me,” Wendell’s mother said. “After he’d asked about Dad and me, he wanted to know how to get in touch with you. I guessed he was leaving messages for you, but you aren’t taking or answering his calls.”

Wendell nodded, fighting the ache that spread through his chest and clawed at his heart, robbing him of air. When he could, he asked, “What did you tell him?”

“I said you were dating a nice guy from Portland who shared your same interests.”

Wendell’s laugh was tinged with bitterness. “Once, Mom. Went out with him once and it wasn’t a date. He’s not gay, for one thing.”

For another, he was not Jon.

## IN FROM THE COLD

Carlton Clay taught at Portland State University, and they'd met at an animal husbandry conference. Sheep were an interest of Carlton's, and Wendell had enjoyed showing him the farm and taking him out to dinner. But Carlton gave no indication he was gay and that squelched any kind of love interest the two might have had. So, yes, he'd enjoyed the man and they might meet again to discuss sheep, but it would never be a date.

"If I did the wrong thing, I apologize, but I didn't know what to say. It's not like you've talked about this with us. We're not stupid, Wendell. You and Jon have loved each other for a long time, and Dad and I've always believed he was the perfect partner for you. We see how much you've been hurting since he left, and we've had to assume the differences in your careers are what keep you apart."

He reached for her then, wrapping his arms around her sturdy but slender body and hugging tight. "I'm sorry I put you in a position where you had to tell a little white lie for me. Jon wanted me to move to New York and live with him. You know I'd never be happy in Manhattan. I wanted him to live here with me between tours and gigs, but it was a *never the twain shall meet* kind of thing. It seemed best to break it off clean."

When he released her, he saw the sadness in her eyes. Sadness for him, her only child. He brushed her chin lightly with his fist and fibbed to her.

"I'm okay, Mom. I'll be fine."

The truth was most days he was convinced he'd *never* be fine again. Over and over he'd reached for the phone, hungry just to hear Jon's voice on the message on his machine, but if Jon had picked up, what was there to say? They'd said it all on that last visit.

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

Every time the phone rang and he heard Jon's voice or, if saw his number on the caller ID when he hadn't left a message, pain wracked him.

His mom brightened. "I made chicken soup and baked fresh bread for lunch. Eat with us?"

"Sure thing. Chicken soup for the farmer's soul, is it?"

His dad came in, stomping to leave the dirt from his shoes on the mat just inside the door. "Weather's turned. It's getting colder out. Winter's not far off," he said as he hung his jacket on the coat rack.

As they sat around the kitchen table and ate, Wendell soaked in the warmth and concern emanating from his parents and knew that, despite his heartache, he was a man deeply blessed.

The conversation turned to sheep, as it always did when they were together, and they discussed their progress with the Herdwick project.

\* \* \*

After returning to his house when he'd finished his chores for the day, Wendell booted up his computer and checked the New York City news and weather. Temperatures were twenty degrees colder than Brooklands and snow was predicted.

He sighed and shut it down.

There was nothing on TV that night, and he didn't want to eat alone. Restless, he drove to a neighboring community where there was a thriving gay bar with dancing.

Jensen, the bartender, was in full femme glam tonight, glitter and rhinestones glued on his handsome, skillfully made up face.

Wendell laughed. "Jem, how in heck do you keep those from



## *IN FROM THE COLD*

falling in your eyes or your food?”

“Strong glue.” Jem smiled. “What’ll you have?”

After he’d eaten and had a couple of glasses of wine, he danced. The DJ was playing some hot stuff, and Wendell gyrated with the other men, bumping elbows and shoulders on the crowded floor song after song. Later in the evening, one stud danced several tunes with him, then approached to whisper in his ear. In a weak moment, Wendell nodded.

During the next dance, the two slipped off to a room stuffy with the sickeningly sweet smoke of grass. He refused a toke some unknown someone extended to him. The only illumination was a strip of pinpoint size blue Christmas lights running along the floor. Noises issued from bodies where sexual fantasies were being given full rein.

Wendell was grateful for the almost nonexistent lighting. Because of it he couldn’t see who was there, could only see movement accompanied by the sucking, groaning sounds of sex.

He refused to kiss the guy he was with because that seemed to declare an intimacy he didn’t feel, but he let the stud’s hands roam his body, becoming more and more intimate as Wendell closed his hands over a sharp, hard ass. It was nothing like Jon’s round butt with its different levels of firmness, but in Wendell’s mind, this was Jon loving him, licking, biting and fondling him.

His blood pounded, dropped and settled in his core, and he moaned with pleasure as his dick fattened and lengthened in arousal. He thrust it forward into the stud’s hands. His hand closed on the package between the blond’s hipbones. When the guy almost ripped Wendell’s slacks apart and reached a greedy hand inside his briefs, Wendell reached for a condom from a nearby bowl and forced the guy to stop until he was sheathed. The driving

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

force of the need to explode and come caused the stud to return the favor.

When Wendell grasped the man's cock through the condom and discovered it was shorter and slimmer than Jon's, the reality of what he was doing shot through the slight alcoholic haze he was in—this was a stranger and not the man he loved.

He stopped cold. "I...I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"Aw, come on, man. I'm almost there."

"Can't do it." Releasing the stranger, he stumbled back. In the restroom, his hands shook as he removed the latex sheath and flushed it away. A sense of betraying Jon flooded him. He felt ashamed he'd almost succumbed to such dismal backroom behavior.

Wendell, eyes downcast, slipped out the back door. He hoped never to see the guy again.

He thanked the heavens he had his own house and a private entrance separate from that of his parents. The first thing he did was shed his clothes because they reeked of cannabis, then he scrubbed from head to toe in the shower.

Falling into bed, he wondered, not for the first time, if hard work was going to get him through this.

\* \* \*

The following week in Chelsea, Jon had just finished a late dinner when the house went totally black. Not even the red lights on his microwave clocks or his computer hook ups glowed. The electricity had failed. Swearing, he pressed the light on his watch and used its faint glow to find his way to the kitchen where he kept a flashlight. It was dead, so by touch he had to locate the batteries

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

in the drawer and figure out how to insert them. When he finally had a decent light, he climbed the stairs to the top floor and looked out the window. The night was black velvet everywhere he looked. The hell of it was, he could see the stars for the first time in years.

“Shit. A blackout.” Checking his breakers wouldn’t do any good. There was an emergency radio in the downstairs closet, so he retraced his steps and dug through the shoes and suitcases stored there and found it. He cranked it until he had a signal and tuned in to learn his part of Manhattan was out. There was a major problem with the grid, and crews would work around the clock to locate and repair the problem.

“Meanwhile, I have no heat, and it’ll drop below freezing outside,” he grumped as he dressed in long thermal underwear and a fleece shirt before stepping into Spyder insulated, waterproof ski pants and jacket. The gloves were clumsy, so he’d wait until the temp had dropped more in the townhouse before he put them and the ski cap on. He pulled out his down sleeping bag and unfolded it on the bed.

Two hours later, he was sitting like a mummy on the couch thinking hard—much too hard—about the simple life in Brooklands, when someone pounded on his door.

Looking out the peephole, he saw Mark standing there with a flashlight on his face so he could be identified.

“What the hell are you doing here? The whole area’s a blackout.” He threw the door wide open.

“Came to get you, dude. Pack your undies and a toothbrush and come with me. My car’s warm and it’ll take us a long time to get to my place because it’s not safe to travel fast with the lights at the intersections out. In fact, everything that’s electric is out here, but I have power at my place.”

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

What should have taken twenty minutes took them a harrowing hour, but finally they crossed into the part of Manhattan that had lights.

"It's like crossing into Glory Land, the gospel singers would say," Jon said. "You saved my life."

"Maybe we can work that into a song," Mark quipped.

It was two days before the vital service was restored. He and Mark had hummed, played guitar, cooked and done some touristy things in the sections of Manhattan with power for those two days. The second evening, Mark asked, "You know the Sams guy from way back?"

Jon nodded. "Middle school. Discovered we were gay together when we were fourteen, I think. He was my first love."

"What happened?"

"I left to follow my music. He eventually went to college to become a sheep farmer."

Relief that he could talk about this to someone was like lead weights being lifted from his feet. "It was great to spend time with him again. We'd lost touch in the past few years, and seeing him again was like we'd never been apart. No awkwardness, just a familiar camaraderie. Smooth as melted butter. Some friendships are like that. You ever experienced that?"

"Oh, yeah. I had a friend up the street in the projects when I was growing up that's like that. Even though he struggles and I have money, it's like our little pinkies are still locked."

"My mom remarried and moved to Portland, so I wasn't in Brooklands much."

"And we have little time to make phone calls when we're in Europe or Asia, and the time zones are never the same. Touring's a bitch."

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

“That it is. I’m glad we’ve decided to cut back a bit on it. Take a breather.”

“Give Hamilton’s marriage time to settle in.”

“Right-o.”

Mark didn’t probe any deeper, and Jon was thankful for it because he’d said all he wanted to say on the subject.

Two days before New Year’s Eve, a blizzard struck New York City. The Times Square celebration was cancelled. The ball dropped, but it was seen only on TV screens and not by human eyes crowded at its base. The ice show in Central Park was nixed. Transportation ground to a halt, and the members of Boyz Gone Badd sat in their respective homes twiddling their thumbs and losing money.

Jon drank mulled cider and ate leftovers and other things he found in the freezer. As he stared out at the swirling snow and four-foot high drifts, he wondered how he could ever have been so self-centered to deny who Wendell was and expect him to live here in this often miserable place. Hot and humid in the summer, crowded and dirty in so many places, electrical failures and snowbound. Great God Almighty, where had he had his head?

Four days later, he watched a snowplow clear his street with his cell phone to his ear as he phoned airlines. He packed a suitcase and slung a guitar across his chest. When the taxi arrived, he was ready. Humming in the icy air, he skipped down the steps to the sidewalk.

As the cab drove away, he didn’t look back.

It wasn’t until he was in the air that he allowed himself to consider he might not be wanted. He may have hurt Wendell so much he wouldn’t risk being with him. And then there was this guy he’d been dating. Was he really into this man? So many

## IN FROM THE COLD

unanswered questions.

*I'll never know if things can change between us if I don't try.*

It was late evening by the time the taxi pulled up in front of the Living the Good Life Farm gates. He paid the cabbie and his excitement to be here spurred a generous tip.

After the bitter cold of Chelsea, it seemed warm here. Carrying his luggage and guitar around to Wendell's house, he pressed the doorbell. No response. There was a dim light on inside, however, so he left his belongings on the wide porch and explored the nearby barns.

His throat tightened and his heart almost beat its way out of his chest when he spotted Wendell on his knees in one of the stalls, watching as a wobbly newborn lamb struggled to gain its feet for the first time. Its mother stood above it, licking clean its dark coat. It was a little Herdwick.

Periodically, the baby gave a little baa.

"I thought this one wasn't due until early spring," Jon said as he noted the chalked color on the ewe's woolly coat. Images of sex with Wendell behind the boulder when he'd noticed chalking on the ewes flashed. He felt heat flood his cheeks and knew he'd blushed. Thank goodness no one could read minds.

A man standing near Wendell, hands in his jeans pockets said, "This little ram came early."

"He seems to be okay," Wendell replied. Then, as if Jon's voice had registered at last, he pushed up. "Jon! What are you doing here?"

Jon may have imagined the special glow on Wendell's face and the excitement in his words because he was here, but for now he wanted to think it was because it matched what was blooming in his own chest at seeing Wendell. "I thought I'd take time to visit.

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

We don't have any gigs at the moment."

"Excuse my manners. Carlton Clay meet Jon Badd. Badd with two ds. Jon and I grew up together. His band played at our high school reunion in the fall."

"Badd? Not Jon Badd of Boyz Gone Badd!"

"The same," Wendell said with pride. "Carlton teaches at the state university in Portland, but he has a special interest in sheep."

Jon extended his hand as dismay hit. This was the guy Wendell was dating.

"I'm a huge fan of your music."

"Thank you," Jon said as he shook a smooth hand that told a tale of books, pens and paper rather than farming.

"Carlton's especially interested in our Herdwick project."

Jon looked deep into Wendell's eyes, catching the kaleidoscope of colors—green, brown, mustard and gold—reflected in the barn's incandescent light. "As am I," he said in a quiet, telling voice.

In the silence that followed, Carlton Clay must have sensed the message, the feelings that passed between them, for he checked his watch and excused himself with, "Ooh, I need to be going. My wife will worry if I'm not in Portland territory by dark. Thanks, Wendell. Nice to meet you, Jon."

Jon smiled, feeling lighthearted and happy enough to do so now that he'd figured there was nothing romantic between the two men. Of course, some secret gays married, lived the lie of being heterosexual, but he sensed this wasn't the case here. "Nice to have met you, too."

"The house is open," Wendell said as he washed his hands at the big sink in the barn, dried them and rubbed alcohol based gel cleaner on them. "I'll walk Carlton out."

They left talking about the birth of the lamb, and Jon took his

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

belongings from the porch and entered the house. He stood near the door for a moment and let all that was Wendell fill him—the smells, the colors, the warmth from the fireplace where logs crackled as flames danced orange, red and blue.

He'd put his bag and guitar near the couch and was standing by the fire when Wendell came in and stood in the middle of the room with his arms crossed.

"Why are you here?" His voice had lost all traces of his earlier friendliness.

Jon tried to talk over the sudden awkwardness that had just descended on his dream. He'd imagined Wendell throwing his arms around him and telling him how happy he was to see him. Instead, a cold, distant man stood before him.

"You...you wouldn't take my calls."

"What was there to say, Jon?"

"Hello? How are you? How're things? How're the folks? The usual things people in conversation say."

Wendell dropped his arms and put his hands in his pockets.

Relief trickled through Jon at this softening of attitude. He spoke in a quiet tone. "I wanted to know those things."

"It was better for me if we cut it off clean. When we were teenagers and you left, it took me a year to recover."

"Oh, Wendell, no. I'm so sorry. I didn't know." He wanted to reach for him, to wrap his arms around him and make things right again. But the situation was too tenuous and he didn't want to drive him away.

"You were into new challenges, so it wasn't surprising I seldom heard from you. When you returned for the reunion, I knew it was crazy to unlock my feelings for you again. Foolish of me to let you into my home, into my bed, thinking I was a man now and



## IN FROM THE COLD

it wouldn't hurt when you left again"—he turned his head away—"but it did. It hurt like hell. I needed to go on with my life and not wallow in loss."

"I've hurt, too. Sometimes I just wanted to hear the sound of your voice."

Wendell looked up, his cheeks wet. "I was afraid to *hear* yours, afraid I'd throw all this away and fly to New York to live with you. In time, it would ruin what we had. You'll never know how hard it's been not to call you."

The wetness welling in Jon's eyes made Wendell a blur. Jon's voice was unsteady. "You'd never have asked me to give up my music, but selfish bastard that I sometimes am, I demanded you leave the place and work you love to live with me. You're right. Your misery might've destroyed all the wonderful things I feel for you. You could've ended up hating me."

"You haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

Jon sensed the sudden tension in Wendell's body, and a hint of hardness despite the tears on his cheeks. Fear turned his mouth dry as he said, "Once I was back in Chelsea, it didn't take me long to realize you didn't belong in that city except for visits."

Wendell drew in a sudden, sharp breath.

"It's never easy for me to admit I'm wrong, but I was. I'm the one whose demand could've destroyed what we are to each other."

"So why have you come? To apologize and leave?"

"No. I'm here to say I love you. If it's not too late for us, I'd like to move in with you. To live here, not in New York City."

Wendell didn't move, and despair swept over Jon, paralyzing him. Fighting against the paralysis, he forced his arms to open, palms turned toward the man who owned his heart and emotions. "Come to me. Please."

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

Jon held his breath and thought he'd pass out from lack of oxygen if Wendell didn't move.

Wendell stepped into his arms, and Jon hugged him so tight neither of them could breathe. He absorbed the tensile strength of the familiar body, the smell of hay and straw and fresh air, of his shampoo, and the rough feel of the wool of his shirt. Of the smooth skin of a cheek still damp.

"You feel so good. Smell so good," Wendell said against his ear.

"Hmm. So do you, Wendell Sams."

"My folks were concerned for me. It's why Mom fibbed to you about dating Carlton. I've never dated him. He's true blue straight. I'd only met with him once."

"Glad to hear it. Mark and Hamilton were worried about me."

Jon angled his face and closed his lips on Wendell's, his tongue gently probing until Wendell opened to him and Jon dove inside. The kiss went on and on as they explored and tasted the moist heat, the slippery feel of inner lips, renewing what they'd denied themselves for the past four months. Jon's hands roamed Wendell's body; ran a palm over the growing bulge in his groin and drew him onto the rug in front of the fire. Gently, he undid buttons and pushed down jeans and briefs so he might take his fill of rediscovering his lover's body. Through a haze of desire he allowed himself not only to give pleasure, but to experience every nerve ending Wendell set a tingle, every stroke of his fingers and his tasting tongue.

Heat flared in his entire body and hovered, simmering.

He gazed down at the cock springing from Wendell's dark bush, its main vein full and blue under velvet skin. It ended at a dark purplish crown whose slit spun silvery strands of pre-cum. He

## *IN FROM THE COLD*

leaned down to lick and taste.

Wendell gasped with pleasure, and his gasps turned to moans. Wendell turned his body until his mouth sucked in Jon's wet cock, and the simmering heat in Jon ignited into flames.

No longer gentle, they feasted on each other, tongues, teeth and hands, while groins thrust deeper and deeper, pushing them higher and higher. In the shattering ecstasy that followed, a fleeting sweetness pierced Jon. A sweetness he'd felt only with Wendell.

They lay in the quiet, recovering. Then Jon, remembering that he'd had no response to his declaration asked quietly, "Am I home?"

In the silence that followed, Jon feared he'd pressed the issue too hard. Tension tied him in knots.

Tension rolled out of him when Wendell said, "Yes, Jon Badd, you're home. But I want you to know it's not just about the incredible, mind-blowing sex."

Jon chuckled and pulled Wendell into a hug. "I finished the song I wrote for you. I'll tell you about it sometime."

"We have things we'll need to work out," Wendell said.

Jon sighed with happiness. "Yes, we will."

Love and warmth, he thought. Home.

## CAROLINA VALDEZ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She resides with her husband in sunny Southern California.

\* \* \*

**Don't miss *Somebody To Love*  
by Carolina Valdez,  
available at [AmberAllure.com](http://AmberAllure.com)!**

*Life is perfect for Cade "Lakota" Montana. Barely into his twenties, he escaped the poverty, illness and drunkenness prevalent on the Montana reservation where he was raised when he agreed to manage an uncle's small spread in Wyoming. His relationship with Dr. Lee Donaldson, his lover, and the ranch's new veterinarian, is secure, and now Cade's proven even wild horses*

*can be broken without pain to carry saddle and rider. A recognized horse whisperer, he's excited about his plans to teach his methods to others.*

*Their relationship begins with two serious problems...*

*Kevin Connolly, star of The Detective and named TV's "Sexiest Man of the Year," works in Hollywood with frequent filming trips to various locations. Nate Marquette, Kevin's new love, works part of the year as a fireman in a mountain range not far from Los Angeles, but most of the year he operates his business as a helicopter logger in the Pacific Northwest and Canada. Complicating the logistics of getting together when they're miles apart is the fact that it's vital both men keep their sexual preferences secret. Exposure as a gay man might certainly ruin Kevin's career, but it could also mean death for Nate.*

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