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Love Matters  
Christiane France

## LOVE MATTERS

... “Would you care to dance?”

Cain turned toward the speaker, someone a little taller and at least a few pounds heavier than himself, who wore an enormous headdress composed entirely of long black feathers. A gold half mask surrounded by a fringe of small black and white spotted feathers covered the eyes and forehead, while the lower half of the face was painted chalk white. A black velvet jacket and knee britches, white stockings and black, buckled shoes completed the outfit. The area between the chin and the collar of the jacket was swathed in purple chiffon patterned in silver.

“Well?” The voice pressed a little louder.

At that precise moment, the mystery and romance of masquerade took over Cain’s imagination. “Yes, of course. Absolutely. I’d love to,” he replied before the stranger got the idea he wasn’t interested and moved on. “Sorry, you’ll have to excuse me,” he continued as the man took his hand and led him onto the floor, “but your headdress is quite amazing. How on earth do you manage to keep it in place?”

“It weighs less than a pound,” his partner replied, “so it’s really no problem. I barely remember I have it on.”

As they began to dance, he brought Cain just close enough so their bodies were just touching from knee to chin in a hold that was light yet Cain felt almost possessive. It was clear the man was a good dancer, and while there was nothing overtly sexual about his movements or the way he held Cain, there was something so sexy about the man himself it made Cain’s pulse race and sent his imagination into overdrive. He was having difficulty with his breathing. He was also highly aroused, and since his partner’s stiff cock was pressing hard against his thigh, he knew the reaction was mutual...

ALSO BY CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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*Wishing On The Moon*

# LOVE MATTERS

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BY

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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LOVE MATTERS  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For Roy and The Boys.*

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Cain Carpenter gathered up the dozen or so pieces of mail the carrier had left just inside the restaurant door and took them into the office. He flipped through what appeared to be the usual items—a few bills, ads from suppliers, a bank statement, and the latest crop of “can’t lose” stock tips from his broker. There was also a plain white envelope marked “Personal” with his brother Leo’s return address in the top left-hand corner. He put the white envelope to one side. With his birthday fast approaching, and knowing his brother’s smartass sense of humor, he just knew it would be one of those funny cards about him being past it, over the hill and in need of a nursing home, or some such nonsense.

At a few days short of thirty-nine, Cain felt anything but old. He didn’t feel ancient, lonely, depressed or ready for the old folks’

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home either. As the owner of a busy restaurant with rarely an empty seat, he was at the top of his game, with everything he'd ever wanted. Well, almost everything. If he were honest, he'd love to have a special someone to share a glass of wine with at the end of a busy day and to warm his bed on a cold winter's night.

A thriving business, money, possessions, and a beautiful home might be enough for some, but not for Cain. He wanted someone to share it all with. Someone he could love, and who would love him in return.

If he had a social life, he could go out, meet people and eventually find a special someone. However, he'd spent the past ten years building The Peony into the number one restaurant for miles around. And, as he'd discovered, success came at a price. These days, and only if he planned ahead, the most he could manage were important family celebrations and the occasional business function like the one he was scheduled to attend tonight.

He picked up the gold script on glossy black invitation he'd left leaning against the base of the desk lamp and ran the pad of his thumb over the smooth, elegant surface.

*Parker Wentworth  
Peach Blossom Estates Winery  
Requests The Pleasure of Your Company  
At a Singles Masquerade Ball & Gourmet Dinner  
In Celebration of The Grape Harvest  
To be held at his home on the  
Niagara Escarpment  
R.S.V.P.  
(See details inside)*



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At this time of the year, Cain associated dressing up and masquerade balls with Halloween and kids out trick-or-treating. Nevertheless, the idea of spending an evening with a group of masked adults, people he might or might not know, sounded rather intriguing. Especially with it being a singles event. And with Parker's reputation for giving outrageous parties, the evening promised to be something really extraordinary.

Parker Wentworth was a longtime friend as well as a customer and also one of the restaurant's most important suppliers. Parker put a lot of trade Cain's way in the form of business dinners and wine tastings, and Cain reciprocated by featuring a number of Parker's award-winning wines in his restaurant.

At one time, Cain thought he and Parker might become more than friends, but after watching Parker change boyfriends with alarming regularity, he'd decided to count his blessings their relationship had never gone beyond a little flirting and a few speculative looks. He had enough to do keeping tempers in check on busy nights at The Peony. The absolute last thing he needed was the added problem of emotional rollercoaster rides in his personal life.

He put the invitation down and grabbed a cold bottle of water from the office fridge. After taking a few sips, he quickly finished sorting the remainder of the mail. The ads went into the recycling bin; the bills and the bank statement he put in a file for his accountant's attention.

Finally, he reached for the envelope from his brother, tapped it against the thumb of his free hand, then he opened it and extracted the contents.

Instead of the funny birthday card Cain had expected, the envelope contained a newspaper clipping announcing the opening

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of Love Matters, a new dating agency catering exclusively to gays. Attached to the announcement was a sticky note with a penciled comment in his brother's handwriting—*Thought this might be of interest to you.*

Cain smiled as he dropped the clipping on top of the discarded ads and quickly glanced over a memo the chef had left on his desk requesting Cain's input on some last-minute lunch and dinner specials he had in mind for the restaurant's tenth anniversary menus. The celebrations were scheduled to last for the entire week and finish with the addition of complementary birthday cake and a glass of champagne for everyone who came on the actual day.

He glanced again at the clipping. He already knew about Love Matters. For someone with as little free time as himself, a reputable dating agency seemed like the perfect answer for finding a compatible partner, and Cain had already tried the best the city had to offer. However, he was old fashioned enough still to believe in love and when nothing came of the half-dozen or so introductions the agencies had arranged, he'd pretty much given up... until he saw the exact same ad his brother had sent him in the local paper. The name had caught his attention and, figuring he had nothing to lose, he'd decided to check it out the very next day...

\* \* \*

*Love Matters occupied space on the third floor of a brand new office building a short distance from The Peony, and Cain had taken advantage of the temporary lull in business between lunch and dinner to find out what they were all about.*

*The décor was professional, shades of grey with lots of glass windows and black leather furniture. Behind the desk sat an*

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*equally professional looking young male receptionist, smartly dressed in a dove grey business suit complete with white shirt and a charcoal striped tie.*

*After greeting Cain, the receptionist explained while the agency believed love was important in a relationship, they went to considerable lengths to match their clients on many different levels. They did not simply introduce a new client to whomsoever they happened to have on their books at the time and hope for the best. He then handed Cain a form and a pen and asked Cain to complete what he said was their standard questionnaire.*

*“If you require assistance with any of the questions, just let me know,” the young man offered.*

*“Sure will. Thanks.” Cain bit back the urge to say he needed help with his love life, not filling in a string of likes and dislikes, or guessing what he might do in certain given situations. In fact, the receptionist was so damn cute and sexy Cain wondered, for one completely insane, out-of-character moment, if he should forget about the form and find out if the guy was interested in a date.*

*“It’s important to answer everything as honestly and with as much detail as possible,” the receptionist added. “If you’d feel more comfortable taking the form home and completing it there, you are welcome to do so.”*

*“Thanks. If I feel the need, I’ll let you know.” Cain wondered if the guy had anyone in his life. He snuck another quick glance. He was kinda cute, if you liked the preppy, college boy type. He also had beautiful, deep-set eyes and a toothpaste smile, but Cain wasn’t looking for a decorative piece of arm candy or anyone quite so young. He wanted someone around his own age, a man with a little experience of life, the kind of partner who would be there for him in the good times as well as the bad, and everything in*

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*between.*

*He continued on down the list of questions. To his surprise, many of them were rather clever. If answered truthfully, they revealed a great deal about a person.*

Question 10:

- a) Are you proud of being gay? or
- b) Do you leave it in the bedroom when you close the door?

*He sighed and tapped his pen against the paper. He knew most people saw him as distant and a little reserved, which was fine. As the owner of an upscale restaurant, it was an image he cultivated. Even so, while he made no secret of the fact he was gay, he didn't shout it from the rooftops either. If anyone asked, he told the truth. So... did the fact he was honest make him proud of his sexuality? Or did his refusal to brag about it make him a closet queen?*

*Tickling yes to both questions, he continued on down the form until he came to:*

Question 15:

Do you believe being gay entitles you to be promiscuous?

*What?*

*No! Absolutely not!*

*For an instant, Cain was sorely tempted to rip the form into a thousand tiny pieces, throw them in the trash container by the desk and leave. All he wanted was a committed and loving relationship with a man who had similar tastes and interests. Someone who would be both lover and friend, and whom he could trust and depend on, not some flighty hunk-of-the-moment he'd need to keep*

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*tabs on by the use of a tracking device.*

*After writing “NO” in block letters in the space next to Question 15, he walked over to the receptionist’s desk.*

*“Excuse me? What happens when I’ve answered all these questions?”*

*The man tapped his fingers against his computer keyboard. “I’ll take your photo and upload it, along with all your other information, into our database.”*

*“And then what?”*

*“We check for people with whom we feel you are compatible and show you their profiles and photos. Then, if you so decide, a meeting is arranged.”*

*“Here?”*

*“Usually in a restaurant or other neutral spot. But if you’d prefer to do it here, you may do so. Of course, only first names are used at the initial meeting.”*

*“Sounds simple,” Cain allowed. “I realize it’s probably unlikely, but what happens if one of the profiles I’m shown is someone I know?”*

*“Then it would be up to you, sir. If it’s someone you’d like to know better, you’ll have the perfect opportunity to do so.”*

*“Okay, thanks.” Cain returned to his seat. The rest of the questions proved relatively simple to answer and, once he’d completed the form, he handed it back to the receptionist on his way out.*

\* \* \*

Cain’s visit to Love Matters had taken place three days ago. As he was leaving, the receptionist mentioned it usually took a

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minimum of a week before they got back to a client. Meaning he still had four more days to wait... and wonder if he'd wasted the hour he'd spent answering all those dumb questions.

He took another sip of water and returned his attention to the chef's memo. The list began with Sliced Beef Filet, Vietnamese Shrimp Salad and Mango Mousse with chocolate drizzle... the three dishes Cain would always credit for the complete turnaround from the kind of restaurant The Peony was before he took over its ownership to what it was now.

Cain had started his career in the restaurant business working as a sous-chef for the establishment's former owner. When the business went bust less than a year after opening, he'd scraped up the money and bought the furniture and equipment from the trustee appointed by the bank. He'd then made a deal with the owner of the building to take over the space for another year with an option to renew if all went well, changed the name to The Peony and got busy.

With the premises newly renovated by the previous owner and a downtown location within easy reach of everything, he'd had a vivid picture in his mind of what The Peony could be with a little luck and a whole lot of hard work. Majority opinion said the previous owner's downfall was largely the fault of a menu composed almost exclusively of heavy, overly rich dishes, and Cain had agreed. Today's diners were more health-conscious. The customers wanted lighter fare, which Cain was prepared to give them. They also wanted different, preferably something with an ethnic twist.

Convinced delicious and different if well prepared and presented was the answer, he'd polled family and friends for their suggestions and come up with a simple menu everyone seemed to

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like. The first year was hard, but a good learning experience, too. Unable to afford either a top of the line, experienced chef or the kind of polished, knowledgeable wait staff he ultimately wanted, his help had consisted of two culinary students from the local community college and a short-order cook who'd needed to earn more than his regular job paid. They'd shared the cooking, the chores, the serving, and anything else that needed to be done among the four of them. They'd invented new recipes, dropped their failures in the trash, added their successes to the menu and, by dint of all the hard work and a little luck, the restaurant had ended its first year in the black.

Cain finished reading the memo and allowed his thoughts to drift. He would always remember the first day—the day The Peony reopened under his ownership. A little afraid no one would come, he'd invited a dozen friends who, in turn, had attracted the curious and the night turned out to be unexpectedly successful.

The opening specials were Cain's own personal creations—slices of beef filet marinated in garlic, spices and wine served with mushroom risotto and asparagus, and a Vietnamese shrimp salad. The shrimps needed to be tender and perfect, so he'd prepared them the night before by dropping the raw shrimp into boiling water seasoned with black pepper and bay leaves and cooking them for exactly two minutes. He'd then rinsed them in ice-cold water, removed the shells and left them in the fridge to chill overnight. The salad itself was a mix of several varieties of lettuce, plus grated cucumber, carrot, daikon, also known as Japanese radish, and fresh mint leaves. The dressing, *nuoc cham*, a Vietnamese dipping sauce, now made to order for The Peony by the mother of one of the waiters, was served on the side. The dessert: a simple, fresh mango mousse with chocolate drizzle.

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Eventually, as the restaurant's fortunes improved, he'd found and hired the staff The Peony deserved—a chef with an impressive list of awards and achievements, and the kind of wait staff who knew how to make the customers feel like royalty. The original menu had been extended and improved on, as had the wine list, but for some reason those three original dishes still remained customer favorites.

After a quick tap-tap on the door, Gino, the handsome but stocky Italian chef, stepped into Cain's office. "Have you had a chance to look at my latest suggestions?"

Cain grabbed the memo and checked the balance of the list. "I thought we had this all worked out."

"We did, but..." Gino shrugged. "The creative mind is sometimes a difficult thing to control."

"These additions look good, but I don't see the brandied walnut-and-orange tart you made a few weeks ago. The customers loved it."

"Okay, boss, I can add it."

"What's this about a special soup and an appetizer salad?"

"That's really what I wanted to discuss with you."

"Okay." Cain smiled and waved Gino to the chair on the other side of the desk. "What do you have in mind?"

"For the soup, I thought I should do the carrot with cilantro. The customers love it. I've also been playing with something new—tiny veal meatballs in chicken or beef broth. I haven't yet decided which of the two tastes better."

"And the side salad?"

"We could stay with our usual three varieties of lettuce with house dressing. Or what would you say to something a little fancier? How about assorted greens with sliced pear and blue



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cheese crumbs and a raspberry vinaigrette?”

Cain frowned, thinking. “A definite yes on the carrot soup and the regular salad. But give the meatball soup and the second salad a trial run as a lunch special and see how the customers react. If they get rave reviews, they can be added to the menu for the main party on the restaurant’s actual birthday. Anything else?”

“No, that’s it. At least for now.”

“Good because right after lunch, I’ll be gone for the rest of the day. If you need me for anything, check with Steve,” Cain said, referring to the erstwhile short-order cook who’d been with him since the day The Peony opened and was now his second-in-command. “If it’s something you feel can’t wait or Steve can’t handle, he’ll know where to find me.”

\* \* \*

The first place Cain went after leaving the restaurant was the gym for an hour with his personal trainer. He followed up the workout with twenty minutes or so in the steam room, then finished with a massage.

The session had been intended to calm and relax him for the evening ahead, but to Cain’s annoyance it had had the complete opposite effect. When he arrived at his tailor’s shop to collect his costume and have a final fitting, he felt as nervous and over-excited as a child going to its first party, instead of an adult attending what was just another business function. Maybe it was because he’d never been to a masquerade party before and didn’t have a clue how these things worked. Did the masks come off at some point in the evening? Or would his fellow partygoers forever remain a mystery?

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On top of all those concerns, he was worried about his costume, worried it was too way out and he'd end up feeling and looking ridiculous. Most of all, with everyone in disguise, he was worried he might say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Not intentionally, of course, but if something was taken out of context or the wrong way, then what? They moved in the same circles, so it stood to reason he'd know most if not all of Parker's guests. But how would he recognize them, or figure out how to tell one from the other? Was he supposed to work it out from their body language, or their voices, or did they whisper their name to anyone who spoke to them?

As he left the tailor's shop with his costume in a garment bag, Cain's nerves were in knots, and he wondered why he'd accepted the damn invitation in the first place. His only excuse was it had sounded like something fun and different, a welcome change from the usual boring cocktail parties and formal dinners, but did he really want different? He'd had one helluva time even deciding what he wanted to go as. He'd thought about all the usual things such as a clown, or a harlequin, or even a pirate, or a wizard. Any one of them would have been fine, but he hadn't wanted *just fine*, and he hadn't wanted to risk showing up dressed like someone else. He'd wanted something sophisticated, but different, and most of all, unique.

With that in mind, he'd spent several hours searching the Net, checking out the unbelievably fabulous creations people wore to masquerade balls in Paris and Venice. Most of the outfits he'd seen were way too extravagant for a house party, but eventually he'd found exactly what he wanted to go as—the man in the golden mask.

The original outfit comprised black pants, black boots, gold

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satin shirt, a black cape, a three-cornered black hat, plus a full-face, gold porcelain mask to completely obscure the wearer's features. However, the wearer wouldn't be able to eat or drink unless he took it off. With the mask the focal point of his costume, Cain had been trying to decide if he should settle for a half mask, forego dinner, or choose another outfit when the clerk in the costume rentals store had suggested the combination of gold face-paint and a gold half mask might solve his dilemma. Although Cain had been doubtful at first, when he'd tried it out later at home, the suggestion worked perfectly.

\* \* \*

Cain had been to Parker's home on the Niagara Escarpment several times before. The house was a magnificent reproduction of a stately English home, complete with a neo-classical portico and colonnade at the front, and a verandah and formal garden in the rear. It was, without a doubt, the largest and most beautiful house in all of Lakeside, and when Cain arrived a little after eight, the driveway was already lined with vehicles. He hadn't expected a party of this size; he'd thought maybe somewhere in the region of twenty or thirty people max. From the look of things, though, there was at least twice that number and maybe even more. Parker had evidently gone all out and invited everyone he knew for miles around.

He drove on a little farther, wondering where he should leave his car, when a uniformed attendant stepped forward and gestured for Cain to stop.

Cain wound down his window. "Where do you want me to put this?"

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“Give me your keys, sir, and I’ll attend to it for you.”

After surrendering his keys, Cain got out of the vehicle and climbed the half-dozen shallow steps to the front door. The door itself stood wide open, but a costumed majordomo holding a clipboard barred his way.

“Your name, sir?” he intoned quietly.

“Cain Carpenter.”

After consulting his list, the man looked up at Cain with a faint, but welcoming smile. “You may go in, sir. You’ll find everyone in the ballroom. Enjoy your evening.”

Cain continued into the entrance hall, which was full of statues and antique wall hangings and was bigger than most small houses, then followed the sound of voices and music. When he reached the ballroom, he hesitated in the doorway and stared at the dazzling scene before him.

The lighting was simulated candlelight, the perfect setting for the multi-colored outfits and sparkling jewels. A band occupied a dais in one corner of the room. The musicians were all in eighteenth-century attire complete with powdered wigs, but the music sounded considerably more modern. Waiters in similar attire moved around the room carrying trays of drinks.

For one brief moment, Cain thought he’d stepped into a time machine and been transported back to Versailles in its heyday. Or perhaps to a *palazzo* on the Grand Canal in Venice for *Carnevale*. Every elaborate costume he’d seen on the Net was here in Parker’s house, along with a few he’d never seen before. There was also a small sprinkling of the more everyday outfits he’d seen in the costume rentals store and a few duplications of some of the fancier ones, but as he threaded his way through the crowd, he saw no one dressed exactly the same way as himself.

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Everyone, including the musicians and the waiters, were, of course, masked. Some with simple half masks, while others had covered their faces with the same face-paint and mask combination as Cain.

As he continued to move through the crowd, he heard snatches of conversation in what he thought sounded like familiar voices. However, while the voices told him both men and women were in attendance, the elaborate costumes could—and probably were—being worn by both sexes, making it impossible to tell which was which merely by looking.

“Something to drink, sir?” one of the waiters inquired.

As Cain accepted a glass of sparkling wine, he asked, “Do you know if we get to take our masks off at midnight or whenever?”

“Oh no, sir, the masks stay on for the entire evening.”

“Why’s that?”

“Why?” The grey-haired waiter seemed a little taken aback by his question. “I’m not sure, sir, but I’d say it’s because it is a masquerade party.”

With that piece of unarguable logic, the elderly waiter departed, and one of the guests, who was dressed as a pirate and standing right next to Cain, said, “I take it you’ve never been to one of these singles masquerades before tonight?”

Cain laughed. “I didn’t even know there were such things. I thought with a costume ball you’re supposed to try to figure out who the other people are, but at some point in the evening, everyone’s identity will be revealed. Is the not telling part something new?”

“No, I understand it’s the way these things first started. The whole point of a masquerade is to pose as something or someone you are not and this, in turn, creates the magical feeling of mystery

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and romance. In my opinion, any telling of names destroys the magic completely.”

“You’d rather be kept guessing?” Cain hazarded.

“Of course. And it’s almost certainly the reason why masquerade parties are gaining in popularity on the singles’ scene. It’s bad enough being footloose and fancy free, but attending those boring get-togethers where you sit around the host’s pool or living room and watch people hook up, then wonder if it’s just for tonight or forever, has definitely passed its sell-by date. These parties are a much better idea.”

“In what way? Say, you’d like to get to know someone better. If you don’t know their name, how do you get in touch with them?”

“Ah, but that’s where the mystery and romance comes in. You don’t know them, and they don’t know you, but think of all the fun you’ll have trying to figure out who the person was who caught your attention. Or perhaps it was you who caught theirs. Maybe you talked for a few moments, or even better, you danced together, but whatever happened, it was enough to set sparks flying or work up a little chemistry. You can even be a little outrageous if you wish. After all, who’s to know?”

“Oh right, thanks.” Cain hadn’t thought about the mystery angle; he’d been too concerned about opening his mouth and putting his foot in it. Now he realized it worked both ways. Both parties were at a disadvantage when it came to figuring out who said what to whom.

Just then, the band began to play another set. Cain felt someone touch his arm, and a voice said softly, “Would you care to dance?”

Something about the honey-on-velvet voice, which he thought might be a man’s but he wasn’t one hundred percent sure, caught

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Cain by surprise. It was rather like being touched without warning in a sensitive spot, and Cain's body reacted accordingly.

He turned toward the speaker, someone a little taller and at least a few pounds heavier than himself, who wore an enormous headdress composed entirely of long black feathers. A gold half mask surrounded by a fringe of small black and white spotted feathers covered the eyes and forehead, while the lower half of the face was painted chalk white. A black velvet jacket and knee britches, white stockings and black, buckled shoes completed the outfit. The area between the chin and the collar of the jacket was swathed in purple chiffon patterned in silver.

"Well?" The voice pressed a little louder, confirming the speaker was a man.

At that precise moment, everything the other man had said about the mystery and romance of masquerade took over Cain's imagination. "Yes, of course. Absolutely. I'd love to," he replied before the stranger got the idea he wasn't interested and moved on. "Sorry, you'll have to excuse me," he continued as the man took his hand and led him onto the floor, "but your headdress is quite amazing. How on earth do you manage to keep it in place?"

"It weighs less than a pound," his partner replied, "so it's really no problem. I barely remember I have it on."

As they began to dance, he brought Cain just close enough so their bodies were just touching from knee to chin in a hold that was light yet to Cain felt almost possessive. It was clear the man was a good dancer, and while there was nothing overtly sexual about his movements or the way he held Cain, there was something so sexy about the man himself it made Cain's pulse race and sent his imagination into overdrive. He was having difficulty with his breathing. He was also highly aroused, and since his partner's stiff

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cock was pressing hard against his thigh, he knew the reaction was mutual.

Cain had no idea if the anonymity afforded by the mask was responsible for his physical reaction, or if it was the result of the whole mystery-romance thing the other partygoer had explained. Whatever the reason, he was beginning to appreciate the appeal of a masquerade. It felt like the start of something exciting; quite what, however, he had no idea. Something he just knew would be both wonderful and different. Something he wished could last forever.

But all too soon, the magic evaporated. After a couple of turns around the floor and a few inconsequential remarks, the man suddenly pulled a cell phone from his pocket, muttered something about an emergency and disappeared into the crowd.

Feeling a bit foolish for allowing his imagination to run wild and more than a little let down by the man's quick departure, Cain realized this was exactly the kind of encounter that made a masquerade seem so magical. For those few moments, he'd let himself get carried away and blown the whole thing out of proportion. The guy had cut a very romantic figure in his feathered outfit—mysterious and sophisticated, too, but as to him being Mr. Right? Cain decided from here on in he'd be well advised to forget about magic and think about a little something called reality.

Keeping the thought in mind, he continued to circle the room, dancing with anyone who asked, exchanging a few words here and there with other guests, and silently amusing himself by trying to guess their identities. Whether he was spot on or miles away, he would never know, but it didn't matter because it was all part of the fun. Since he was enjoying himself and planned to stay at the party at least until after dinner, he helped himself to a second glass



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of wine. Two drinks were usually his limit. If he had a third, it would have to be non-alcoholic, or he'd need to call a cab.

He glanced around the immediate area, wondering what had happened to the first guy he'd danced with. The black feather headdress was impossible to miss and since it was nowhere in sight, Cain figured the man had left. In one way, he was sorry; in another, he decided it was just as well. There had definitely been more than a flash of chemistry between the two of them, but nice as it was to know someone found him attractive, he was looking for something permanent, not a nameless one-off who could well leave him wanting more.

As he finished the wine and put the empty glass on a table, a giant black cat, who talked like a cartoon character with a plum in its mouth, asked him to dance, told him a silly joke while they were dancing, and the moment the music finished, moved on to his next victim. After the cat, Cain danced with several other people whose sex he wasn't sure of and whose elaborate outfits defied description.

Then it was the turn of a woman dressed as a Roman gladiator who insisted on leading, and lastly, with a man wearing a frothy, feminine concoction composed entirely of pink roses and pink feathers. Cain had thought, going by the outfit and the scent of his aftershave, it was probably Parker, but when his every attempt at conversation was answered with a series of nods or grunts rather than actual words, he gave up trying to guess.

At the end of his dance with the pink person, one of the musicians announced the band was taking a break. A moment later, there was another announcement by someone else to the effect the gourmet dinner was to be buffet-style and would be served in the dining room, starting at ten o'clock. Cain checked his watch. With

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only a few minutes to go before the buffet opened, he was looking for somewhere to sit and wait when another exotically dressed guest joined him and said, “Did I hear something about a buffet?”

The newcomer’s outfit had been concocted from what appeared to be a collection of pastel-colored scarves and strings of shiny beads. What he was supposed to represent, Cain couldn’t even begin to guess, but his voice was one hundred percent male.

“That’s what someone just said. Ten o’clock in the dining room which should be anytime now.”

“You planning on getting something to eat, too?”

“I was thinking about it,” Cain said. “What about you?”

“Absolutely. Thanks to a particularly annoying customer, all I’ve had today is a small bowl of cereal and half a banana for my breakfast, and no time for lunch. I’m starving.”

Guests were already starting to move in the direction of the dining room, signaling the doors were now open. Cain and the other man followed along at the end of the line.

The buffet was on a long table down the center of the room, while chairs and smaller tables where the guests could sit and eat took up the rest of the space.

After they’d piled their plates with a little of everything they fancied and agreed they could always come back for seconds, Cain suggested they find somewhere to sit.

Most of the tables were already taken, but Cain noticed a table for two in an alcove and hurried to claim it.

For the next little while, they were both too busy enjoying the delicious food their host had provided to do much talking, except for making the odd remark about the food and the events of the evening. Cain was finding the anonymity factor more than a little irritating, but he waited until they were finished eating before he

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said, “I know we’re supposed to keep our identities a mystery. But surely we can use initials or make up names or something. What do you say?”

His companion looked across the table at him and laughed softly. “I know what you mean. ‘Hey, you,’ doesn’t really cut it, does it?”

“Hardly.” Cain masked his irritation with a smile. “I understand the appeal of the mystery aspect, but what’s wrong with saying our first names?”

“Because not saying them is the whole point of a singles’ masquerade party. Even giving your first name would be too big a clue. If you meet someone during the course of the evening and want a return engagement, then you have to work for it.”

“You mean by trying to guess the person’s identity?”

“Exactly. You meet someone, maybe fall in love a little during the course of the evening, and that way you leave wondering as to the identity of the mystery man or woman who caught your attention. Was it someone you know, or someone you’ve never met before? And if you get really hooked, it doesn’t end with the party. From then on, you find yourself concentrating on everyone who crosses your path. Looking for some little telltale sign in the hope it might reveal whom the mystery person was. The search can go on for weeks. Sometimes you find out, and sometimes you never do.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Cain confessed. “Probably because I’ve never been to a masquerade before. I think I figured out a few people, and I’m sure I’ll be wondering for a day or two about some of the others. But I don’t see myself thinking about it for longer, certainly not for weeks.” The man sitting across from him was nice easy company, but there was no connection between

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them, no zap of electricity, nothing Cain wanted to pursue.

“You can honestly say you haven’t met anyone here tonight who piqued your interest a little? Someone you’d like to know better given the chance?”

A vision of black feathers, a gold half mask, and a purple scarf filled Cain’s mind. His pulse rate increased, his temperature shot up and he was back on the dance floor, reliving those exquisite few moments he knew he’d give anything to experience again.

He wanted to believe the attraction had been an illusion, an overreaction on his part. Something which happened because he was lonely, sex-starved, and... The truth was the whole experience had scared the hell out of him. Falling head-over-heels for a stranger happened to other guys, not to sane, sensible Cain Carpenter. He’d always figured falling for someone was some kind of slow, gradual process and took at least a week or a month before a person got well and truly hooked, but it seemed he was wrong. By his reckoning, it took less than a second, and he was very much afraid it had just happened to him. Unless he’d allowed the magic of the moment and the night to get to him, and he’d over-reacted. A momentary mental aberration, perhaps?

“Shall I take that as a yes?” his companion inquired with a chuckle.

Cain quickly shoved what he was thinking from his mind and hoped the makeup and the mask concealed any emotions that might otherwise have shown on his face. “Sorry, what did you say? I’m afraid I got distracted.”

“Yeah, I know. You disappeared on me for a minute there. That good, was it?”

Suddenly, the need to get away and find somewhere he could be by himself and think was too strong for Cain to resist. Muttering

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a quick, “Excuse me,” he left the table and slipped through the nearest door, out onto the verandah and into the welcoming darkness of the cool October night. He needed to recapture those few moments while he still could. He needed to hold them close to his heart and commit them to memory before they faded away, as he knew such moments always did once the party was over and night became a new day.

He closed his eyes, willing the vision to return. He could hear the music; he could feel the light touch of the other man’s embrace and the heat of his body. Above all, he could smell him, an intoxicating mix of sex and soap and his own faint but elusive scent—the thing that made him unique and the one thing Cain knew he must remember if he ever hoped to find him again.

*No!* He slammed his clenched fist hard against the verandah wall and willed his heart to stop racing. He was not going to look for the man. He had a business to run and a life to live. He would not allow one moment of infatuation, or lust, or the mystery and magic of a stupid masquerade party to turn his world upside down and ruin everything he’d worked so hard to achieve.

It was over. Done. He’d go home right now, have a couple of stiff drinks, and a good night’s sleep. Whatever he’d felt had not been love. This time tomorrow, he’d have forgotten all about it.

\* \* \*

By the time Noel Hardingley returned home and exchanged his masquerade costume for street clothes, drove downtown to the jail, interviewed the client and arranged for his bail, it was almost one in the morning.

While he waited for the young man to be released, Noel leaned

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against the squad room wall and closed his eyes. It was late, he was beat, and any hope he might have had of returning to Parker's party was gone. So were his chances of picking up a few clues to the identity of the man in the golden mask. As it was, he knew the man's height, approximate weight, and he'd caught a faint hint of aftershave or soap. In other words, a bunch of totally useless information that would fit half the men in the city.

As a rule, Noel didn't much care for parties or guessing games of any kind, but this one had promised to be different and interesting, and it had certainly started out that way.

The instant Noel noticed the guy and asked him to dance he'd known he was someone special. He'd felt an immediate but inexplicable connection, and he knew damn well Golden Mask felt it, too. A warm feeling of coming home when they first touched and inhaled each other's scent, then the almost unbearable feeling of loss when his cell phone rang and life intervened. He'd wanted the chance to go back and apologize for his abrupt departure and claim a second dance. He'd wanted to spend more time with him, get to know him a little better, but—

If there was one thing Noel disliked even more than guessing games, it was what appeared to be an insoluble mystery.

"I guess my mom went out after you talked to her," his young client said as he joined Noel, cell phone in hand. The boy sighed, flipped the phone closed and returned it to the back pocket of his fashionably baggy and tattered jeans. "I guess I'd better go find myself a cab."

"No, it's okay, I'll drive you." Noel led the way out of the police station and around the corner to where he'd parked his car at a meter on the next block.

This was the third time in the past month Ricky, the seventeen-

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year old son of one of his more important clients, had been arrested—the first time for a domestic dispute involving his mother’s latest lover. A week later, he got into an argument over a restaurant check, which escalated into a fistfight with the waiter, and tonight, he’d decided to punch out a cop. No charges had been pressed for the first two incidents, partly because there were no injuries or property damage and partly because Ricky had never been in trouble before.

Tonight, though, was a whole different ballgame. Apparently, the kid and two of his friends had been watching a minor blaze in the downtown area, and Ricky had resisted when a cop tried to move them on. The cop had a black eye and a split lip, and he’d made it clear he wasn’t about to let it go.

Noel knew exactly why the kid was acting out, and while he couldn’t condone his bad behavior, he didn’t want to see him treated too harshly, either. All Ricky wanted was attention, someone to show they loved him and actually cared about what he was doing. Noel also knew the love and attention Ricky craved wasn’t available. His father was always busy, chasing around the globe, looking for new business, and as a result was seldom home. His mother, who was every bit as needy as Ricky, dealt with her attention deficit by dividing her time equally between the selection of booze she kept in the house and the young men, not much older than Ricky, she found in the downtown bars.

“You going to tell my dad?” the boy asked as Noel drove out of the lot and onto the street.

“I already did.”

“Is he coming home?”

The freckle-faced boy looked young for his age and the slight tremor in his voice slid right under Noel’s defenses and settled in

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the soft center of his heart. The kid was upset and scared shitless. When he was around the same age, Noel had been in Ricky's position—busy parents who hadn't given a shit whether he lived or died—at least that's how it had felt—so he knew exactly how much it hurt. He wanted to slam on the brakes, give the kid the hug he so badly needed and tell him everything was going to be okay. Since he had to keep things on a professional, businesslike basis, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel and pressed a little harder on the gas. “He said his plane is due into Pearson around two tomorrow afternoon.”

“What do you think he'll do?”

Noel chuckled in an attempt to get the boy to relax. “Knowing your father, I imagine the first thing he'll do is yell a lot and then he'll find you the best defense lawyer money can buy.”

“I thought you were my Dad's lawyer.”

“I am, but not for something like this. I specialize in corporate law. What you need is a good criminal lawyer.”

“I'm really in a load of shit this time, right?”

“Well...” Noel stopped for a red light, waited for it to turn green and then continued on. “Hitting a cop definitely wasn't a smart thing to do.”

“He shouldn't have shoved us.”

“He said he was moving you out of harm's way.”

“Right. We were on the other side of the street from the fire. We weren't doing any harm and we weren't in the way, but he came over to us acting all officious, like he controlled the world. Told us to move our asses or else. I didn't jump, so he pushed, and I pushed back.” Ricky sighed again. “I know, his word against mine. What do you think they'll do to me?”

“I can guarantee it won't be the death penalty or life in the Big



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House. It'll largely depend on what your lawyer can work out with the Crown. Even so... ” Noel stopped for another red light and waited for it to turn to green.

“Even so, what?”

“I'm not a counselor and it's not my business what you do, but may I offer a word of advice?”

“You mean like my parents? They're always saying I'm a big disappointment and if I don't quit getting into trouble, I'll wind up in jail. I don't want anything like that to happen any more than they do, but...”

“Your problem is you don't know how to get off the bus, right?”

Ricky laughed. “Guess that's one way of putting it.”

“Do you want to get off?”

“I'd like to. You have the magic answer as to how?”

“No, but you do. You have to change direction. Find new friends and different interests. Make a whole new life for yourself. Turn your parents' disappointment into pride for your accomplishments.”

Ricky gave a disgusted sigh. “Oh, sure. Just like that?”

Noel brought his car to a stop in front of Ricky's parent's home. “Exactly like that, and if you want to, you will. Think how great it would be if you could leave all this behind when you start college next year.”

“Won't it kinda depend on the judge?”

“To a degree, yes, but it will depend on you as well. Whatever he hands out, you take it like a man, promise to do better and then show everyone you mean what you say by staying out of further trouble. What do you think?”

“I can always try.” Ricky gave Noel a sad little smile. “Thanks

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for the advice, man.” He punched Noel lightly on the arm. “And thanks for getting me out. I wasn’t looking forward to spending the night in jail. It smells like you would not believe in there.”

“You’re welcome.” Noel waited until Ricky was safely inside the house, then he headed for his own home and bed. Ricky was basically a good kid, and Noel hoped he had whatever it took to turn his life around. But whether or not he made the effort would be Ricky’s decision and his alone.

Just before Noel fell asleep, an image of the man wearing the golden mask slid before his mind’s eye. Was it someone he’d already met since moving here to Lakeside or a complete stranger? And was there even a remote chance of them ever meeting again?

He didn’t have the answers to his questions and no way he could think of to find them out. If anyone did know anything, Noel had a feeling Parker Wentworth would be the man to ask. In fact, when he attended The Peony restaurant’s anniversary celebrations next week as Parker’s guest, he’d have to see what, if any, information his old friend might be willing to pass along.

Since relocating from Toronto to Lakeside, Noel’s social life had been non-existent. He’d needed every minute of every day to get his new law practice up and running. Now, things had started to turn around. Thanks to those clients who’d stayed with him and the new ones Parker had steered his way, the hard part was all behind him. The masquerade party had been his first venture into the local social scene and, while it hadn’t worked out quite the way he’d hoped or expected, this was a small town. If Parker didn’t know the identity of Golden Mask, there was always a chance they might meet again at another event. But was the connection he’d felt to the man strong enough for him to see beyond the mask?

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\* \* \*

Cain tipped his office chair back, put his feet on the desk and stared up at the ceiling, wondering why the man in the black feather headdress continued to haunt his dreams and invade his every waking hour. The masquerade party had been days ago, so why couldn't he just forget about him, push him out of his mind?

Being sexually attracted to a stranger wasn't something rare or unusual. It had happened before, and as the whole world knew, it would happen again. In a crowded room, an elevator, or even walking along the street. All it took was a brief exchange of glances, a sudden feeling of awareness, and for a split second, the world stopped turning. A moment later, the world moved on, the incident was forgotten, and life continued in its normal course.

So why hadn't everything returned to normal the moment the music ceased and the man disappeared? Why was it, days after the event, he still had the feeling of being bewitched and mentally whirling around an imaginary dance floor in the arms of a man he'd been with for less than five minutes? A man whose name he didn't know and stood zero chance of ever finding out.

On the off chance Parker Wentworth might know his name, Cain reached out a hand for the phone, only to snatch it back before making contact. He'd made a few guesses at the identities of several of the partygoers, and he assumed Parker and everyone else had done the same. Problem was, they were just wild guesses with no chance of becoming anything more.

Annoyed with himself for mooning around like a lovesick teenager with a bad case of unrequited lust, Cain brought the front legs of his chair down to the floor with a loud thump, got to his feet and headed for the door. He had a business to run, and with

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The Peony's anniversary celebrations only days away, there were important details he needed to keep checking and rechecking; he didn't have time to waste on daydreams or for gazing into space and wondering "what if?"

As he hurried along the hallway leading to the kitchen to see Steve, his second-in-command, Cain mentally reviewed his "to do" list. The Peony already had an extensive wine cellar, but at Steve's suggestion he'd ordered half a dozen special vintage wines to complement various new dishes on the anniversary menu. He'd also ordered flowers for the entryway, chosen new centerpieces for the tables, and spoken to a reporter at the local TV station with a view to giving The Peony's tenth anniversary a brief spot on the local news.

"You okay?" Steve asked the moment Cain tracked him down outside the new walk-in fridge-freezer.

"I'm fine, why?"

Steve shrugged. "You look kinda... I dunno. Tired, I guess. Like maybe you have a whole lot too much on your mind. Anything I can do to help?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Just haven't slept very well these past few nights. Worried I might forget something and ruin the celebrations. In fact, that's why I'm here. I wanted to check with you to see if there's anything we've forgotten."

"I can't think of anything." Steve took a vacuum-wrapped filet of beef from the freezer section and closed the door. "Anyway, I thought you had everything organized."

"I do. At least, I hope I do. Probably last minute nerves or something. You know how it is when you want something to go well, and you start worrying about the really way out stuff we both know won't happen, but could."

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Steve gave him an evil grin. “You mean, such as a power failure or a mouse running through the dining room? Something really, really bad?”

“Or Gino getting sick or the waiters going on strike.”

Steve wrapped an arm around Cain’s shoulders and gave him a brief, reassuring hug. “Not going happen, buddy. You have my personal guarantee. But it sounds to me as if you need to get out of here for a couple of hours and clear your mind. Catch a movie, go ten-pin bowling—”

“Bowling?” Cain stared at Steve, wondering if he’d heard right, then, as he started to laugh at the suggestion, he felt his tension ease slightly. “I wouldn’t know how to bowl if my life depended on it.”

“So go find a bowling alley and learn. It’ll give you something else to think about. Go for a walk, go shopping, just get the hell out of here, okay?” Steve hesitated, frowning. “I know what you can do...”

“What’s that?”

“You can go to the farmers’ market and pick up a few bunches of fresh mint. Also, check if they have any decent strawberries—two quarts should do it—and about three ripe avocados. It’ll save me the trip.”

“Anything else?”

“A pack of romaine hearts wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Sure, why not? I haven’t been to the market in ages. Not since we hired Gino.” He smiled and gave Steve a friendly slap on the back. Steve was straight, married, and the father of a couple of kids. He was also Cain’s best friend. “You know, there are actually times when I wonder what I’d do without you.”

As Cain was about to leave, Steve said, “By the way, someone

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called from the lawyer's office. They want to know if you can drop by to sign the lease renewal, or if they should have someone bring it over here."

"Do I have to make an appointment?"

"The woman who called didn't mention an appointment. She said to drop by at your convenience."

Deciding it would be more convenient to go the lawyer's office and then the market, Cain grabbed his suit jacket and headed out. As he passed by the building where Love Matters was located, he paused. They'd sent him the photos and profiles of three clients they felt would be compatible, along with a request he get back to them ASAP, which so far he'd neglected to do. All three looked and sounded perfectly fine, but as Cain read their information and scrutinized their photos, he'd felt nothing. No spark of interest, no chemistry, nothing he could honestly say had stood out and grabbed his attention.

Except he couldn't be sure if there really was nothing special about any of them, or if he was simply too obsessed by the man he'd met at the masquerade party to give them the attention they deserved. Either way, he'd wait a few more days and look the three files over one more time. If he still felt nothing, he'd call the agency and tell them to forget it.

His lawyer's office was in the next block. He entered the building via the revolving door and joined a group of people waiting for the next elevator. After a short wait, an empty car arrived. He followed the others inside, but as he pushed the button for the floor he wanted, a hand reached over his and pressed another button for a different floor—a man's hand with a thin white scar running down the second joint of his forefinger.

As the hand withdrew, Cain's chest tightened and his heart

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began to pound. He'd seen the same scar somewhere before. He couldn't remember exactly where, but... *Was it on one of Black Feather's fingers?* He turned his head to catch a glimpse of the owner. Could this be Black Feather in the flesh? Short dark hair and dark eyes, nice face, a little taller and a little heavier than himself, and probably around the same age, but not someone he knew or could recall having seen before. Even so, there was a certain something about him... chemistry, electricity, an intriguing combination he found sexually exciting. He suffered a quick surge of panic. If his arousal was visible... If it was, there wasn't one damn thing he could do about it. It was like being trapped in a force field, if indeed such a thing existed. He couldn't move, he couldn't—

The man turned his head so he was looking straight at Cain, frowned, and gave Cain a friendly smile. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Embarrassed to have been caught staring, Cain felt the blood rush to his face. “No... I... umm... No, I don't believe so. I, err...”

To Cain's relief, the elevator stopped at his floor. Feeling like a total idiot, he pushed past the other passengers and got off. The doors closed behind him, and since the hallway was empty, he leaned against the wall, took a few deep breaths and waited for his heart to stop racing and his libido to settle down. He pressed a hand hard against his aching cock.

If memory served, Black Feathers was about the same height and weight as the guy on the elevator. As for the scar... whether he'd seen it elsewhere or merely imagined it, Cain knew it could not have been at the masquerade party. Even with twenty-twenty vision, the simulated candlelight had been nowhere near strong

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enough for anyone to notice something quite so small. In any event, he seemed to recall Black Feathers had been wearing gloves.

Or was he imagining the gloves, too?

After what happened on the elevator, Cain knew his obsession with Black Feathers had gotten way out of hand. Between embarrassing himself in public and the fact he was no longer sure what was real and what he must have imagined, he'd been behaving like a candidate for lala-land ever since the night of the masquerade party. It had to stop. Starting right now, he needed to quit thinking about the man and pull himself together.

The ding of the elevator arriving and the sound of voices warned Cain he had company. He quickly moved away from the wall and continued along the hallway to his lawyer's office at the far end.

Of course, what he really needed was a vacation. A chance to sit back, clear his mind and recharge his batteries. Something he hadn't done in way too long. He'd have to wait a week or two until after the anniversary. Then he could leave The Peony in Steve's capable hands and take off for a warm beach somewhere... or maybe Vegas. He hadn't been there in a while. Or how about the trip to Europe he'd always dreamed about? Fly to London, then on to Paris and Rome, and a few of the other interesting places in between.

\* \* \*

By the time Cain returned to The Peony, he felt more in control. Over the next few days, by keeping busy, he also kept his resolve not to think about Black Feathers and it worked, most of the time. Especially once anniversary week got underway and he,



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along with the rest of the staff, was too busy to think about anything much other than the job at hand. He still slipped up occasionally and his sleep wasn't completely dreamless. Nevertheless, by the end of the week, the images had virtually faded and he thought he had the problem solved.

In fact, he was almost positive he did until the last night of the celebrations, the night of The Peony's tenth birthday party. In his role as host, Cain was stationed at the front entrance, greeting the guests as they arrived, when Parker Wentworth appeared with the guy from the elevator in tow.

At first, Cain simply stared, positive he was dreaming.

Then, as the man captured Cain's gaze and smiled, everything disappeared but the moment and the two of them. Cain's heart beat faster and, suddenly, he knew for absolute sure. He had no idea how he knew, he just he did. Maybe it was chemistry; maybe it was Fate. But this was no dream and it wasn't his imagination either—the man standing less than a foot away was the man in the black feather mask. The man from the party, the one who'd invited him to dance, tossed fairy dust in his eyes, and captured his very soul.

"What are you gawking at, Cain?" Parker demanded with a chuckle. "My gorgeous new suit? Is this what's making you drool? You look positively green with envy."

The bubble burst, the moment passed, and Cain tried to act as if nothing untoward had happened. "Who wouldn't be? It's beyond gorgeous," he gushed. Parker could have been wearing a sack for all he'd noticed; even so, he was glad to be offered a believable reason to explain the momentary lapse. "Where on earth did you find it?"

"On my last trip to Rome. A little shop I discovered a couple of

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years ago that stocks the most exquisite things imaginable. I— Oh, Lord, here I go rabbiting on and forgetting my manners.” He smiled and half-turned toward his companion. “I’d like you to meet Noel Hardingley. Noel is my lawyer. He moved here to Lakeside a few months ago from Toronto,” Parker continued by way of introduction. “Noel, this is Cain Carpenter, The Peony’s owner and a long time friend.”

“So, we meet again,” Noel said softly as he shook Cain’s hand.

Cain didn’t know if he meant the incident in the elevator or if he was referring to the party at Parker’s house. God! What if he didn’t even remember the first time?

“Again?” Parker interjected. “Where did the two of you meet before? Was it at my masquerade party? So, Cain, where have you put us tonight?” he continued without waiting for an answer. “I hope it’s the table over there by the fire because it’s freezing outside, and I urgently need to defrost.”

“Would you like to give me your coats?” Cain inquired.

Parker handed his coat over first. While Cain was hanging it up, Noel laid a hand on Cain’s arm and said quietly, “Sorry I had to run out on you the night of the party. I had an emergency call from a client. Perhaps we can make up for it sometime soon, yes?”

*Ah, so he did remember.* “I’d like that,” Cain replied. What with Black Feathers’ unexpected appearance and now the exciting suggestion of “sometime soon,” he felt totally empowered, along with shaky and breathless. Like he’d won the biggest lottery of all time and couldn’t believe his luck. He wanted to punch a fist in the air and yell, Yesssss, at the top of his voice, but since this was neither the time nor the place to let loose, he handed Noel a card from the small brass dish on the reception desk. “Why don’t you give me a call?”

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Noel's hand slid discreetly down Cain's arm and squeezed his fingers before he accepted the card and slipped it into his pocket. "Don't worry, I plan to. That's a promise."

"What are you two whispering about?" Parker wanted to know.

"Nothing important. Noel asked how long I've known you." Cain smiled. Refusing to say anything more or think beyond the moment, he beckoned one of the waiters over and asked him to seat Noel and Parker at the table by the fire.

As the three of them moved on into the main part of the restaurant, Cain absently rubbed the spot where Noel touched his arm and wondered if he'd follow through on his promise to call. He also wondered if, in addition to Noel being Parker's lawyer, there was something more to the relationship. If so, was it Noel's reason for relocating? Then again, he wouldn't be the first guy to tire of the big city rat race and opt for the more relaxed lifestyle of a small town like Lakeside.

As more people arrived, Cain tried to focus his attention on greeting them, but he couldn't resist shooting the odd glance across the room to where Noel and Parker were seated. There didn't seem to be anything going on between the two of them, and he was pretty sure he'd have known by now if there was. For one thing, Parker had a notoriously short attention span when it came to lovers, and for another, each time he managed to sneak a glance in their direction, he'd caught Noel looking back at him.

The next group through the door included Cain's older brother, Leo, and his wife, Joanne.

"Hey, bro? Look as if you've got a full house night," Leo remarked after the three of them exchanged hugs. "Congrats on making ten years. I'm so damn proud of you, kid. You've done really good."

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His big brother's obvious pride in his accomplishments made Cain feel a tad teary-eyed, but then Leo had always been there for him. Right from the start, when Cain was struggling with his sexuality and putting up with cruel remarks from the other kids, Leo was there front and center—Leo, his hero and protector. “Love you, too, bro,” Cain whispered.

With every seat filled, Cain went from table to table, making menu and wine suggestions and small talk. At one point, he was speaking to the occupants of the table next to Noel's when he felt a hand touch the area around his knee.

He turned quickly to find Noel looking up at him with a butter-wouldn't-melt grin. “Sorry! Was that you?” Noel apologized, his dark eyes dancing with something Cain didn't dare try to interpret. “My mistake. I thought it was the table leg.”

When it happened again as Cain stopped by Noel's table again a few minutes later, he knew it was no mistake. Particularly when Noel captured his gaze without releasing his knee.

“Everything to your satisfaction?” Cain asked.

“Excellent,” Parker replied with a sigh. “Those shrimps were to die for. And the soup with the little meatballs... pure ambrosia.”

“And you, sir?” he asked Noel.

Noel smiled and increased the pressure of his hand, clearly enjoying the fact he was in control and there was nothing Cain could do about it. “It's all quite wonderful. But I have a feeling the best is yet to come. Hmm?”

“It is?” Parker queried. “What did you order for your entrée?”

“The *filet de boeuf* with asparagus. It sounds totally delicious.”

“It's certainly one of our more popular dishes,” Cain agreed as he tried to regain possession of his knee without upsetting the table or drawing attention to himself. “Now, if you'll excuse me,

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gentlemen.”

Noel relaxed his grasp, and Cain made his escape, wondering if Noel would call tonight after the restaurant closed. Or did he plan to ratchet up the tension even more by making him wait until tomorrow?

As he passed by his brother’s table, Leo grabbed his arm. “Hey, who’s the dude with Parker?”

“His lawyer, why?”

“What’s the deal?”

Cain raised his eyebrows. “The deal?”

“Yeah, you know what I mean. Poor guy can’t take his eyes off you. I’ve been sitting here watching him track you like a hawk.”

“Maybe he’s got the hots for me,” Cain murmured, resisting the urge to say more.

“No maybe about it, kid. At a guess, I’d say he’s got it really bad.”

*Yeah, me, too.*

Determined to change the subject, he turned to his sister-in-law. Blue-eyed, blonde-haired Joanne lived next door when he and Leo were growing up, and she’d been another of his staunch supporters through school. Mess with Joanne’s friends and you messed with her. As the daughter of a kickboxing instructor, she knew how to earn respect whenever the situation demanded it. “What did you think of the raspberry and blue cheese salad, Joanne?”

“It was good. A keeper, in my opinion.”

“Thanks. I’ll have to tell Gino. It’s one of his new creations. You guys having the beef filet?”

“I am,” Leo admitted. “Joanne wants to try the pork tenderloin in red wine. Is that new, too?”

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“Fairly new. It’s something Steve came up with, and Gino perfected. It’s also very good. And make sure you both leave enough room for a slice of birthday cake and a glass of champagne, okay?”

For the rest of the evening, Cain kept one eye on the guests and the other on his watch, interspersed with the occasional glance over at the table by the fire. Shortly before ten, Parker called for the check. A few minutes later, he and Noel were heading for the exit.

“Great food, as always,” Parker said, as Cain helped him on with coat. “And the new Italian dessert wine is quite delicious. I’ll have to remember the name. What did you think, Noel?”

Noel looked at Cain, narrowed his gaze and touched his upper lip with the tip of his tongue. As far as Cain was concerned, Noel’s message was clear and his nerves immediately tightened. “Everything was totally fabulous. The ambiance, the food, the wine, and the company, of course,” he said, smiling at Parker. “I can’t wait to come here again.”

“Anytime. I’m glad to know you had a good evening.” Cain started to assist Noel with his coat, only to regret the move as Noel managed to grope him rather effectively by, or so he said, getting his hand somehow caught in the lining.

After Noel and Parker left, Cain was wound up tighter than an old-fashioned alarm clock. Again, he wondered how long he’d have to wait for Noel’s call. Would he call shortly to find out what time Cain would be free? Or would he wait until he figured the restaurant was about to close for the night?

He also wondered if Noel and Parker had driven here together or separately. If separately, was Noel sitting out there in the parking lot, just waiting?

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The possibility set his heart racing and tied his nerves in knots. He could barely breathe, he was so excited... at the thought of being alone with Noel, being touched and—

“Night, bro,” Leo said, breaking into Cain’s reverie and giving him a rib-crushing bear hug. “Don’t forget you’re having dinner with us next Sunday. Jo’s making one of her famous roasts, okay?”

“Sounds good. The usual time?”

“Yeah, around seven.”

As Cain walked Leo and Joanne out of the restaurant, he grabbed the opportunity for a quick check of the lot next door where his customers usually parked. He saw at least a dozen or more vehicles there, and, with the lot being city-owned, they could belong to anyone. However, if Noel was waiting in one of them, it was too dark for Cain to see.

He went back inside and fidgeted for a few minutes, aligning the stack of business cards in the dish, straightening the empty hangers on the rail, and constantly checking his watch. The Peony usually closed around eleven or a little after. Give the staff half an hour or so to grab a coffee, finish what was left of the birthday cake and be on their way. By midnight, everything should be locked up tight.

Actually, it was closer to twelve-thirty when Steve finally stuck his head in the office to say everyone had gone and to ask if should he set the alarm on his way out.

“No, I’ll be leaving myself in a few minutes. I’ll do it.”

Steve hesitated in the doorway. “It’s been a great week, huh? Busy, but great. I can’t believe it’s been ten years.”

“Me, either,” Cain admitted. “Think the next ten will be a little easier?”

Steve laughed. “I guess we can always hope. Anyway, I’d

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better get outta here before my wife calls and wants to know what the holdup is. See you on Monday, buddy.”

After Steve left, Cain checked the parking lot one more time. There were still a few cars out there, but whether Noel was in one of them was anyone’s guess. If he was, why hadn’t Noel called to let him know? Swallowing his disappointment, Cain unplugged his laptop, turned off the lights, and set the alarm on his way out via the back door.

Earlier, when he’d walked outside with Leo and Joanne it had been a nice, mild evening; now it was bitterly cold. The temperature had dropped, the wind was picking up strength and clouds were scudding across the moon. Pulling up his coat collar, he hurried over to his car.

When he reached it, he paused, searching for his keys. Could be Noel had never had any intention of calling him, not now and not later. While they hadn’t indulged in any public displays of affection, it wasn’t proof positive he and Parker didn’t have something going beside the lawyer-client thing. Some people actually preferred to keep their private life private. Although, if that were true in this case, why would Noel make a pass at him?

Cain hated putting himself through this type of mental anguish, but he knew there had to be a reason for Noel’s flirtatious behavior. Had he wanted to make Parker jealous? Embarrass Cain because he’d sensed his interest. Or was he the kind who thought it clever to show off like a spoiled brat? One of those arrogant, self-confident jerks who went through life flirting with every guy they met, not caring how many friendships they destroyed or hearts they broke simply because they could.

Annoyed with himself for getting caught up in Noel’s spell yet again, after putting the laptop in the trunk, Cain opened the



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driver's door and got in. If he was misjudging the man—

Cain's car was parked between two other vehicles and, as he was about to start the engine, he thought he saw a brief flash of movement to his right. Before he could decide if it was someone or a merely a shadow thrown by one the trees bordering the lot, a sharp tap-tap sounded against the window on the passenger side.

For one horrible, gut-wrenching moment Cain thought someone was trying to break into his car. He envisioned being injured, even killed by the attacker, but then the shadow moved lower. At first, all he saw was a face, but then he breathed a quick sigh of relief when he realized it was Noel out there, knocking on the window.

He leaned over and opened the passenger door. "Jeez, man, you almost gave me a heart attack. What are you doing here?"

Noel pulled his coat around his body and stepped into Cain's car, bringing with him a dash of cool night air along with a faint woody fragrance Cain thought might be aftershave. "Waiting for you. What else?"

The smile, the way Noel was looking at him and the fact he was there, and Cain's misgivings of a moment ago were forgotten. "You've been hanging around out here in the cold since you and Parker left. What? Two, three hours ago?"

"No." Noel gave a soft, sexy chuckle that raised hairs on every part of Cain's body and made him very conscious of the way his cock was pressing against the zipper of his pants. "I had to drive Parker home, then I went to my place for a while, but I couldn't settle for thinking about you. So I came back. I thought about calling to ask you to hurry it up, but I knew you still had customers, so I figured I should wait. Anyway, enough waiting, agreed?"

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As Noel reached for him, Cain melted. Their mouths touched, and he felt the delicious sensation of Noel's tongue sliding over his lips, seeking entry. He was so damn hot, so ready for this, he didn't care the console was in the way, that they were in a public parking lot, or anything else. He wanted Noel and he wanted him now. Noel was everything he'd ever dreamed of, everything he wanted in life. Hell, he was already more than a little in love with a man he barely knew, yet he could so easily imagine the two of them walking off into the sunset, hand in hand to live happily ever after.

As quickly as it began, the wonderful dream vanished and Cain pulled back. This was exactly what he wanted, but not at someone else's expense.

"What's the problem?" Noel asked. "I thought you wanted me. I thought we had something special, something worth exploring. Of course, I could be wrong and if I am, then I apologize. We'll forget I was ever here."

"No, you're not wrong. We both know the chemistry was there the night we met at the masquerade. Even so, I—"

"You're having second thoughts? You've changed your mind?"

"Tell me about Parker."

"Parker? What's to tell? He's a client and a very good friend. We've known each other for a number of years." Noel hesitated. "I don't know what else to say."

"You're saying all he is to you is a client and a friend? Nothing more?"

"We're not lovers if that's what you're asking. Never have been and never will be. We have no interest in one another sexually. If we were involved, I can assure you I wouldn't be here with you."

"Sorry I had to ask, but... " Cain felt awkward and

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embarrassed both for the moment and for what he'd thought about Noel earlier. Nevertheless he'd needed to know. "There's never been anything sexual between myself and Parker either, but we are good friends and have been for a long time. I wouldn't want to do anything to ruin the relationship... that's why I had to ask. I hope you understand."

"Of course, I understand. I'd probably have done the same thing in your place." Noel reached across the console and, taking Cain's hand in his, he rubbed the pad of this thumb back and forth over his palm. "I don't play with people's affections, I don't cheat, or double-dip, or whatever the current expression is. What you see is what you get."

"Same here," Cain said, intertwining his fingers with Noel's. Feeling a tiny burst of something special around the region of his heart, he added, "And now we've got that out of the way, your place or mine? I'm too old to be making out in the back seat of my car."

Noel smiled. "Scared of the cops turning up?"

Cain gave a mock shiver. "You betcha. Kids in cars used to be a prime target for some of the local cops, and I spent my teenage years in constant fear of getting caught. I guess I've never quite gotten over it." Letting go of Noel's hand, he started the engine and backed out of his parking space. "I live about five minutes away, down by the lake. You?"

"I'm renting part of a house a few blocks from here. It's just temporary until I find time to look around for a place to buy, so I'm afraid it's rather lacking in furniture at the moment."

"Then my place it is. You want to follow in your car?"

"Good idea. Which way?"

"I'll be turning left out of here onto Main Street, then left again

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at the first light. There shouldn't be much traffic at this time of night, but in case we get separated, keep going straight until you get to the lake and then hang a right. My house is on the lake side, and the number's one-three-six-eight."

\* \* \*

Noel got out of Cain's car, shivering as he hurried back to his own vehicle. After the heat of Cain's body and the warmth of his car, the night felt colder than it had a few minutes earlier. He hesitated for a moment, then he restarted the engine and drove over to the exit where Cain was waiting for him to catch up.

As Cain predicted, there was almost no traffic, plus they caught every green light. In less than five minutes, Noel parked his car in Cain's driveway.

Cain was the first man Noel had allowed himself to want in a very long time, and he wanted him desperately. However, the overwhelming, on-the-brink-of-something-wonderful feeling that had started at the masquerade and kept him waiting for hours back at the restaurant had disappeared. He'd figured maybe a quickie in Cain's car to take the edge off and then they'd go somewhere where they could relax and take things slowly. Now, he was wishing he'd gone home and stayed there.

He got out of the car and paused.

"You coming?" Cain called.

"Just making sure the alarm's on." Noel had always been impulsive. Falling for the wrong guy and letting his heart rule his head had landed him in trouble on more than one occasion. Somehow, though, he'd always managed to survive, so he figured it was just his nature. It never once occurred to him the day might

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come when he wouldn't survive quite so easily, that he could meet someone who would take everything he had and simply walk away. But it had happened. He'd fallen for someone, a man he believed to have international business interests, who'd turned his life into a nightmare. Between the gambling debts he'd charged to Noel, the forged checks, and the constant demands for more money, he'd thought it would never end.

Eventually, it had ended. Once the flow of money stopped, the guy disappeared, and Noel was forced to sell his house and most everything else he owned to cover what was owed to the bank.

Nevertheless, it was far from over in Noel's mind. He'd been so terrified the man would come back and the demands would start again, he'd quit his job with a Toronto law firm where he was in line for a partnership and left town.

He still had his law license and a little money left over from the house sale, and he'd been lucky to have several of his better clients, including Parker, want to stay with him. Even so, after moving to Lakeside and starting his own business, he'd kept strictly to himself, living like a monk, while he gradually added to his client base and tried to rebuild his life.

Parker's masquerade was his first step back into the social scene and, while the evening had been cut short it had gone well. He'd felt like he was finally over what happened, that he'd conquered all the fear and self-doubt and could go back to living a normal life. Although, if that were true, why was he feeling so damn nervous and unsure now? He wasn't heedlessly rushing into the unknown with a stranger he'd met in a bar. Cain was a solid citizen, a business owner, and one of Parker's friends. Maybe it was because of the instant wanting the first time they met. The delicious feeling of knowing *it* had to happen sooner or later that

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had him tied up in knots.

He followed Cain up the steps and into the house, then waited as Cain flipped on lights. But as Cain closed and locked the door, he felt a swift surge of panic. One-half of his brain pressured him to invent some excuse and leave, while the other half insisted he stay on the grounds instant attraction didn't always have to end badly.

Taking off his overcoat and suit jacket, Cain tossed them on a nearby chair. "You want a drink?"

Noel hesitated. Telling himself running wasn't an option, he took a deep breath, removed his own coat and jacket and dropped them on top of Cain's. "Sounds good. You have any scotch?"

"How do you take it? Ice, water, or straight up?"

"Straight up, thanks."

Cain showed Noel into a beautifully decorated cream-and-charcoal living room and told him to make himself comfortable. "I'll be back in a moment with the drinks."

Noel chose to sit on one of the upholstered chairs. The furniture was modern and so was the art decorating the pale cream walls, and while the décor was masculine, there were small splashes of color to soften the effect. Like the man and his restaurant, everything about Cain's home was elegant and sophisticated. Very similar to the house Noel had once owned until it disappeared down the toilet along with his life.

When he returned with the scotch, Noel was surprised to see Cain's hand shake slightly when handing him his drink. "Cheers." Noel raised his glass and took a small sip, relishing the rich, peaty taste of the single malt. So, Cain was nervous, too. Oddly enough, the knowledge restored a little of Noel's confidence.

"I really like your house," he said. "It must be nice, living so

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close to the lake.”

“It is, most of the time. It can get a little hairy when a winter storm comes howling across the water, and you figure you’ll get blown away, but you get used to it.”

“Has that ever happened?”

“You mean like a house getting blown away?” Cain shook his head. “Not to any of the ones along here I’m aware of. They’re rock solid. The original owners, seafaring men who lived here around a hundred years ago, spent their lives battling storms on the Great Lakes, so they built them to withstand anything Mother Nature could toss their way. I imagine they’ll still be here in another hundred years. Provided, of course, someone doesn’t pull them down to make way for something else.”

The living room was located at the back of the house. Placing his drink on a small table, Noel stood and walked over to the window. It was too dark to see much, other than the well-lit public pathway running behind the house and the wind driven waves along the shoreline. In the far distance, he could see the lights of a ship, and he wondered where it was from and where it was going. Maybe it came from some faraway place with a cargo of fabulous treasures made from gold and ivory to dazzle the people of the new world. And maybe it was just a rusty old laker, carrying a load of scrap to one of the nearby steels mills.

Cain’s hand touched his shoulder, and Noel’s body tensed. He knew almost nothing about Cain, yet he sensed the man was a lot like his house. Someone he could be sure of and depend on... assuming, of course, he ever found the power within himself to trust anyone again.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Noel lied. “Why?”

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“Because... I guess it’s because the other times we’ve met, and even tonight when you arrived with Parker, you seemed so up, so confident, like you had the whole world and everyone in it by the balls. I thought you’d jump me the moment we walked through the door.” He passed. “But now, you seem... I don’t know. A little shaky, unsure. You tell me.”

Noel’s chest and throat felt tight with emotion. He wanted to throw his arms around Cain, tell him the truth and have Cain hold him while he cried his heart out. Apart from Parker, Cain was probably the only other person who might understand the reason for his mood swings and how getting your life back was probably the most difficult thing a person had to do. How you tried to be your old self, and how sometimes you couldn’t sustain the pretense for very long. Perhaps one day he’d tell him, but not now.

Instead, he managed a husky chuckle. “How about it’s late, it’s been a long day, and your whisky packs one hell of a punch?”

Cain turned Noel to face him and grasped both his shoulders. “How about the truth? The real truth this time. Not some cobbled together shit about being bowled over by two sips of good malt. Something’s very wrong here, and I want to know what it is.”

“The truth?” Noel sucked in a breath and released it as a long, drawn out sigh. “You mean the bit where I fell too hard, too fast, believed everything I was told like a wide-eyed two-year old, got royally screwed over, wiped out, and dumped? That the truth you wanted to hear?”

“When did this happen?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His lips twisted in a self-deprecating sneer. “It doesn’t reflect very well on me, so I’d rather not talk about it.”

“When?” Cain insisted, increasing the pressure of his grasp a little. “Tell me. Just spit it out.”



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“A while ago. Before I moved here.” To his horror, Noel felt his eyes burn with tears and erase what little pride he had left. “It was my own damn fault. I was so incredibly fucking stupid I should be locked up. Now please, let it go.”

Cain pulled him close so their bodies were pressed hard together. “Hey, stop beating yourself up. It’s okay. You want me to go punch the guy out?”

Noel stifled the urge to laugh at Cain’s unexpected offer. There was something about this beautiful man wanting to fight his battles he not only found outrageously funny, it also had the added and immediate effect of making him feel a whole lot better. Just knowing someone cared often worked as many miracles as the most expensive medicine. “No. Once he figured he’d cleaned me out, he simply disappeared. I have no idea where he is now. Even the name he used was phony.”

“Did you contact the police?”

“And tell them what? There was no point. Nothing they could do. The money’s gone, and so is he, and I don’t have a hope in hell of finding either one. I invited the man into my life and let him rob me blind. I should have done something the moment I realized what was happening, but I didn’t. I also didn’t go to the cops because I’m a lawyer, and I have to protect my reputation. I didn’t want the story getting out. I’d have been the joke of the year. I figured the fewer people who knew the better.”

“Who does know?”

“Parker and one other friend. Now you, of course.”

“What about you?” Cain relaxed his hold and slid a finger beneath Noel’s chin. “Getting wiped out holds a lot of shock value for even the strongest of us. I imagine it did a real number on you mentally and physically.”

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Noel shrugged and stepped away. “I’d like to say I blew it off, but obviously I didn’t. Still, I’m getting there. I’m better than I was a year ago. And before you say any more, it was something I walked into eyes wide open. I have no one to blame but myself. It’s over and done with, and talking won’t change a thing. All I can do is try to forget about it.”

\* \* \*

Cain watched Noel walk over to the table where he’d left his drink, pick up the glass, and take another sip. He seemed more relaxed now, and Cain was glad he’d gotten him to open up, even though he hadn’t said much. He’d known one other guy who’d been ripped off by a lover, and it wasn’t just the money and possessions. It was the loss of dignity and self-respect, along with the fear it could happen again that did the most damage. It took him months to get over the experience. He quit his job, holed up in his apartment and refused to have anything to do with anyone for the longest time. At least Noel was making an effort to get back his life. He was working and he was going out. Even so, Cain suspected this was his first attempt to get up close and personal with anyone. Unfortunately, it wasn’t going quite the way he’d hoped.

Hell, it wasn’t going the way Cain hoped, either, but Noel had taken his first big step in the right direction. No way would Cain let him regress by giving up now, not when he’d come this far.

Noel put his half-finished drink on the table and jingled his keys. “It’s been a long day and it’s late. I should go and let you get to bed.”

“I thought you’d be staying here tonight.”

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“Yeah, me, too. But...” He smiled a tad self-consciously. “But spilling my guts that way was not part of the plan. I’m afraid it kinda spoiled the mood.”

Cain returned his smile. “You think?”

“It didn’t spoil it for you?”

“Why would it? You had something on your mind and you needed to get it out. Now that you have, you need to move on.”

Noel sat down on the edge of the sofa. “I know talking about it is supposed to be good. A problem shared and so forth, and I do feel better for the telling. But I’ve always been the leader, the man in control, and the one who made all the moves. Now look at me. I feel like such an idiot.”

“Because you’re human and screwed up?” Cain joined Noel on the sofa. “Or because you met someone who was smarter than you?”

Noel looked away. “No, because I’m a lawyer, a highly educated man who’s supposed to protect his clients from the phonies and the scam artists of this world. God! I couldn’t even protect myself. I feel totally emasculated.”

“So, get over it.”

Noel’s laugh was harsh and humorless. “Oh, sure.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that.”

“You can do anything you want.”

“So I’ve been told. By experts.” Noel sighed and leaned back into the cushions. “But first I have to want something badly enough to believe I can have it.” He picked up one of the throw cushions, held it tight to his chest for a moment, and put it down again. “When we met at the masquerade, I knew I wanted you enough to do whatever it might take. And I guarantee I’d have been fine, except the damn phone started ringing and game over. I

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had to leave. Then tonight when I first saw you at the restaurant... Wow!"

"What about it?"

He laughed and touched his upper lip with the tip of his tongue. "I wanted to hustle you out of there and go somewhere private where we could fuck our brains out. You didn't know?"

"I knew. You made sure I did." It was Cain's turn to laugh. "So did my brother. And now?"

"I still want you."

Cain ran a hand down the front of Noel's pants, feeling a faint stirring of Noel's sex beneath the fabric. "Then prove it. Seduce me."

"Seduce you? You have to be kidding." Noel's mood changed faster than the weather. He rolled away from Cain, got to his feet and headed for the door. "I can't. I doubt I can even get it up."

"You chickening out?"

Noel hesitated in the doorway, and it was all the encouragement Cain needed to make him stop and face his demons. Before Noel could take another step, he moved in fast, wrapping his arms around Noel from behind. He felt him tense, and he heard a quick intake of breath and a low, almost feral growl, but Cain held firm. Noel was bigger than Cain, and Cain expected Noel to shake him off. Instead, he broke Cain's hold and turned around to face him.

"Damn you," he muttered in a voice that cracked. Grasping Cain's face in both hands, he ground his mouth against Cain's, roughly forcing his lips apart and pushing his tongue in as far as it would go.

Cain felt Noel's cock pressing hard against the lower part of his belly, evidence Noel's fear he couldn't get aroused had been

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groundless. However, Noel's latest mood swing had happened too quickly in Cain's opinion. Cain feared he'd pushed him too far in too short a time and Noel would take him by force. But then, as Cain slipped his arms around his waist and returned the kiss, Noel gentled his assault. He slid his tongue slowly in and out of Cain's mouth, while his hands moved down to squeeze and caress Cain's ass cheeks until Cain was so turned on, he shook with need.

Noel unfastened Cain's pants and slipped a hand inside. Holding Cain's cock in one hand, he rubbed the fingers of his other hand over the tip. "You have a condom handy?"

Cain hesitated, wondering for one insane second if he dare take a chance and go without. He'd never even contemplated taking any kind of risk before, but then Noel solved the problem by saying, "You keep them in the bathroom?"

"No, the bedroom." Cain refastened his pants and led the way up the stairs and along a short hallway to his bedroom. Sitting on the bed, he took a couple of foil packages from the bottom drawer of the vanity and placed them on top.

"Now, take off your clothes," Noel said softly.

"All of them?"

"Every last stitch." Noel smiled, sending shivers of anticipation skipping over Cain's skin as he began to do the same.

Cain quickly unknotted his tie, kicked off his shoes and unbuttoned his shirt. He glanced over at Noel while removing his shirt and unzipping his pants, feeling a quick thrill of excitement as Noel stopped what he was doing and watched him.

"Hey, what's the holdup?" Cain asked, enjoying the sight of Noel's nicely muscled and tanned upper body. A sprinkling of dark hair covered his chest and continued in a thin line that dipped below his waist.

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Noel sat on the bed and regarded him through sleepy, half-closed eyes. "I want to look at you. Do you mind?"

"I guess not." This was the first time Cain had undressed to please a lover, but his body was in good shape and, although he found the request a little unusual, it was also amazingly erotic. He took off his shirt, draped it over the back of a chair and followed it with his pants and socks.

"Now the boxers," Noel instructed. "But come over here in front of me. I want you to look at me while you take them off, and I want you to do it very slowly."

Cain walked back to the bed, looked deep into Noel's dark eyes, hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers, and pushed them slowly down over his arousal, then his hips, and let them fall to the floor.

Noel ran his hand over Cain's flat belly. "You're a very beautiful man. I thought you would be." He stroked Cain's cock, apparently fascinated by the drop of pre-cum glistening at the tip. "I want to taste you," he murmured. "But let's save the good stuff for another time, agreed?"

Cain was so hot and hard he just wanted to get to the main event, but he had a hard and fast rule about never taking chances, even though he'd come within a hair's breadth of breaking that rule a moment ago. "Sounds good to me."

Noel picked up one of the foil packages, opened it with his teeth and fitted the condom over Cain's shaft. Leaving the bed, he got down on his knees and took Cain into his mouth. He began the loving very gently, holding Cain's cock with one hand while he licked and sucked, but as Cain's fingers dug into his shoulders, urging him on, he upped the action. Bringing his other hand into play, he squeezed Cain's balls and slid a finger up and down his

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crack, until Cain couldn't hold back for another second. Release came like a series of explosions, so hard and so fast, he could barely remain standing upright.

But then it was over. Noel finished undressing and pulled Cain down beside him on the bed. Holding him close, Noel leisurely kissed his face as he stroked his back. "Thanks for convincing me to stay," he said quietly. "If you hadn't... Anyway, I'm really glad you did. I think it turned out pretty good between us, huh?"

"You won't hear me complaining. But what about you? You didn't get anything out of it."

Noel laughed softly. "Sure I did. I knew there was no way I could hold back, it's been too long, and so I did me right at the beginning. But you know what?"

"No, what?"

"It was over much too fast. I like taking it real slow and easy. Anticipate the moment for as long as possible." Noel took Cain's hand and wrapped it around his limp dick. "So, why don't we think of what we did as the appetizer, and now we can take our time working up our appetites for the main meal? Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a great plan." Cain released Noel and got off the bed. "Can you hold the thought while I make a quick trip to the bathroom?"

Cain was gone less than five minutes, but when he got back to the bedroom, he wasn't too surprised to find Noel under the duvet and, from all appearances, already fast asleep. His face seemed a little flushed, but his breathing was deep and even. In fact, he looked so peaceful and relaxed Cain knew it was just what he needed, even though it would probably take a bomb to wake him up.

For a few seconds, he stood there and watched Noel sleeping,

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still a little overwhelmed by the knowledge they'd managed to find one another again. It was hard for him to believe what happened tonight was real and not a dream. Things like this only happened in books and fairy tales, almost never in real life and he hadn't really thought it would happen to him... until now. Smoothing a hand over Noel's dark hair, Cain kissed him lightly on the forehead, got into bed and turned out the light.

It was late and Cain was tired, however, he was too psyched to sleep. Instead, he lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling to watch the ever-changing patterns made by the combination of trees swaying in the wind and the lights along the path reflecting back from the water.

Noel mumbled something in his sleep and moved closer to Cain. Turning on his side, Cain wrapped an arm around him and drew him close. He felt happier and more content than he had in a long time. There was something about the two of them cuddled up together like this that seemed so right.

Making a mental note to contact Love Matters and say, "Thanks, but no thanks," he finally drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

Cain woke up a little after eight to find the heavy weight on his belly was Noel's head, and the reason he felt so turned on was because Noel was playing with his cock.

He reached down and ruffled Noel's hair. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to attack you, but I could use a little help."

Cain chuckled and stretched his arms above his head. "You seem to be doing just fine by yourself."



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“I’d be doing fantastic if you’d kindly reach in the nightstand and find me a condom.”

“Umm... I have a rather more interesting idea. One where we both get to enjoy ourselves.” Cain got out of bed, grabbed a couple of condoms from the nightstand, and headed for the bathroom. “You coming?”

By the time he’d turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature of the water, Noel was right behind him in the doorway. “Do I get to scrub your back?”

“No, babe. I get to scrub yours.” After Noel stepped into the cubicle, Cain got in behind him and closed the glass door. Turning his face up to the water, he ran his hands slowly down Noel’s belly and stroked his dick. “Feels good, hmm?”

Noel ground his butt hard against Cain’s groin, causing Cain to catch his breath. “What did you do with the condoms?”

“They’re on the caddy, right next to the lube.”

“So... what’s the problem?”

Cain nipped Noel’s shoulder with his teeth. “I thought you said you liked to take your time.”

Noel turned off the spray, grabbed one of the foil packages and tucked it under Cain’s hand. “Yeah, but there are times, like now, when I feel so sexually starved, hard and fast holds a lot of appeal, if you get my drift.” He reached for the container of lube and held it up. “Here. You’ll need this, too.”

With Noel spelling out exactly what he wanted, Cain wasn’t about to deny him. He donned the condom, squeezed a little of the lube onto a finger, and ran it down Noel’s crack, smiling at Noel’s groan of pleasure as he slid the tip into his hole.

“Come on, babe,” Noel pleaded, pushing back against him. “No preliminaries and no messing about. I want to feel you all the

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way in. Please!”

“Patience,” Cain muttered, as he worked his finger back and forth to relax the muscle. Once he’d loosened it a little, he squirted more lube into the opening and slathered some on his own aroused shaft, too. “Okay, bend over.” As Noel did what he asked, Cain spread his ass cheeks wide and inserted the head of his dick. He waited a few seconds and pushed in a little farther. Then, holding on tight to Noel’s hips, he went in all the way. “Better?”

“Wow!” Noel chuckled. “I almost forgot how good this feels.”

It felt good for Cain, too. He pulled out slowly and pushed back in a tad faster, listening to Noel’s verbal encouragement as he gradually upped the speed of his strokes, until he slammed into him with all the force of a runaway freight train. Once he had himself on the edge, feeling as if he was made of spun glass, knowing one false move and he’d shatter, he paused. This was the part he enjoyed the most, holding onto the moment and stretching out their mutual pleasure by kissing and licking Noel’s back and neck.

Finally, he pushed Noel’s hands away and took possession of Noel’s cock, stroking and squeezing until he knew Noel was ready, too. Then he pulled out and pushed back in slowly until he felt Noel’s entire body tense. As Noel began to shoot his load, Cain wasn’t far behind. He felt the glass crack, then shatter into a million tiny golden fragments.

Noel turned the water back on and gathered Cain close in his arms. His breathing sounded a little ragged, and his heart was beating extra fast, but all Cain really cared about was the reality of Noel being here in his house. He hadn’t given in to his fears and slipped away in the night as Cain had half-expected he might. Although what would happen next, he didn’t even dare try to

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guess.

Once they finished showering and got dressed, Cain made a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. “Any plans for today?” he asked, as he split the balance of the coffee between them.

“I’d thought I might go for a hike along the Escarpment. I don’t mind the cold, but when I watched the Weather Channel yesterday afternoon, they were calling for rain and snow flurries today, so I think I’ll pass. You?”

Cain glanced out the kitchen window. A weak, winter sun sent silvery fingers of light across the rippled surface of the lake, while those people brave enough to walk along the beach path looked to be dressed for the frozen north.

“Nothing special. The Peony’s closed on Sundays, so I usually spend the day catching up on my reading, maybe go out to a movie, or watch a little TV.” Cain wanted to propose the idea of them doing something together, like maybe going back to bed, but he sensed Noel was still a little jumpy and uncertain about him and their embryonic relationship. The absolute last thing he wanted to do was to spoil things by pushing him in directions he might not be ready to go. The next step was up to Noel.

Noel looked at him over the rim of his coffee mug, a tentative smile hovering on his lips. “Would you like to do something with me?” he asked, making Cain wonder if he read minds. “Or would you like me to vanish so you can read your book?”

Cain reached across the table and laid his hand atop Noel’s. “I definitely don’t want you to vanish. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, since a hike is out, how do you feel about house hunting? There’s a property I’m interested in checking out and today they’re having an open house. Afterwards, if you like, we

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can go somewhere for lunch.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Do you like Chinese?”

“Love it!”

“Good because a new place recently opened up near the courthouse and the food is fabulous. My treat, okay?”

“Fine. Where’s the house?”

“Also downtown and within walking distance of my office. I’d save a ton on gas and with this latest price increase, transportation costs are becoming a big consideration.”

\* \* \*

The property Noel had his eye on was in what used to be the more exclusive part of town when Cain was growing up. This was where the company owners and all the town’s movers and shakers raised their families... and also a little hell on occasion. Now, the entire street looked to be in need of a large helping of TLC. Several of the previously well-cared-for large homes were now rooming houses, while others were split up into apartments. They all looked neglected and rundown, and Cain wondered what the attraction was.

“This is it,” Noel said, as he parked his car in front of the last house at the end of street. “What do you think?”

Cain glanced up at the three-storied brick mansion with its peeling dark green paintwork and filthy first-floor windows. The brickwork was badly in need of repointing, and the portico with its two supporting columns looked to be in need of a little work and a new paint job, as did the partly open ornate front door. “It looks a bit big for one person.”

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“It is. But that’s the whole point. The house has been converted into three large, self-contained apartments, plus a studio apartment in the basement. One of the apartments is currently vacant, so if I do decide to buy, I can live here, and the rent money from the other three will help recoup some of my losses. What do you think?”

“I thought you said you’re wiped out financially,” Cain said bluntly.

“I was.” Noel shrugged and shuffled his feet. “I lost my house and just about everything else. And I wouldn’t even be able to think about buying this place, except my grandfather died not too long ago and left me some savings bonds that are about to mature. Between the bonds and what I’ve managed to put aside this past year, I figure I can probably scrape together the minimum down payment.”

“How did you hear about it?”

“The owner’s a client. He recently had an inspection done with a view to selling, so I know for sure it’s structurally sound. According to him, all it needs is a little fixing up and redecorating, which I don’t see as a problem. I covered the major part of my school fees by working in construction, so I could do most of what’s needed in my spare time. He suggested I look it over, think about the possibilities, and if I’m interested, he says he’d be willing to let me have it for a good price. Shall we go in and take a look?”

Cain followed Noel up the three shallow steps and through the door to find the real estate agent waiting in the hallway. After going through his spiel about what a terrific opportunity it could be for the right buyer, the young man offered to show them around.

The three main apartments featured spacious, high-ceilinged rooms, but it was obvious the kitchens and bathrooms all needed a

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major update, and the parquet wood floors would have to be refinished. The basement apartment was in a little better shape than the others since the current tenant had gone to the trouble of repainting the walls. Even so, the air throughout the house was thick with the smell of stale cooking and overflowing garbage cans. By the time the tour was over, it was clear to Cain what the owner told Noel about “a little fixing up” had been something of an understatement.

After leaving the house, Noel drove over to a lot across from the courthouse where he parked his car, and he and Cain walked the remaining block to the restaurant. To Cain’s surprise, Noel waited until they were seated and had given the waiter their order before he returned to the subject of the house.

“So, what did you think? It’s such a beautiful old place, and with a bit of work I think it could be really something.”

“A bit? From what I saw, it needs a ton of work.” Cain shrugged. “But if that’s what you want, and you’re willing to spend the time and money...”

Noel frowned. “In other words, you’re telling me to stop and think, not close my eyes and leap. Well, I have thought—”

“Right. For at least five minutes.” Cain smiled to soften his words, wishing Noel would just forget about the damn house. Then they could go back to his place, put on some nice romantic music, and spend the afternoon cuddling on the sofa or the bed or... He sucked in a breath and tried to ignore the hard-on he’d achieved merely by thinking about the possibilities. “You’re the one who told me you’re impulsive and how it’s gotten you in trouble in the past.”

“I am and it has, but I think I learned my lesson after the last time—at least I hope I have—so I promise not to rush into

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anything.” Noel reached across the table and squeezed Cain’s hand. “You’re also right about the place needing more work than I was lead to believe. Where I’m currently living is a dump and I want to get out of there ASAP, but as you saw for yourself, the vacant apartment I was hoping I could just move into is ten times worse.

“The toilet and sink are both cracked, the bath is toast, and the kitchen is beyond disgusting. I opened one of the cupboards and saw a cockroach and mouse droppings, so even if I do decide to buy it, there’s no way I could move in until the building has been fumigated and the empty apartment at least partially renovated.”

The waiter arrived with a cart containing a pot of Chinese tea and steaming platters of food he arranged between them on the table. After asking if there was anything else he could bring them, he bowed and departed. Noel picked up the teapot and filled both their cups before he continued.

“Before I make a decision either way, here’s what I’m thinking. First, I find out what the owner wants for the property. If it’s within my means, I’ll go back, take a second look and find out the cost of what needs to be done right away. Getting rid of the bugs would be my first concern. Then I’ll visit a home improvement center for a ballpark estimate on what I’ll be looking at cost-wise to replace and install new kitchen units and bathroom fixtures in the empty apartment. Add on the cost of paint, plaster, renting a sander for the floors, along with whatever else I figure might need, like the services of a licensed electrician and plumber.

“Once I have those amounts, I’ll have a rough idea of what I’d be looking at, over and above the down payment, before I could move in. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a very sensible plan.” Cain helped himself to the

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*tai dop voy* and chicken chow mein. “You might also give some thought to how long you think it’ll take to put the empty apartment into livable condition. What I mean is, until it’s ready, you’ll still be paying rent for your current place on top of the mortgage.”

“Right! The one thing I hadn’t thought of.” Noel sighed. “A couple of months’ rent would buy a lot of paint. It would also be great if I could take a couple of weeks off and dig right in, or if I could afford to hire outside help. I can’t do either, so the work would have to be done during evenings and weekends.”

“The Peony is closed Sundays and Mondays.” Cain didn’t know if encouraging Noel to pursue his dream was the right thing to do. However, he had a feeling that throwing cold water on the idea would make him want it even more. “I know how to paint walls and do the trim without making a mess. Assuming, of course, you’d be interested in a little help.”

“Now who’s being impulsive?” Noel teased. “I haven’t even decided if I’m going to buy it.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure you want to. Right?”

“I have this picture of what it could look like, so yes, I admit it’s a huge temptation to simply close my eyes and jump, but...” Noel picked up a fried wonton filled with cream cheese, dipped it in the cherry sauce and popped it in his mouth. “That won’t happen until I know for sure what I’m dealing with in terms of time and money.”

“You could probably cut costs by doing a little bargain hunting. Check with a few of the home renovators. What someone else doesn’t want, you may be able to get for a song.”

“True. I should have thought of that myself.” Noel filled his plate from the various dishes, ate a few mouthfuls, then hesitated, his fork midway between the plate and his mouth. “When I worked



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in construction, I saw skips full of reusable materials... door knobs, wall hooks, coat rails, closet doors, shelving, all manner of small stuff that can cost big money if you have to go buy it from a regular outlet. Sometimes they sell it cheap to anyone who wants it, and sometimes whoever's in charge will give it away and save themselves the bother of hauling it to the dump. And with the house being more than fifty years old, secondhand hardware will fit in better than new."

Even though Cain couldn't quit wishing Noel would forget about the house for a while, he was glad Noel had found something to occupy his mind other than constantly beating himself up for something which could have happened to just about anyone. With that in mind, he said, "Well, if you do decide to go for it, my brother Leo has his own plumbing business. I know he does contract work for an apartment management company so that means he buys wholesale in large volume. If you want, I'll give you his number. No promises, of course, but he might be able to find you a good deal on the bathroom fixtures."

Noel took a sip of his tea and reached for another fried wonton. "Come to think of it, I have a client who's a qualified electrician, and it just so happens he owes me money. I should give him a ding and see if he'd be willing to work it off."

\* \* \*

After they finished their lunch, Noel drove Cain back to his place.

"You coming in or what?" Cain asked as Noel pulled into the driveway.

Noel ran his hand slowly down Cain's thigh and squeezed his

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knee. “If I come in, I won’t want to leave.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Me, too, but I’ve been wearing these same clothes since last night. Give me an hour to go home, check my messages and change?”

Cain cupped the back of Noel’s head with his hand and brought him close enough he could kiss him softly on the lips. “Sure. But hurry it up, okay? I’m going to be counting the minutes.” *And hating every single second you’re not here with me.*

Noel smiled and gave Cain a mischievous wink as he licked his upper lip with the tip of his tongue. “An hour, max. Promise.”

Cain took Noel’s hand and pressed it briefly against his crotch, needing Noel to understand just how much he wanted him before he opened the car door and stepped out. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

The day was cold and raw with the threat of snow, exactly the way the Weather Channel had warned. After Noel left, Cain went into the house and put a match to the living room fire. He then went upstairs and exchanged what he was wearing for a pair of comfortable old blue jeans and his favorite sweater. By the time he got back, the logs were ablaze and the room already felt warmer.

Instead of turning on a lamp, he lit several candles and slid an easy listening disc into the CD player. The first track featured a raspy male voice singing about the wonder of love and the unimaginable pain when it all went wrong, and although Cain had owned the disc for a while, this was the first time he’d really listened to the words.

Until now, Cain had never been in love, not really In Love. Oh, for sure he’d thought he was a time or two, but the madness had soon faded, leaving him wondering what had attracted him in the

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first place. This time, though, he was pretty sure what he felt for Noel was the real thing, but how did one tell for absolute sure? Was it the feeling his life suddenly had purpose? The flash of panic when Noel backed out of the driveway and disappeared down the street?

He sat on the hearth rug and gazed into the flames, wondering if Noel would make it back within the promised hour. What if it was longer? And what if something happened to prevent him from returning? What if he had an accident? What if— Would Noel call? Or would he simply leave him to wonder?

He checked his watch. In less than five minutes the promised hour would be up. He wanted to call and ask how much longer... and he would, except he didn't have Noel's number. Come to that, he didn't know where he lived either.

He got to his feet and pressed a hand against his aching cock. Should he deal with it himself, or should he wait for Noel? He paced back and forth in front of the fire. He knew he was being ridiculous, but he wanted to feel Noel's arms around him again. He wanted to feel him kissing him. And hell, yes, he wanted to feel Noel's velvety tongue wrapped around his prick.

Telling himself to cool it, Cain headed for the kitchen. So Noel was running a little late, so what? In the meantime, maybe a stiff drink would help calm him down.

He took the bottle of single malt from the cupboard, but before he had time to remove the cap, the front buzzer sounded in one loud, non-stop blast.

His heart skipped a beat. He put down the bottle and rechecked his watch. Still one minute to go.

He hurried into the hall, ripped the door open, and Noel, who stood there with his finger on the buzzer, almost fell into his arms.

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Cain pulled him inside and slammed the door shut. “What happened? I thought you’d changed your mind. That maybe you’d had an accident or something.”

“No, none of the above.” Noel dropped his sports bag on the floor, removed his coat, and then he checked his watch. “I said I’d be back in an hour, and I am.” He slipped the watch off his wrist and gave it a shake. “Unless maybe my battery died.”

“No, your battery’s fine; it’s me that’s not.” Cain gave an embarrassed laugh as he took Noel’s coat and hung it in the hall closet. Actually, he felt like an idiot, a very insecure idiot. “It’s just that... I don’t know.”

“The first time we met, I disappeared on you, and you figured it would happen again?”

“No! Of course not.” Cain sighed. He was busted. “Yes, you’re right. Something like that, I guess. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I understand.” Noel put his arms around Cain, holding him close.

Noel felt good and smelled even better than Cain remembered. His scent was a combination of something spicy and the cold outside air that made the ache in his dick intensify a thousand fold.

“I felt bad having to duck out on you the way I did. Unfortunately, it was one of those unexpected things completely out of my control. I don’t do criminal law, but the son of one of my more important clients needed to be bailed out of jail, and at that hour...” He shrugged. “What can I say? He’s just a kid. When he called, he sounded terrified. He’s not a bad kid, just a neglected one, and I didn’t have the heart to leave him in there all night. Anyway, that was then, this is now, and I’m back as promised.”

“I was about to make myself a drink. You want one?” Cain asked.

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“Please.” Noel’s hands slid down Cain’s back and squeezed his butt cheeks. “Maybe some of that single malt we had last night?”

Cain smiled. “That’s what I intend to have. You go on into the living room and make yourself comfortable, and I’ll be with you in a minute.”

When Cain returned, he found Noel, eyes closed, stretched out on his back in front of the fire. Putting the tray with their drinks on the coffee table, Cain lay down beside him. The raspy voiced singer on the CD had been replaced with a sultry blues number that worked perfectly with the candlelight, the open fire and the moment. Cain couldn’t remember ever feeling quite this content.

He ran a finger lightly along Noel’s lips. But then Noel grabbed his wrist and captured his finger with this mouth, gently sucking and licking until Cain couldn’t stand the heightened feeling of suspense.

Contentment quickly changed to excitement, and he snatched his hand away. Needing to feel closer, he sat up, took off his own sweater, then he pulled Noel’s shirt up his body and off over his head. He lay down again with his face against the warmth of Noel’s bare chest, breathing in the masculine scent of his body, extremely conscious of Noel’s arousal straining against his pants. After undoing the snap of Noel’s jeans, Cain lowered the zipper. Hot and hard, Noel’s cock came free, the head already damp with a dribble of pre-cum.

“Suck it, don’t play with it,” Noel pleaded with a groan. “And suck it hard.”

“Patience, patience,” Cain murmured as he took out one of the foil packages he’d tucked in the back pocket of his jeans. After tearing open the package with his teeth, he fitted the condom over Noel’s erection, grasped it firmly in one hand, and swirled his

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tongue around the tip.

“Take off your pants and raise your knees,” Cain instructed.

“What’s wrong with how I am?”

“Do it. You’ll see.”

Cain quickly removed his shoes, socks and jeans, and used a second condom to cover his own erection. Then, moving around so they were facing in opposite directions, he placed one knee on either side of Noel’s body, and stretched forward, making sure he could reach Noel’s cock and that his own cock remained within easy reach of Noel’s mouth.

“This is cozy.” Noel laughed, sending hot moist air to tease the area around Cain’s crotch.

“You’ve never done it this way before?”

“No. But it feels good. Special.”

As Cain took Noel into his mouth and began to suck, Noel’s fingers began probing his butthole, while his hot mouth took possession of Cain’s dick. Cain sucked harder, quickly deep-throating him while he squeezed Noel’s balls.

Cain wished he could prolong the exquisite feelings resulting from the delicious intrusion of probing fingers and inquisitive tongues, but they were both way too excited to hold back. Right now, they both needed the high that came with a fast orgasm. Slow things down and stretching out every little moment would come later. As he felt Noel start to orgasm, Cain was right behind him.

Eventually, the fireworks display ceased and the world around him calmed. Cain reversed his position and gathered Noel in his arms.

“Think we’ll ever get tired of doing this?”

“Never.” Noel moved his head so he could stroke Cain’s lips with his tongue. “We barely know one another, but I think what we

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have is something very special.”

“You think?” Cain hugged Noel tighter. He knew with absolute certainty that what he felt for Noel was more than special. Noel was a dream come true. “I figured that out the night we met. Took me less than two seconds.”

\* \* \*

On another Sunday afternoon almost a year later, Cain put down the paint roller he’d been using and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

After a little bargaining back and forth with the owner, Noel had bought the old mansion on Ravensgate, and now the renovations on the third and last apartment were almost complete.

“Looking good,” Noel observed as he came up behind Cain, wrapped his arms around him and lovingly kissed him on the neck. Cain relaxed in the warmth of Noel’s embrace. With Noel in his life, he felt like the luckiest guy in the world. “Guess what?”

“I missed a spot?”

“No. I have a tenant for the apartment I’ve been using, and she wants to move in yesterday.”

“Nice timing.”

“Mmm. That’s what I thought since I won’t be needing it after next weekend.” Noel squeezed Cain’s ass, then his hands moved around to stroke his prick. “Can you believe this time next week we’ll be an old married couple?”

“No. I also can’t believe you’ve made me wait so long before you even agreed to move in with me.”

Noel unzipped Cain’s pants and slid his hand inside. “That was because I can’t get enough of this. If I’d moved in with you, we’d

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have spent every spare minute making out, and this house would still be in the same condition as when I bought it.”

“You think?”

“No, babe. I know.”



## CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys—two black and white Persian cats.

\* \* \*

**Don't miss *The Club At Cool Harbor*  
by Christiane France,  
available at [AmberAllure.com](http://AmberAllure.com)!**

*A year ago, all private investigator Gabe Muller needed to complete his perfect life was the perfect man. Then he met fellow P.I., Raz Reynolds, the man of his dreams. The attraction was mutual, and they made a date for dinner at Raz's house. When Gabe arrived, he found Raz on the patio having sex with another man. Although literally caught with his pants down, Raz tried to explain that things weren't at all the way they looked, but Gabe wasn't buying it. Hurt and disillusioned, he cut off all contact with Raz.*

*Now, the security firm for which Gabe works is hired by the owner of Le Club, the new all gay males' resort at Cool Harbor, to stop the leak of highly sensitive, personal information about members'*

*leisure-time activities. Posing as a waiter, Gabe arrives to investigate and immediately runs into Raz, also there undercover. Although Gabe is working for the owner and Raz for one of the club members, their goal is the same. For this reason, Gabe suggests they temporarily put personal differences aside and share information.*

*For Raz, it's the perfect opportunity to try to convince Gabe what he thought he saw a year earlier wasn't at all what it seemed. When Gabe learns the truth, will he believe Raz, forgive him, and give the man another chance?*

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