

The Professor's Secret Passion

M. L. Rhodes



THE PROFESSOR'S SECRET PASSION

...The book bag thunked to the floor. Keeping his gaze locked with Aidan's, Nate crossed the space between them in two steps, lightly grasped the man's head in his hands, and settled his lips over Aidan's. He tasted warm and spicy, like the cinnamon mints he kept in his desk drawer.

Nate teased at Aidan's lips, slowly urging them open, and Aidan put up no resistance. In fact, when their tongues at last made contact, he moaned softly, and his hands snaked around to clutch Nate's back, confirming everything Nate had suspected.

Nate kissed him thoroughly. Passionately. Pouring all his own intimate feelings into it so Aidan would understand this was the real thing.

When he finally pulled back, he gazed into those green eyes he'd come to know and love so well. "I don't believe you don't care. When you're ready, I'll be here."

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THE PROFESSOR'S SECRET PASSION

BY

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THE PROFESSOR'S SECRET PASSION
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*To my own hero,
my husband, who's always there for me.*

CHAPTER 1

Tonight's the night.

Anticipation rippled through Nate Turner as he entered the office he shared with his advisor and shut the door behind him. At six o'clock on a Friday evening, the sociology department was dead. Like summer vacation dead, even though the semester didn't officially end until next week. Still, he wasn't taking any chances on having another student or prof wander by and overhear anything. It had taken him all day to work himself up to this, and he sure as shit didn't need an audience.

With finals going on this week and next, Nate had been certain he'd find the professor working late tonight. And tonight, he'd decided, was the night. A week from now, break would begin, and he wouldn't see Aidan—Professor Sheridan—all summer. The not-knowing for three more months would be too damned hard to stand.

"I brought my next semester course schedule by for you to sign," he said by way of getting the conversation started.

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The professor glanced up from the student paper he was reading at his desk. He tugged off his glasses, and his welcoming, green-eyed gaze settled on Nate. "Hey there. Let's have a look. Did you get into that seminar you wanted?"

His husky voice always sent a warm pulse through Nate, but tonight, knowing what he'd really come here to talk to the man about, the sensation was amplified. Like a searing jolt of high voltage electricity, bringing all his nerve endings to a full and resonant hum.

Nate pulled the strap of his book bag over his head and dropped the heavy leather pouch on the small computer table squashed into a corner that served as his space in the office. He dug through it looking for the schedule. "Yeah, although Professor Engleby made it clear she was doing me a huge favor by letting me in."

Aidan rolled his eyes. "She tells every student that. The woman's got an ego the size of Alaska. The only thing that keeps her halfway bearable is that she's as good as she thinks she is. You won't regret taking her class. Just mind your Ps and Qs."

Nate grinned. "Don't I always?"

"You have your moments." A smile twitched at Aidan's lips. He ran a hand through his short, brown hair—a gesture Nate had seen too many times to count, and one he found both endearing and unaffectedly sexy.

He took the few steps to the larger desk, and passed the paper across it. His fingertips skimmed Aidan's warm palm, and he wondered if the other man felt the undercurrent of tension as strongly tonight as he did. Aidan's neutral, or worse, sometimes non-responses, to his subtle signals were driving him crazy. Which was exactly why he was here tonight. It was time to stop guessing and get everything out in the open.

They'd known each other for two-and-a-half years, had worked together closely for two. He knew he'd never find another advisor for

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his graduate studies who even remotely had Aidan's expertise in the field, or his ability to offer such genuine, enthusiastic support. And working as Aidan's TA had been excellent. They made a good team in the classroom. But above and beyond the educational stuff, during the time they'd known each other, he and the professor had formed a solid friendship. One Nate treasured.

Over the course of this past semester, however, Nate had come to realize his feelings for Aidan had evolved into something more.

Spending time with the man day in and out, discussing everything from music, to books, to world events, having a drink at the local pub or the occasional game of racquetball, even helping him move into a new house this past winter, had convinced Nate the handful of relationships he'd had in his past, the ones that never seemed to go anywhere, had gone nowhere for a reason. None of them had ever given him a sense of fulfillment like time spent with Aidan did. In truth, he hadn't even looked at anyone else in over a year.

He noticed Aidan was holding the course schedule at arm's length to read it. "Your glasses are in your hand," he said, grinning, unable to resist the teasing tone.

"Hmm? Oh." Aidan flashed him a sheepish smile as he put them on. "Damn things. I still haven't gotten used to wearing them."

"Uh-huh. And it has nothing at all to do with the fact you're in denial about needing them in the first place?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. Not another word about my impairment, Mr. Turner." But his earlier smile still teased at his lips as he went back to his reading.

The professor was thirty-six to his twenty-seven, yet the nine-year age difference didn't faze Nate. As far as he was concerned, it just meant Aidan was more settled in his life and more secure in his own skin. Which Nate appreciated. He himself had been out since he was fifteen—he'd been lucky to have supportive and accepting parents, so

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there'd never been anything to hide. That had allowed him to play the field and work out all his experimental urges in high school and his early twenties, when a lot of young gay men didn't come out and start that process until much later. At this point in his life, he was tired of the club scene and boys who just wanted to have fun. He wanted the real deal—a long-term relationship. Commitment. And in his heart, he knew Aidan Sheridan was the one he wanted it with.

The problem was, Aidan hadn't given him any clear indication whether or not those feelings were reciprocated. There'd been someone in his past, a year or so before Nate first met him. Aidan had never talked about it much, but Nate got the sense the other person had done the leaving and Aidan had been hurt by it. Since then, if he'd had flings, he'd never spoken to Nate about them. He did know, however, that Aidan wasn't currently involved with anyone.

But just because Aidan was available didn't have to mean he was attracted to Nate in the same way Nate was attracted to him. They shared a lot of common interests, especially on the important stuff—politics, religion, family, education—but enough differences to make things interesting. Aidan was dark-haired, a prep, and loved fine art. Nate was blond, a jock, and loved fast motorcycles.

At times he was convinced Aidan had no romantic or sexual interest in him whatsoever. But then there were the occasions when they touched in the most innocent of ways—brushing against one another accidentally as they passed in the small office, for example—and he'd bet his life he wasn't the only one who felt the tingle of hidden desire. He heard it in the subtle shift of Aidan's breathing, or the way he'd slow for a moment, as if to prolong the contact. There were also the rare but precious moments when he'd look up from his work to find Aidan's gaze on him, and he was certain there was more than just academic interest simmering below the surface. Those instances were enough to give Nate reason to hope.

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“Looks good.” Aidan’s words broke the silence. He picked up a pen and scribbled his name in the appropriate space at the bottom of the schedule, then pushed the paper back across the desk. After tossing aside his glasses, he rose from his chair and ran a hand through his hair again as he stretched. “If you’ve got some free time, how’d you like to help me slog through these final Intro to Soc essays? They’re not too bad this time around.”

When Nate arched an eyebrow at him, a smile curved Aidan’s generous mouth. “Okay, they’re still written by freshmen and hardly brilliant. But they’re better than the batch from last semester.”

Nate snorted. “Yeah, you’ve totally convinced me I can’t live without this added thrill in my life.”

At Aidan’s low-pitched chuckle, Nate’s knees turned to mush. He seemed to spend most of his time these days drunk on the man. Damn, he should say it now. Just blurt it out, get it out there between them. *I’m so fucking in love and lust with you I can’t think straight. Any possibility you feel the same?*

Instead, what came out of his mouth was, “Okay, sure, I can take a few papers home with me to work on this weekend.”

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

Apparently oblivious to Nate’s inner torment, Aidan turned to replace a book on the shelf behind his desk. Nate couldn’t help but admire how the faded denim of his jeans clung to his ass, and how the long-sleeved, green, button-up shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. Aidan always preferred comfortable, classic clothes—Levi’s or khakis, soft button-ups, casual loafers, the occasional tweed jacket. Nate was certain the man had no idea how sexy his understated style and confident mien were, not just to him, but to other men. And women. He’d seen more than one head turn on campus when the professor passed by.

“How are your classes coming? I don’t want you behind on your

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own work here at the end of the semester. You have to take comps in the fall, and I won't let my prize student be anything but his best."

"Everything's cool. I have one last final on Monday, then I'm done. And I'll have plenty of time to study for comps this summer."

"So..." Aidan turned back around and shuffled papers on his desk, not making eye contact. "You still going to Maine?"

"That's the plan, I guess."

He hated the knot that formed in his stomach every time he thought of spending the summer with his family in their miniscule cabin in the remote woods of Maine. It had been fun when he and his sisters were younger, but now...five full-sized people crammed into a tiny space with no outlet for their various energies was more like torture. It was the same every year, with his parents fussing at each other because his dad still tele-commuted for his investment job in New York every day, which ticked off his mom, who wanted uninterrupted family time. And his two teenaged sisters would bicker with each other and whine because they couldn't be at the beach or shopping or working or anywhere else in the world besides being stuck with the family in bumfuck nowhere.

"Your mom's still insisting, huh?"

"God, yes, like a pit bull gnawing at a bone. She's been on my case about it since I was home at Christmas. Since I missed the last two summers because of school and internships, she insists she *really* wants me there this time because it might be the last summer I'll be free."

If he finished his dissertation this coming spring, by next June he hoped to be employed full-time.

Nate figured he'd take a page out of his dad's work ethic book and squirrel himself away in the cabin loft all summer studying for his comprehensive exams. It wouldn't be pleasant, but at least it might be productive. The worst part of it all, though, was that he was already dreading not seeing Aidan on a daily basis for three long months.

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"I was wondering..." Aidan said, still not looking at him.

Which, come to think about it, was odd. It wasn't like Aidan to be anything less than direct. One of the things Nate loved best about him was how he looked people straight in the eye when he spoke to them or when they spoke to him. "Wondering what?"

"I've been wanting to talk to you about something." More paper shuffling without looking at Nate.

Okay...this was strange. *Oh, crap.* Nate's heart skipped a beat, and the knot in his gut suddenly morphed into butterflies. Did Aidan know why he'd really come here this evening? Was that what he wanted to talk about? "I'm listening."

Aidan cleared his throat. "I've been asked to teach in Chicago."

The butterflies died a painful death under the cold shock that swallowed Nate. "You're leaving?" he managed to eke out past his dry mouth.

Aidan's gaze flew up to meet his. "No. No! Not like that. I mean I've been asked to teach there this summer."

"Oh..." The sound was more wheeze than word, and filled with relief.

"It's a summer symposium on sexuality and society. They've asked me to do a class on gay theory and politics. I thought, since your dissertation is in a similar field...well, I thought maybe you might be interested in going to Chicago with me."

Nate fought to calm his racing heart. They'd never traveled together before and this was an opportunity to spend several weeks together in close contact. Was Aidan asking him to go to Chicago strictly on business, or was there perhaps more to it? That might explain his strange behavior and the awkward way he'd brought up the topic.

"You want me to go with you?"

"We'll have to cover your airfare, but the lodging would be free. They've reserved a suite and it has two bedrooms. I know how your

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family feels about the Maine summers, but maybe they'd understand since this would be related to your education. It would be a good experience for you. You might make some good contacts, do some networking that will help you find a job once you finish your degree."

Excitement pounded in Nate's chest. The possibility of not only avoiding the summer family getaway, but being able to spend that time with Aidan was too good to be true. "I suppose Mom would get over it eventually if I didn't show up at the cabin," he thought aloud.

"Excellent, it's settled then." Aidan turned his back on Nate again, this time to look at the calendar hanging on the wall. "I'll have the department secretary book you an airline ticket. We'll be leaving next Sunday. The class begins the day after Memorial Day. I'll expect you to bring your books with you so you can study during any free time you have."

His words were rushed, and he sounded businesslike. Almost too businesslike.

"I didn't say for sure I was going, only that my mom would probably live if I did."

Aidan turned slowly. His dark brows tugged together. "If you'd rather not go, you certainly won't be penalized academically. Surely you know I wouldn't do that, that I wouldn't force you to attend."

Nate looked at him askance. "I know that. Why would you even assume that's what I was getting at? I only meant, give me a bit to smooth things over with my family." Then he shook his head. "Aidan, what's going on?"

"Going on?" Still standing, with the desk between them, he shuffled more papers and rearranged piles Nate knew good and well didn't need to be rearranged.

"Yeah, with the making weird assumptions, and the avoiding eye contact, like you're doing right now?"

Aidan glanced up at him.

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Yep, guilty as charged.

"And the way you're trying to rush this conversation about Chicago, like you can't wait to get the topic over with. Something's up. This isn't like you. What gives?"

"I just think this would be a good opportunity for you to make some professional contacts. A good, solid, educational trip. Plenty of time to network, meet other people, learn something new."

"Yeah, okay, I get the whole educational thing, and I agree. So what's the problem?"

"There's no problem. I figure if you go you'll be so busy meeting people I probably won't see you much." Aidan's gaze, which had briefly landed on him, drifted away again, studying the Chagall Metropolitan Opera poster on the wall next to Nate. "And that's a good thing," he added, his voice suddenly intense. "You should broaden your horizons, try to learn from as many people as you can, and not spend every second with me."

"I haven't even said for sure I'll go and you're already trying to get rid of me?" Nate said with a smile. "What, are you afraid if I'm hanging around the hotel suite too much I might try to seduce you?" He meant it as a joke. Sort of.

But Aidan's too-serious response, "I don't think that's a concern, is it?" made him wonder. It wasn't the words so much as the tight hollowness with which they were delivered.

Nate huffed out a disbelieving breath as a thought hit him. "Oh, my God, *is* that what's going on here? Where all this 'you need to meet other people and stay away from me' stuff is coming from?"

Aidan finally stopped fiddling with papers and looked at him—really looked at him. And although little tension lines creased the skin around his mouth, his eyes were clear, and sincere. "No, of course not."

"Then what?"

"I told you, there's no problem. You're making this into more than

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it is. I just don't want you to feel like you have to hang with me out of some sense of loyalty because you're my student. You're young, you're exceptionally bright, and I want you to feel free to come and go as you please. *If* you decide to go. And that decision is certainly up to you."

Nate studied him, knowing in his gut Aidan still wasn't telling him something.

Then it occurred to him he wasn't going to get a better opening to bring up the issue that was on his own mind.

"While we're on the topic of spending time together...there's something I need to talk to *you* about. I didn't come here tonight just to have you sign my schedule."

"Oh?" Aidan paused in putting a file folder into his desk and looked up at Nate. His gaze was back to its usual green-eyed intensity, and Nate knew he had the man's full attention now. "That sounds somewhat serious."

"It is. Maybe." He crossed his arms over his chest, but then realized it might look too demanding. Or too defensive. Instead he stuck his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Before I decide whether or not to go to Chicago, I'd like to know something."

"Okay." Aidan set the file folder down, and with both hands planted on his desk, leaned slightly toward Nate in a position of open listening. "Again with the seriousness. Let's hear it."

Nate drew in a breath, steeling himself. If Aidan wasn't interested in pursuing a deeper relationship with him, he knew he wouldn't go to Chicago, no matter how good the opportunity. The idea of sharing a hotel suite with Aidan, even being in the same hotel period, feeling the constant ache of wanting to be with him but knowing he couldn't...it'd be too damned hard.

"I think you already know how much I appreciate you as a mentor, and also how much I appreciate our friendship. But I think you should know, if you haven't figured it out already, that my feelings for you

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have...changed. Grown.” His heart fluttered in his chest, but he surged ahead. “Rather than continue to try to guess what your every look means, and wonder and worry what might or might not be going on, I think it’s best to just lay all this out in the open. So...I’m wondering if there’s hope of something between us. Something more.”

His stomach churned, and he dreaded the response. But it felt good to get it out. Finally.

Aidan sighed and his shoulders slumped as if he were resigning himself to something he’d known was coming. “Nathan...”

No one ever called him Nathan except Aidan. There was something about the husky way it rolled off his tongue that sent warm surges of need through Nate. He felt his cock stir and his balls tighten. Even now, when Aidan’s sigh didn’t indicate anything good, he couldn’t stop himself from reacting to the sound of his name on the other man’s lips.

“Nathan...” Aidan started again, as if he were having trouble building momentum to say what was on his mind. “Something between us... something *more* between us...it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a teacher and you’re my student.”

“I’m a PhD student, a man, not an eighteen-year-old freshman. There’s no policy at this university against it.” He knew because he’d damn well done his research.

Aidan’s hand speared restlessly through his hair. “No, there’s no university policy against it. But I have my own policy. It would be too...”

“Too what?” Now that he’d broached the topic, his earlier nervousness had disappeared. This relationship, this man, was too important to him to mince words.

Aidan’s gaze grew troubled. He moved around to the front of the desk and perched on the corner of it. Only a couple of feet from Nate now, heat radiated from Aidan’s muscular thighs, and Nate had the

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urge to reach out and stroke his hand along one of them. But this wasn't the right time.

"It would be too what?" he repeated.

"There's too much risk."

"Risk? Of what? These aren't the dark ages. This university is fully supportive of the gay and lesbian community. Both of us are open about our orientation, so there's nothing there to surprise anyone on campus."

"Yes, I know. But this isn't about being gay. It's about intimacy blurring the lines between the personal and the professional. It's about how taking that step makes it too easy for parties to be manipulated."

"Are you saying that if we become intimate I'll expect you to give me good grades in return for sex?" Nate's ire was clear in his voice. "What the hell kind of a person do you take me for? I thought you knew me better than that."

"It's not about you, and no, I don't think that." Aidan swallowed hard, as if he were in pain, his Adam's apple making the long, slow trek up and down his throat. "It's more complicated than that. Being a professor comes with a certain amount of power. Not only the power over deciding who succeeds and fails in the classroom, but also a certain amount over students' thoughts, their dreams, their self-confidence, even their self-worth. All those things are there in a regular student/teacher relationship, but when you throw intimacy into the equation, it becomes too easy for the person in the position of power to abuse that power."

For the first time since the serious conversation started, Nate smiled. He'd worked closely with Aidan for two years, and in all that time he'd never once seen even the tiniest hint that Aidan was capable of abusing his authority.

"It's not amusing. It's real. And it can happen." Aidan's eyes had turned dark moss-green with seriousness. "Many years ago, at a

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different college, I watched a similar situation unfold. It all started innocently enough—the student fell for the professor, they began a relationship, and outwardly, everything seemed fine. Until the manipulation started. At first it was just, as you put it earlier, favors for grades. The professor would give the student an A on a test even though the student really only earned a B. He wanted to make the student beholden to him. It was a form of control. But when the student argued against it, the professor made blackmail threats.”

He shook his head. “By the time the student finally came forward and spoke to the higher powers at the college about what was going on, the relationship had become physically abusive. The professor’s contract was terminated. But the student was blacklisted at that school for being a snitch.”

“That’s insane!” Nate growled. “This kid was emotionally and physically abused by a teacher, yet was punished, too?”

“That’s right. Nobody won. People got hurt.”

“Aidan, you’re not some SOB prof who gets off on power-tripping. That’s not you. And again, let me remind you that even if you were I’m not an impressionable teenager ripe for the picking.”

“Power, control—they work effectively no matter the age. And sometimes people don’t start off intending to control others—it just evolves. You know as well as I do that strong emotions like infatuation, lust, love can do things to human beings, make them behave differently, obsessively even. I’m not willing to risk it, Nathan. There are too many potential problems, and I’m not willing to put a stain of any kind on your reputation or your future career.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?”

Aidan shook his head. “No. I’m the person in the position of authority here, and I won’t risk it. I won’t risk you. No matter how—” He paused as if he’d just caught himself from saying something he didn’t mean to. He took a shaky breath and stared at the wall behind

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Nate for a second. Then he finished with a weak repetition of, "I won't risk it."

No matter how what? No matter how he feels about me? The words and the brief glimpse of Aidan's emotional state following them gave Nate another spark of hope. They implied, or at least he hoped they implied, Aidan did feel something.

He dared to reach out for the other man's hand, which rested on the desk. He'd never been bold enough to overtly touch him this way. For a moment Aidan tensed and Nate thought he'd pull away. But he didn't. He did, however, sigh again in a troubled sort of way.

Nate curled his fingers over the top of Aidan's, savoring the feel of warm skin against his palm. "Okay, let me ask you something."

Aidan's eyes squeezed closed and he rubbed them between the thumb and forefinger of his free hand. "What?"

"Let's say, hypothetically, that I wasn't your student. That I didn't even go to school here. If we'd met somewhere else, gotten to know each other in a different environment, is there a possibility there could be more between us?"

"I'm not going to answer that because you do go to school here and you are my student." Aidan hesitated for a moment, then slipped his hand free. "I'm sorry, Nate. That's just the way it has to be."

Now I'm Nate instead of Nathan? "Come on, humor me. If I weren't your student, what then?"

"You are my student."

"I won't always be."

Aidan's eyes were clouded, but he shook his head. "No. I'm not saying anything else on the subject. Let it go. It doesn't matter."

He stood and started back around his desk, effectively shutting Nate out.

But Nate grabbed his hand again and tugged him to a stop, waiting until Aidan had turned to face him. His chest felt as if an iron band had

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wrapped around it and was slowly constricting, cutting off his air. "It matters to me. I can't keep living like this, Aidan. Working with you day after day, feeling the way I'm feeling about you with all this..." He grimaced and put a hand against his own chest. "Damn. With all this powerful emotion ripping up my insides, but not knowing whether or not you feel the same. The not knowing is killing me."

Aidan's calm expression had faltered while Nate spoke, and now it radiated a confusing mix of sympathetic understanding one moment, and tightly held control the next. "I hear what you're saying. But the knowing, especially if it's not what you want to hear, might only be worse," he said softly.

Nate dragged in a deep, pained breath, trying to force his tight lungs to function. "No. At this point, no. Just, please, give me the truth. One way or the other. At least have that much respect for me."

An emotional storm churned in Aidan's eyes, and the lines around his sensual mouth, formed from years of easy smiles, now compressed into troubled furrows. He reached out as if he were going to stroke Nate's cheek, but then he stopped, his fingers curled into his palm, and his hand fell to his side. The intensity of his gaze, which seconds before had been a swirling window to his soul, grew dull. He shook his head and his voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. "I'm sorry, Nathan. You're my student, and my friend, but nothing more. I don't feel what you want me to feel."

The cold plunge of the words hit the pit of Nate's stomach, then spread outward, leaving him numb. He'd been so certain there was something there... He stared at Aidan, wishing him to take it back, change his mind. But as the seconds ticked by on the wall clock, he didn't.

So that's it then.

He felt himself nod, but it was like an out-of-body experience—he was present, but not. "I understand," he murmured.

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Mechanically, he released Aidan's hand, grabbed his book bag, and let his heavy feet carry him to the door. Felt his hand close around the cool metal of the knob. Felt it begin to turn from the rote guidance of his fingers.

But then, as if he were suddenly stepping out of the fog, his head cleared. Puzzle pieces shifted in his mind, and in a moment of crystal clarity, everything fell into place—Aidan's odd behavior this evening, his hot and cold emotions, his denial moments ago.

Nate released the knob, spun around, and turned toward the professor, who still stood by the desk. Aidan looked startled. His face was paler than Nate had ever seen it.

The book bag thunked to the floor. Keeping his gaze locked with Aidan's, Nate crossed the space between them in two steps, lightly grasped the man's head in his hands, and settled his lips over Aidan's. He tasted warm and spicy, like the cinnamon mints he kept in his desk drawer.

Nate teased at Aidan's lips, slowly urging them open, and Aidan put up no resistance. In fact, when their tongues at last made contact, he moaned softly, and his hands snaked around to clutch Nate's back, confirming everything Nate had suspected.

Nate kissed him thoroughly. Passionately. Pouring all his own intimate feelings into it so Aidan would understand this was the real thing.

When he finally pulled back, he gazed into those green eyes he'd come to know and love so well. "I don't believe you don't care. When you're ready, I'll be here."

CHAPTER 2

This time Nate's steps to the door were as light as his heart. All he'd needed was the assurance that Aidan felt something. And now that he had it, he could wait until Aidan was ready to accept those feelings.

Before he reached to open the door, however, Aidan was behind him. He gripped Nate's arm, turned him around, and pushed him backward, until the heavy wood collided with Nate's backside.

It was Nate's turn to stare in surprise. At the intense, impassioned expression on Aidan's face, a surge of heat coursed through him and detonated in a white-hot burst below his balls. Aidan slanted his mouth over his with a hungry, forceful urgency that caught the younger man off guard.

It was pent-up desire in its rawest form—almost more of a claiming than a kiss—and it went on until they had to pull apart to gasp in air.

"Damn you, Nathan." Aidan's voice was thick with emotion. "You were supposed to walk away."

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“But I didn’t.”

With one arm braced on the door next to Nate’s head, he rested his forehead against Nate’s and sighed. “No. You didn’t. Sometimes you’re too stubborn for your own good.” He shook his head and dragged in a ragged breath. “I shouldn’t be feeling these things for you that I feel.”

Contented satisfaction filled Nate. “Why the hell shouldn’t you?” he demanded. Then quickly added, “Never mind, we’re not going to have that conversation again. The point here is that you do feel them.” He caressed Aidan’s cheek and stared in appreciation at this man he’d admired, craved, cared about for ages.

“I’ve wanted for a long time to kiss you like that,” Aidan admitted, eyes closed as if he were struggling with himself.

“Then you should have. I would have let you, you know?”

“Nathan—”

Nate pressed his lips against Aidan’s to silence any protests he might make. He’d managed to pull the man out of his shell, and now he wanted to concentrate on keeping him there, showing him how good it could be between them.

As the kiss deepened, and as their tongues moved in slow, sensuous thrusts against one another, the burn of arousal that had begun when Aidan pushed him against the door continued to build in Nate. His cock thickened, bulging indecently—and damned uncomfortably—in his pants. He didn’t want to scare Aidan off by jumping his bones this fast, but he didn’t have a prayer of hiding his blatant hard-on if their bodies came any closer.

Aidan rendered the thought moot when he cupped the back of Nate’s head with one hand, and slid the other around his waist, tugging him in tight against his own body. Their groins notched together, Nate’s yin to Aidan’s yang, and vice versa, melding them in perfect, complimentary harmony.

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Aidan's erection pulsing against his caused Nate's brain to temporarily shut down, and he floated in a sea of sensual haze. Two hard cocks rubbing together, even separated by layers of clothing, was erotic as hell. But when their hips began to move instinctively, pressing their groins tighter together, thrusting, grinding, the friction was so intense it was all Nate could do not to cum in his jeans.

Yet at the same time, it wasn't enough. After months of painful longing, he couldn't seem to get enough, taste enough, touch enough. It was like the dam hadn't just cracked, it had burst wide open.

When Aidan slid a hand up under Nate's shirt and stroked his back with warm fingertips, Nate shuddered with pleasure. He clawed at the shirt tucked into Aidan's waistband, pulling, yanking, until finally it came free, giving him the same access.

"Need you..." he breathed between kisses.

Shirts were unbuttoned and pushed off, and the searing moment when they were at last chest to chest, skin to skin, had them both groaning. Erect nipples grazed against hot flesh, sending shivers up and down Nate's spine. But he still wasn't complete. He clutched at Aidan's back, his ass, trying to get them closer still.

Aidan's need was clearly as demanding as Nate's. With almost frenzied urgency, he reached between them and tore at Nate's belt buckle, working it loose in a violent twist, then moving to release the button and zipper on his jeans.

Nate shimmied his hips to help Aidan get his pants over the erection stabbing against his boxer briefs, then couldn't stop the moan of sheer pleasure when that warm hand slid down into his briefs and lightly brushed over his aching cock.

Aidan licked his way down Nate's collar bone, and lower, to curl his tongue around one nipple, the other, and back again, setting up a rhythm that was enough to drive a man mad. At the same time his other hand played a light, teasing, brush-and-evade game with Nate's stiff

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shaft.

“Damn,” Nate whispered. A dizzy rush swept over him. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the door, trying to stay upright as sensation tore through him. Aidan expertly worked him, toying with his nipples, rubbing his cock, until Nate felt fire licking in his veins.

“I want to see all of you,” Aidan rasped. “Touch all of you.”

When Nate opened bleary eyes, it was to see Aidan stepping back a couple of feet. His eyes shone with a potent heat that only fanned Nate’s internal flame to a raging blaze.

Aidan’s chest rose and fell in rhythm with his hoarse breathing, and for a moment, Nate was lost in the beauty of its broad, muscular planes, and how it tapered down to flat abs. Aidan’s shoulders bunched and flexed as he moved, and his arms were as sculpted as the rest of him. He wasn’t muscle-bound, didn’t look like a lifter. Instead he was defined. He had the body of a man who stayed active and took care of himself.

Nate was five-ten to Aidan’s six feet, and although he didn’t have Aidan’s height or muscular physique, he’d been a runner most of his adult life and was an avid sports player. Baring himself was hardly a chore, and he unabashedly pushed down his tight-fitting boxer briefs until they tangled around his ankles with his jeans. He toed off his shoes and kicked the clothes aside. His cock leapt as Aidan’s hot, appreciative gaze swept over him, and again at the hint of a sexy smile when he spied the tribal sun tattooed on Nate’s hip.

They’d played racquetball together many times, had even showered at the gym in plain sight of one another, so their bodies were no secret to each other. But this time it was different.

This time it was intimate, Nate thought with a rush of desire.

This wasn’t guys in the shower—not even two gay guys who had certainly checked each other out. This was the slow, appreciative exploration of lovers.

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Aidan's gaze slid back up to meet Nate's. "Do you know how long I've wanted to see you like this? Nude and hard, just for me?" His voice was thick with lust.

"How long?"

Aidan ran a hand through his hair, almost as if he were embarrassed to say.

"How long?" Nate demanded.

"When you were in my class for a semester I was impressed by you. You were a good student and I thought you were damned smart. But at the end of the semester, when you came to ask me to be your advisor...you stood here in the doorway, and I..." Aidan shook his head and swallowed, like it was difficult for him to bare his feelings like this. "It's the way you smiled, the way you still smile. It's so open, like you're totally comfortable with yourself, with life. And it just... It touched me. Still does."

Nate's chest felt so full he could barely breathe. "You've been feeling this way for two damned years and you never let on?" But he wasn't expecting an answer, didn't need one. Before Aidan could respond, Nate hooked a finger through his belt loop and pulled him close again. "And you say I'm stubborn." He feathered a light kiss against Aidan's lips.

Their gazes collided, snapping and sizzling with heat.

"I haven't been with anyone since my last test. I'm clean."

"Same here." Nate smiled. "Now it's your turn. I want to see you," he said, fondling Aidan's turgid cock through his jeans, squeezing gently until Aidan's eyes glazed over. "Say it," he urged.

"I want you," Aidan whispered.

"I want you." Nate scraped his fingernails over the flat, bronze disks that were Aidan's nipples, and smiled in satisfaction when he moaned.

Moving lower, Nate set to work freeing what had to be a damned

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painful erection filling Aidan's jeans near-to-bursting. When he got the zipper down and saw the enormous bulge inside the black briefs, he wanted to shout with joy. He eased the soft black fabric over Aidan's jutting shaft and down his legs, and when Aidan stepped out of them, he wrapped his hand around the glorious, rock-hard cock.

Aidan's head fell back, his eyes closed, and a guttural pleasure-growl rumbled from his throat. "Oh, God...oh, that's good," he groaned. "It's been..." Ragged huffs of breath. "It's been a very long time." His eyes fluttered open and the vulnerability in them tugged at Nate's heart.

"How long has it been?"

"Three years. Three-and-a-half."

"Why?" The question was out before Nate could bite it back. The thought of a man like Aidan—intelligent, caring, gorgeous—going without sex for so long was a shock.

"There wasn't anyone I wanted...except you," Aidan whispered.

Emotion filling his throat, all Nate could do was shake his head. "Stubborn, stubborn man," he finally murmured. "All this time..."

He sank to his knees in front of Aidan, barely noticing the scrape of the rough, institutional carpet under his knees. His focus was on the beautifully sculpted, blue-veined penis standing at eager attention.

Aidan's cock was long and not too thick, and it curved slightly upward toward his abdomen. *A perfect fit to be inside me.*

The thought sent a hot wave of eroticism through his body. As he stroked his tongue over Aidan's bulbous cockhead and listened to the appreciative moans from above, his ass clenched in anticipation, and he imagined feeling Aidan's long shaft impale him. He could almost feel it thrusting in and out, feel heavy balls colliding with skin.

He broke out in a sweat at the thought. Although he was comfortable being the top or bottom, most of his fantasies about Aidan had revolved around Aidan fucking him.

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But there was no rush. Right now he wanted to take his time and relish every moment, every sensation of this first experience together.

Aidan's cock, on the other hand, seemed to have other ideas about Nate taking his time. Aidan's hips surged forward, begging, *demanding* attention.

Nate looked up at him and grinned. "Don't worry, I give good head. I promise you're in good hands. And an even better mouth."

A low groan was his only answer, and he chuckled as he returned his full attention to the sleek cock that needed him.

He inhaled deeply of Aidan's rich spicy musk as he bathed his cock with long, slow licks from tip to root, then wet, swirling ones around and around the engorged head. At the same time, he fondled Aidan's balls, rubbing them lightly, and feeling them tighten in response. Another long stroke of his tongue brought him back to the base of the full shaft, where Aidan's curly groin hair tickled his nose. He laved wet strokes over the heavy sac that protected his testicles, then gently pushed it aside with his hand, and tongued the very root of Aidan's cock where it joined his body.

Aidan's hands came up to clutch Nate's head, and Nate smiled when he heard the other man's heavy breathing.

Slowly, licking as he went, he moved back up to the mushroom-shaped crown. He pulled it into his mouth, rubbed the sensitive underside of the rim with his tongue, and began a wet sucking motion. At the same time, he wrapped his hand around the slick, damp length of cock and stroked up and down, letting his palm slide over the slippery skin, giving Aidan two sensations at once—hand and mouth moving in counterpoint.

"Jesus," Aidan gasped. He held Nate closer, bobbing his head up and down in rhythm with Nate's sucking.

Nate glanced up at him, never stopping the motion of his mouth and hand, to find Aidan's hot, heavy-lidded gaze on him. He knew from

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experience just how much of a turn-on it was to watch a lover with your cock in his mouth.

With Aidan his captive audience of one, he sucked the pulsing shaft farther into his mouth, then pulled it almost out, only to take it deeper in the next time. And the next. Until it nudged the back of his throat.

Aidan's face was flushed and it briefly contorted in a pleasure-pain grimace. His eyes closed, only to flicker back open immediately, as if he didn't want to miss a thing. "Good...so good..." he moaned.

As he pumped his mouth up and down on Aidan's cock, Nate used one of his free hands to play with Aidan's balls again, rolling them gently between his fingers, and occasionally teasing behind them, with light strokes against his pelvic floor and anus. Aidan bucked and shivered in response, and his breathless panting and whimpered moans filled Nate with an odd sense of power, urging him to swallow Aidan deeper, suck him harder.

"Oh, God...Jesus..." Aidan panted, his voice scratchy, dry, and nearly senseless. His hands frantically tangled in Nate's unruly blond hair.

His balls tightened, his hips began to jerk erratically, and Nate knew his lover was seconds from losing it. And then, with a powerful spasm that thrust his cock way down Nate's throat, he growled his release. A stream of hot cum spilled from his thrusting prick. It was followed by another. And another. Nate swallowed every drop, savoring the salty, bittersweet flavor on his tongue, knowing he'd never tire of it.

His own erection throbbed with blatant need, so he wrapped his free hand around it and smoothed his thumb over his crown, but refused to bring himself off. This was Aidan's time.

When Aidan's convulsions finally quieted, Nate released the softening cock from his mouth. Holding Aidan's hips between his hands, he pressed gentle kisses to the dark, damp curls surrounding it. The tang of Aidan's unique male musk and sweat tingled in his nose,

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and it was heaven.

When Nate finally rose to his feet, Aidan's gaze was still heavy and slightly dazed—a sign of utter fulfillment, which pleased Nate immensely—but also filled with a tenderness that made his heart flutter.

Aidan pulled his face close, and then he was kissing Nate, taking his time to explore his mouth, running his tongue over Nate's teeth, tasting his lower lip, then thrusting his tongue deep.

They stood together for long minutes, sweat-slicked bodies entwined, mouths moving on one another, hands exploring, caressing, fondling, and cocks mingling—one hard as granite, the other slowly filling with blood again.

“Why'd you act so strange about the Chicago thing?” Nate asked as he nuzzled Aidan's neck. “If you weren't afraid I was going to hit on you, what was it? And you had to have known for a while you were going, so why did you wait until tonight to bring it up?”

Aidan's eyes closed. He sighed, and they fluttered back open to meet Nate's gaze. “It wasn't you. It was me. I wanted you to go, but I put off telling you because...well, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay professional.”

“You were afraid *you'd* come on to *me*?” Nate asked with a grin.

Aidan nodded and his eyes sparkled with apologetic humor for a brief moment. But then lines creased his forehead and he turned serious. “Nathan, this...” He shook his head.

Nate kissed him lightly. “This is right, Aidan. You've been feeling it, I've been feeling it, we've been friends for a long time. We know each other well, so there's no need to put on airs and impress. Everything about it is right.”

“Professionally, this is—”

“Completely fine. It's going to work out fine.”

Aidan's eyes narrowed. “Are you going to finish every sentence for

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me?" But there wasn't much heat behind the words. On the other hand, there was very much heat down in the area of their connected groins.

"Only the ones I'm sure I have the right answers to." Nate smiled, rubbing himself against Aidan's growing erection.

"Don't get cocky," Aidan said, then winced as he realized how that sounded.

Nate laughed. "Too late for that, I think. And for you, too."

He reached between them, capturing both cocks and rubbing them together. Their combined heat seared his hands, and he admired the way they looked side by side, one slightly thicker and shorter, the other longer and slimmer, two swollen heads in varying shades of purple. Damn, they complemented each other so perfectly.

The heavy, lustful look he'd worn earlier slid over Aidan's face again as he took in the same sight as Nate. "Jesus, Nathan..." he moaned. "I can't get enough of you. I can't...get...enough."

Then he was in motion, with a hand on Nate's chest, turning him, guiding him to move backward. At the same time his mouth covered Nate's again; no leisurely exploration this time, but rather the same sense of claiming Nate had felt earlier. It sent an electric surge through him.

The edge of the desk bumped into the back of Nate's thighs.

With a swipe of his arm, Aidan shoved books, papers, a metal cup full of pens and pencils off the edge, clearing a spot, and then Nate was up on the desk, sitting, his bare ass pressed against the cool wood. But only for a moment. Hands on his chest now, Aidan pushed him backward until Nate lay sprawled on the desk, his legs dangling off the edge and spread to accommodate Aidan's hips between them.

Leaning over him, hands anchored on either side of him, the heat of his cock and heavy balls scorching Nate's, Aidan took one of Nate's nipples in his mouth. He sucked it hard, rolling it with his tongue, then anchoring it between his teeth.

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Nate gasped at the biting pressure, and clutched the edges of the desk as his head swam. *Holy crap. Holy...crap...* He'd never felt so much sensation in that spot before.

The pressure continued, tightening, intensifying, until Nate wasn't sure he could take much more. But at the same time, his cock, which had already been erect to start with, stiffened to impossible proportions, and a white heat seared his balls.

His hips lunged upward off the desk, wanting more contact with Aidan's groin. But Aidan stepped back just enough they no longer touched down there, and Nate groaned his displeasure.

Aidan released his pebbled nipple with a soft pop, but there was no relief from the pleasure-pain because he immediately latched onto the other one. The same biting sting commenced, leaving Nate writhing, unbearably horny, and desperate for Aidan's hands, mouth, anything on his aching and now ignored cock.

Nate's hands clutched in Aidan's hair. "Please!" he gasped. "Touch me."

His plea was ignored, and the pressure on his nipple increased. A tongue was added to the mix, with Aidan alternating between flat, soft sweeps across the aching tip, and stiff, hard thrusts.

By the time Aidan released that nipple, Nate was ready to beg. Did beg. Yet still his groin was ignored.

Aidan moved around the desk until he stood behind Nate's head. He teased his tongue around Nate's ear, running it around the curves, dipping it inside, and sucking on the lobe. At the same time he pinched Nate's tender nipples between his fingertips.

Nate turned his head, trying to capture the other man's mouth with his, and when Aidan allowed it, their tongues tangled together, Nate's in desperation, wanting whatever he could get that might help ease the god-awful burning in his shaft and testicles.

"Please," he gasped again against Aidan's mouth.

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"Tell me what you need." Aidan's voice was low and husky. "Tell me Nathan."

"I need you to touch me...my cock."

"How?"

"I don't care!" Nate cried. "For God's sake, please, just touch it."

"Not yet."

Nate growled his frustration, but Aidan only swallowed the sound with another probing kiss. His mouth moved to the side, to lick and suckle Nate's neck. The feel of his hot breath on his skin nearly drove Nate mad.

He moved again, back between Nate's legs, and Nate watched him, admired, and lusted after Aidan's erect dick bobbing amidst the dark, tightly curled nest of groin hair. He wanted that inside him. Deep inside. Thrusting hard. His ass clenched tight, and a slow shudder wracked his body.

Aidan smiled from where he stood between Nate's legs. He palmed his own cock, giving it several long strokes as he gazed down at Nate. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes," Nate rasped.

"But you already sucked it earlier."

"I...I don't..."

Aidan's full, sensuous lips curved into an even wider smile. "Ah, you aren't interested in sucking this time, are you?" He released his shaft and his big, warm hands caressed Nate's thighs—the tops, the sensitive insides, coming close to his groin, but never touching it. Nate arched upward, trying to force him to connect to the area he wanted, but it didn't work.

He swore under his breath and stared accusingly at Aidan, who only chuckled in that sexy, throaty way that made Nate's balls ache even more. "Damn it," he gasped. "You're enjoying torturing me, aren't you?" He closed his eyes and groaned his frustration.

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The wet touch of tongue to swollen cockhead had him open-eyed and breathing hard in a heartbeat. "Yes! Thank you!"

Aidan smiled up at him, and Nate nearly sobbed at the sight of the dark head between his thighs and his cock jerking and dancing under the deft strokes of Aidan's tongue.

Aidan pushed Nate's legs back until his feet rested on the edge of the desk, leaving him open and exposed to Aidan's erotic play. His long fingers closed around Nate's rod. "You have a beautiful, thick cock," he murmured. He bathed the head again with his tongue, and Nate nearly shot off the desk at the contact.

But it was short-lived. He protested when Aidan's hands slid down his thighs again, kneading and fondling. Aidan feathered light kisses against his stomach, his hips, swirled his tongue over and around his tattoo, but once again avoided the swollen length that desperately needed his attention.

"Damn it, Aidan," Nate cried. "You're killing me—uh!" Aidan's hands had teased up the inside of his thighs, and his thumb had brushed across the sensitive skin on Nate's pelvic floor, skimming the edge of his opening.

His mouth returned to Nate's shaft, making slow, long, licks up one side and down the other, around the tight skin of his pouch, below it, and up again. The cool air in the drafty office grazed Nate's wet skin, causing a prickling sensation all over his body. After another trip of Aidan's wet mouth up and down his cock and balls, drops of moisture slid lower, pooling at his opening, causing him to squirm. Once again the vision of Aidan's long cock spearing into him, stuffing him full, ripped through Nate. He'd never wanted anything so badly in his life. He shuddered and thrashed on the desk, mindless with need, but unable to speak it.

Another slow lick around the head was followed by a wet suctioning as Nate's swollen crown was vacuumed into Aidan's mouth,

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then popped free again.

"Tell me, Nathan," Aidan said, his breath hot against Nate's wet prick. "Talk to me. I know this feels good, but I also know it's not what you really want."

Nate was so aroused, so stimulated, he couldn't get words out. God, he wanted to, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out but animalistic groans and panting breaths.

More incredible sucking action left Nate's balls on fire and white lights flashing behind his closed eyes. He clutched at Aidan's head, pulling him closer, wanting to be swallowed up inside this man. No one had ever made him feel this way. Ever.

"Aidan..." he breathed, his voice so raspy it was barely understandable. "Oh...God...I want..."

Aidan's mouth worked him harder, faster.

"God...fuck me, Aidan. Please...fuck me!"

The hot mouth pulled free of his cock, and when he opened his eyes it was to find Aidan leaning over him, his eyes ablaze with lust and satisfaction. He pressed a kiss to Nate's mouth. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes! Are you...? Do you...?"

Aidan gave him a sexy smile that turned his heart upside down. "I am, and yes.

He saw Aidan open a desk drawer and reach into the back of it.

"You said...three years. That it had been three years..." His head still spun and he had to concentrate to get coherent words out. "How is it you have stuff here?"

Aidan was silent for several seconds as he ripped open a package and donned a condom.

"Aidan?" Nate was afraid he'd hurt him somehow with his question.

Aidan smiled at him, allowing Nate to see another glimpse of the

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vulnerability he'd discovered earlier. "I guess you could say this is a testament of just how little faith I had in myself where you're concerned."

His words shook Nate to the core, and a heat that had nothing to do with his current state of arousal, and everything to do with just how deeply he cared about this man, swept through him. He sat up. "You've kept supplies here for me? In case something like this ever happened?"

Aidan's Adam's apple moved up and down his throat in a long swallow that Nate was beginning to recognize as a sign of intense emotion in the man. "Yes."

Nate reached for him, pulling him into a kiss that was tender, yet also alive with the hunger that still pulsed between them. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. It's been a long time. I may not remember how to do this." The mischievous twinkle was back in his green eyes, and a new surge of heat shot through Nate.

"I don't really think it's something you forget how to do," he retorted with a grin.

Aidan's hand found and massaged Nate's cock, up...down... up...down, his thumb smoothing over the crown and just under it until Nate's eyes nearly rolled back in his head and his body vibrated with renewed and painful need. "Damn," he panted. "Damn, Aidan, I'm..."

"...not going to cum yet," Aidan said, releasing him. He turned Nate around so he faced the desk, then pushed him forward over it.

Nate braced his hands against the wood, his breathing coming hard and heavy. His cock felt like it was going to explode.

When Aidan said, "Spread your legs," in a commanding tone, new zings of electricity shot through Nate. He did as he was told, then jumped at the first contact of Aidan's fingers against him. The cool slickness of lubrication in his cleft had him moaning and twitching.

Aidan's warm, broad hands massaged his ass, digging in just the right amount on his cheeks with the heels of his hands, relaxing him,

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but also bringing him to yet a new heightened awareness. When he didn't think he could possibly get more turned on, his cheeks were spread, and once again he felt the cool draft in the room graze over his sensitive places.

"Do you still want me?" Aidan rumbled behind him. "Fucking you?"

The words alone nearly brought Nate off. "Yes," he gasped. "God, yes."

A firm yet gentle pressure stretched his opening, a finger, preparing him. Slick with lube, it inched into him, easing past his tight rings, probing farther and farther in. Nate's passage closed tight around it, and he clenched and clenched, unable to stop his spasming muscles. Aidan wasn't the only one who hadn't been sexually active. It had been a long time since he'd been penetrated, and he'd forgotten how damned good it felt.

Another finger slid in to join the first, stretching him more. His hips jerked, and he found himself instinctively thrusting backward, trying to take them deeper.

"Does that feel good?" Aidan asked, his voice sandpaperly.

Nate nodded.

"Is it what you want?"

"No," Nate managed to whisper. "I want your cock in me."

Aidan was sliding his fingers in and out, each time pressing against Nate's prostate and sending little shocking spasms of high voltage through him. "Christ, Aidan!"

Aidan's fingers slipped out of him, leaving him empty and frustrated, but they were quickly replaced by a thicker object probing at his entrance. Slowly, sensuously, Aidan's hot, lubed shaft made its way past the tight muscles to find purchase within Nate's willing body. The pressure and sense of fullness inside Nate was incredible. His ass spasmed and clenched around the heavy rod that impaled him, and a

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primal growl rose from his chest.

Aidan gave a quick, hard thrust, pushing himself deeper, and pulling a strangled cry of pleasure out of Nate.

"God...more!" Nate begged.

Grasping Nate's hips in firm hands, he thrust again, and this time both men groaned.

Nate had never felt so stretched, so full...so complete. As Aidan pulled partway out, then shoved his cock home again, the ridge of his cockhead rubbed against Nate's prostate, and a sharp sizzle of lightning hit Nate at the base of his spine. "Fuck!"

"Jesus, you feel good," Aidan moaned.

He pulled Nate closer, and his weight pressed down on Nate's back. Their hot, damp skin sizzled together.

He began a rapid-fire rhythm of thrusts that left Nate shaking.

It was tough to form coherent thought, but the one thing that kept coming to Nate over and over was that he didn't want to live without this man ever again.

His own cock ached for release, and when he reached for it, he found hot fluid already leaking from the tip. Aidan's right hand slid off his hip and pushed Nate's out of the way, to surround Nate's swollen member in his slick, hot palm. "I want to do this for you." His voice was thick with arousal and exertion.

Nate moved his hand back to the table for support and gave himself over to Aidan's care. Aidan managed to create a steady rhythm between his deep thrusts into Nate's ass and the hot strokes of his hand on Nate's cock.

Nate was on fire. His skin. His sex organs. His blood. Aidan pounded hard into him, and he pushed himself back, desperately meeting each down stroke with a solid thrust of his own. His balls ached. The friction of Aidan's cock sliding against his prostrate was electrifying. And his opening tingled and stung from being stretched by

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Aidan's plundering.

He shuddered and shook, feeling the pressure in his backside meld with the building pressure in his dick. "Aidan...shit...shit!" And then he lost it. Wave after wave of thick seed spurted out of his shaft, coating Aidan's hand, the desk, his own stomach.

Seconds later, Aidan's motions intensified. With a strangled cry, his entire body convulsed, and each of the final, peaking thrusts shoved Nate forward on the desk with their intensity.

Weak, utterly sated, and unable to hold himself up any longer, Nate collapsed onto the desk with a soft huff. Aidan's weight settled on top of him, his lightly stubbled cheek resting between Nate's shoulder blades. For several minutes the only sound in the room, aside from the damnably loud, ticking wall-clock was their heavy, exhausted breathing. And Nate had never felt closer to anyone in his life.

Finally, Aidan stirred. His cock slipped free, and he rolled over onto his back on the desk. Nate pulled himself fully onto the desk as well and rested on his side facing his lover, his head propped on his hand. He shifted, trying to find a comfortable spot where his hip wasn't being gouged by the hard wood.

"Damn, I'm thinking next time...soft bed."

Aidan laughed, and the whisky-smooth sound stirred a wash of emotion in Nate. "And here I thought I was the old man."

"Oh, trust me, there's nothing old about you."

"But there will be," Aidan said in a quiet tone. "I will be old."

Nate shrugged and brushed the damp hair off Aidan's forehead. "So will I."

"Nine years difference..."

"...is fine. It's what's in here that counts." He tapped his chest.

"There you go finishing my sentences again."

"I'll let you finish some of mine if it makes you feel better," Nate said with a grin. "For example, try this one." He sat up cross-legged on

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the desk, moved Aidan's arm so his hand was in the air, then he pressed his palm against Aidan's slightly bigger one. "I'll start the sentence and you finish it."

At Aidan's amused smile of acknowledgment, Nate said, "I'm touching..."

"You?"

"Excellent! See, you're catching on already. Okay, try this one." He leaned over and brushed a soft kiss against Aidan's lips, waiting until the man responded before he lifted his mouth a few inches and said, "I'm kissing..."

"You," Aidan breathed a split second before their mouths closed together again for another lingering caress.

"Very good," Nate said, sitting back up. "Here's another." This time he gently, very gently, cupped Aidan's balls, and, without direction this time, Aidan did the same to his. Heat swelled in Nate at the simple touch. God, he didn't think he'd ever not want this man.

"I want..."

"You." Aidan's voice had dropped to that husky timbre that sent warm pulses through Nate.

The stared at each other, lost in the sensation, the words, and the quiet moment of closeness.

"See, you're getting good at this," Nate finally said in a soft voice. "One more." His hand slid up Aidan's firm abs and chest to settle directly over his heart.

Aidan followed his lead, and a second later, his warm hand pressed over Nate's heart. Nate wondered if Aidan could feel it throbbing inside him.

The moment stretched out for several heartbeats.

Never taking his gaze off Aidan's, he said, "I love..."

Aidan's eyes glistened with naked emotion. "You," he whispered.

They stared at each other, the words floating in the air between

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them like warm, golden rays of sunlight.

Nate's heart squeezed so tight, for a second he thought he was going to pass out. He reached for Aidan's hand, and Aidan met it, wrapping his long fingers through Nate's, forming a bond that went far deeper than simple hand holding.

A sharp knock at the door shattered the moment, jerking them apart. Aidan pushed himself up onto his elbows. His eyes were wide and fastened on the door.

His pulse racing, Nate's gaze settled on the door as well. Who the hell would still be in the department this time of night? Damn, here they were, sprawled out nude on the desk, with no way to get clothes on without the person on the other side of the door hearing them if they moved around.

Another knock, this one more urgent than the first. "Aidan?" a brisk voice called.

Holy crap. It was Dr. Knudson, the sociology department chair.

Nate put a hand on Aidan's chest, trying to relay some calm, but he felt Aidan's lungs rising and falling in rapid, staccato breaths.

Their eyes met, and like a punch to the gut, Nate felt Aidan pulling away from him. Not physically—his hand was still on Aidan and they weren't moving. But emotionally.

"Aidan, are you still here? I thought I heard voices earlier," Dr. Knudson called. "If you're there, I wanted a word with you before I leave for the evening."

Aidan turned to look at the door again and his breathing grew even more rapid. Nate felt the other man's heart pounding a full-out sprint under his hand.

Then he saw what Aidan was looking at. *Shit!* The door wasn't locked!

Another knock. This one sounding impatient.

They both held their breath, waiting for the moment the department

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chair would try the doorknob and they'd be exposed.

Damn. Shit. Fucking hell! Nate said a quick prayer.

Aidan was a bundle of tightly strung nerves next to him.

Finally, after several long, painful seconds that ticked into a minute, then two, all remained silent in the hallway.

Nate decided to be the daring one. He slipped off the desk, made his way to the door, took a cautious breath, and cracked it open.

The hallway was empty.

His heart racing at what might have happened if he'd found Dr. Knudson still standing there, he shut the door again and pushed in the lock button. Turning, he leaned back against the door. "All's clear."

Aidan was already standing and had gathered his clothes. While Nate watched, he stabbed his long legs into his briefs and jeans. His hands shook as he fastened them.

Nate crossed to him, unconcerned about his own state of nudity, and put a comforting hand on his back. "That was close," he said softly, "but it's okay. I'm sure he had no idea we were in here."

Aidan was silent. He pulled away from Nate to slip his arms into his shirtsleeves. His long fingers began working at his shirt buttons but having a difficult time with it since his hands still trembled. Nate gently pushed his hands out of the way and took over, sliding the remaining buttons through the appropriate holes. Aidan remained silent, watching, until the last one was fastened.

Finally, he looked up, and what Nate saw chilled him to the bone. Gone was the warm, loving, satiated man of earlier. And in his place was a distant stranger.

"Aidan, talk to me."

"What's there to say? It never should have happened."

"Excuse me?" Nate's heart pounded as Aidan's words filled him with a red haze of hurt and anger. "What are you trying to say?"

Aidan bent over to slip his shoes back on. "I'm saying this was a

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mistake. It was foolish. We should never have done this.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll spot you that we probably shouldn’t have done it here. We got swept up in the moment—which is understandable considering how long it had been building—but I think we’re both smart enough not to let it happen again while we’re at work.”

Aidan stood and his gaze met Nate’s. A hint of his old tortured torment was back, swirling in his green eyes. “It won’t happen again anywhere, Nathan. It shouldn’t have happened at all. I’ve spent two years working hard to keep our relationship professional, above reproach. I let...” He dragged in a slow, stuttered breath. “I let my heart and my physical urges win out over my better judgment tonight. I shouldn’t have.”

“Your heart and your physical urges are what make you human, Aidan. Yes, you should have let them win out. That’s what life is all about. If you don’t, then you’re not really living.”

“Spoken like the passionate young man you are. But when you get older—”

“Oh, don’t even start that age bullshit with me,” Nate snapped. “Yeah, you’re nine years older. Big fucking deal. This isn’t about age, it’s about life. There are people a hell of a lot older than either of us who understand that you can choose to fake your way through it, holding yourself back, so afraid of what might happen if you step out the door that you never really experience anything at all. Or you can leap into it with open arms. Take all it has to offer, savor it, *live* it.” Nate paused and shook his head. “Why are you so damned scared of caring?”

“I’m not scared of caring,” Aidan said, his tone heavy. “I’m just experienced enough to know that relationships aren’t always sunshine happiness and sticky with love. Eventually the gold-plating wears off and you’re left with the decay underneath.”

“Spoken like a true cynic.”

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"It's the truth."

"Sure, sometimes it is. There are plenty of crappy relationships out there. Plenty of crappy people, too, like the teacher you told me about earlier. But they're not all like that. In fact, most people, most relationships, aren't. You won't ever discover if the one you have is solid gold, though, if you aren't willing to trust and to invest something of yourself in it."

Aidan gathered up the books and papers he'd pushed to the floor in the heat of the moment. Nate could have helped, but anger burned in his veins. Anger at Aidan for being so damned obtuse. How could someone as smart as he was be so ridiculously out of touch with love?

When Aidan rose, he replaced the books on the desk, but continued to hold the student papers against his chest.

"I'm sorry, Nathan. I can't do this. I can't be who you want me to be. This ends tonight."

A blunt instrument through the gut couldn't possibly have hurt any more than those words. Cold ripples of shock slid through Nate. "All because somebody knocked on the door?"

Aidan shook his head. "The knock on the door was a wake-up call. It brought me back to my right mind. If Dr. Knudson had opened that door, you and I might both have been looking for new jobs, and you might have been looking for a new place to finish your degree. I could cope, but you're just starting your career. It would have been a black mark against you that'd be tough to shed."

"Knudson *didn't* open the door. But even if he had, for fuck sake, Aidan, do you think I care about my damned career more than I care about you?"

Aidan's hand shot through his rumpled hair, and his eyes were sad. "You should care more about it. I'm not worth ruining your life over. I'm going now." He grabbed his jacket off the back of his desk chair and started to the door.

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Nate watched in numb shock. "How can you just walk out? After everything that happened between us tonight?"

Aidan's back was to him, but he slowly turned. His chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. He stepped toward Nate and kissed him. Nate's hand shot up to curve around his head and keep him close. He deepened the kiss, savoring Aidan's taste, his heat, but at the same time trying to will some sense into the man. Eventually, though, Aidan broke away.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice a tortured version of its usual self. "I never meant to hurt you, Nathan. That's the last thing I ever wanted to do."

And then, before Nate could stop him, he was out the door.

"Aidan!" Nate called, starting to go after him before he realized he was wearing nothing but his socks.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"

He backed into the office to find his clothes.

By the time he'd pulled on his jeans and shirt, and jammed his feet into his shoes, Aidan already had a good head start. Nate grabbed up his book bag, slammed the office door shut behind him, locked it, and ran. As he turned the corner, he noticed Dr. Knudson's office door was closed and all was quiet, thank God. At least he didn't have to worry about bumping into him.

When he emerged from the building, the deep slate-gray of spring twilight had settled over the campus. It had rained at some point in the evening because the air was damp and cool, and puddles blotched the sidewalk.

He sprinted to the parking lot across the quad, hoping he wasn't too late. But as he slid to a stop at the edge of the blacktop, he saw the tail lights of Aidan's BMW already moving down the street a block away and picking up speed.

Nate bent over, hands on his knees. The earthy scent of wet grass

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and pavement invaded his senses, filling him with a poignant longing. Suddenly unable to breathe, he dropped to a crouch. His chest felt like someone was smashing it with a sledgehammer, and the hot sting of tears burned his eyes. He buried his face in his hands and let the waves of heartache consume him.

CHAPTER 3

The sound of the organ at the university chapel roused Nate. It was playing the wedding recessional, and the lilting tones echoed across campus, a celebratory paean of someone's joyous night. But for Nate, each note punctuated his own loss with a sharp stab in his gut.

He scrubbed his hands over his damp eyes and stared out into the now-dark evening. The streetlights were glistening stars in the black puddles, giving him a sense that the world had turned upside down.

And in a very real way it had, he thought.

He wanted to be furious at Aidan for being so difficult, for being so hard to reach. For making him feel such powerful emotions tonight, then ripping them away and leaving him lonely and empty inside. But he couldn't. Aidan was hurting. And Nate suspected his fear of their relationship stemmed from more than some observed bad entanglement between a prof and student in his past.

No, his wounds went deeper than that. And until he opened up

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about it and faced it, whatever *it* was, they weren't ever going to be able to have the close relationship Nate knew they were capable of.

And, damn it, he wanted that. He knew in his gut Aidan did, too. It was in his every touch, in his voice, his kiss. And it was especially in the anguished way he'd said goodbye tonight, Nate realized.

Rising to his full height on stiff legs, Nate knew what he had to do. Aidan could try to shut him out. And maybe he'd succeed. Maybe Nate wouldn't be able to pierce his protective armor. But he had to try.

"It's the way you smiled, the way you still smile... It touched me. Still does."

The memory of Aidan's words, and the vulnerable look on his face when he'd said them, sent a warm quiver of need through Nate. Two years the man had been feeling that way.

No, he wasn't ready to give up hope just yet.

He set out at a jog down the street. Of all the damn days he'd decided to walk to class. *Shit*. Now he was stuck getting home on foot. He chafed at the delay.

Several blocks later, his apartment building loomed up in the night—dark brick against even darker sky. He took the building steps two at a time, jammed his key in the lock of the outer door, and ran the two flights to his floor. He stopped in his tiny apartment only long enough to dump his book bag and grab a jacket and his helmet. Then he was back down the steps and out into the chilly night once again.

He had a deal with the apartment super that he could keep his motorcycle in the man's garage behind the building, and that's where he headed. For an extra twenty bucks a month—a steal—his beloved Yamaha sportbike stayed safe. Tonight it beckoned him like a siren, telling him to climb aboard and fly.

And that's just what he did.

Traffic was light and as he tore alongside the Charles River he let himself relax into the rumbling power beneath him and the raw

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exhilaration of speed. People who didn't know better called bikes like his "crotch rockets," and they weren't wrong. His bike was fast as fucking hell, and when everything else in life turned to crap, he always had the sensation he could just blow past it. The cold wind tugged at his jacket and ate through his jeans, but he didn't mind. It was comforting in an odd way. And helped balance him—a counterpoint to the hot swells of pain still ebbing and flowing inside him.

Twenty minutes later he pulled his bike up in front of the Victorian Aidan had bought in January, the house Nate had helped him move into. Located in a quiet, residential neighborhood that had once been run down and less than desirable, the house, and most of the others along the street, now stood in dignified contentment behind redolent flower gardens and fresh coats of paint. The area had been revitalized ten years ago and was now a highly sought after mecca for those who wanted a quiet suburban life, yet still be close to the city.

As Nate shut off his bike and pulled off his helmet, he noted the house was dark. Aidan's car was nowhere to be seen. But then again, it wouldn't be. He probably parked it in the detached garage behind the house.

A quick walk down the side of the house and a peek into the garage showed him no sign of the gray BMW.

He knocked on the back door. "Aidan?" He didn't expect a response and didn't get one.

Trying not to let disappointment and a new wave of gut-wrenching loss overwhelm him, he climbed the few steps to the white-railed front porch and knocked there. Still no sign of life.

With a defeated sigh, he sank onto the top step and buried his face in his hands again.

But then he startled. "Shit!" He patted his inside jacket pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He'd thought to retrieve it from his book bag before he left his apartment, but it hadn't occurred to him until just now

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that he could use it.

He punched in Aidan's cell phone number out of memory, his hands shaking. As it rang, his heart squeezed tight and he had the sensation again that he couldn't breathe.

But after only three rings, he got a computerized message that the caller was unavailable. A fancy way of saying Aidan had turned off his phone. And obviously his voice mail as well.

Another stab of pain pierced Nate's gut.

When Aidan shut him out, he shut him out all the way. "Damn it!" he whispered.

Well, the man had to come home sometime. And he was going to be here when he did.

* * *

Hours later, as the first pale fingers of pink and gray slid across the horizon, Nate woke from a doze. The sweet scent of lilac enveloped him in its comforting embrace and he was, at once, a kid again, sleeping out on the covered porch at his parents' house on Long Island on a warm summer night.

But then his muscles protested, and the cold, damp ache that had seeped into his bones from a night spent sitting up, head resting against the porch rail, in the chilly Boston spring air brought him fully back to reality. He rolled his neck, trying to work the stiffness out of it. He'd probably been in this position for hours. He should have moved up to one of the low-slung canvas chairs that graced one end of the porch, but just hadn't ever found the energy.

More disheartening than his cold, stiff body, however, was the realization he was still alone. Aidan had never come home.

Worry shot through him that something bad might have happened. A car accident on a wet, dark road last night. *Oh, God.*

No, don't panic. He's probably fine. He had his phone turned off, so he obviously needs some alone time.

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Somehow that didn't make Nate feel any better.

He pulled out his cell again and dialed Aidan's number for probably the tenth time since he'd taken up residence here on the porch.

Nothing. It was still off.

Where could he be?

Nate pushed himself to his feet with a groan. He looked over his shoulder at the sea-foam green house with the red door and white trim. The handful of times he'd been here, the house's warmth had filled him with a sense of contentment. But he realized that without Aidan's presence it was just a house.

He knocked on the door again several times, knowing it was pointless, but unable not to go through the exercise anyway. Just in case. Ridiculous, since if Aidan had come home and he'd managed to sleep through it—hardly likely—he couldn't see Aidan ignoring him completely and going in to bed.

Shaking his head, Nate moved down the steps and out to his bike parked at the curb. He couldn't stay here indefinitely. He was cold, miserable, and he had to pee.

With a leaden heart, Nate donned his helmet, started his bike, and with considerably less primal thrill than he'd experienced last night, retraced his route back to the city.

On one last, long-shot hope, he swung by the university instead of going straight home. As the first rays of sunlight flickered over the campus, Nate parked his bike in the nearly deserted lot, crossed the quad, and let himself into the building where the sociology classrooms and offices were housed.

The department was deserted, as he'd expected it to be. And, as best he could tell, everything in Aidan's office was exactly like he'd left it last night. The professor hadn't been back here.

By the time Nate parked his motorcycle in the garage behind his building and dragged himself up the two flights of stairs to his

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apartment, he felt like he'd been wrung through a wringer. Hell, he had been. He thought he could collapse into his bed and sleep for days.

Yet he suspected he wouldn't. Worry for Aidan ate at him. And the surging pain in his stomach was more alive than ever.

* * *

The weekend proved to be the longest two days of Nate's life. There were no calls or messages from Aidan, who still wasn't answering his phone, and Nate had made the trip back out to his house on Sunday afternoon to find things as quiet as they'd been when he'd left the previous morning.

By the wee hours of Monday morning, the two nights of tossing and turning had caught up to him. He was exhausted, but so wired he couldn't sleep. He'd finally given in to the incessant ache of missing Aidan, and had resorted to giving himself a soapy, balls-aching hand job in the hot shower, trying to relax enough he could pass out. As he imagined Aidan's mouth on his swollen cock, then felt Aidan's magnificent prick pounding into his ass, he'd exploded, shooting jets of cum against the shower wall until he was certain every last drop of liquid in his body had been squeezed dry.

The plan had worked. Too well. He'd crawled back into bed around dawn and been dead to the world in minutes. When his alarm had gone off a couple of hours later, he'd shut it off accidentally instead of hitting snooze, causing him to oversleep—not a normal thing for him. He'd had run to make it to his final on time.

At midday, the test was finally over. He knew he'd passed, but it wasn't going to be pretty. He'd hoped studying this past weekend would help keep his mind off the twisting in his gut. But it hadn't. And his test score was going to suffer for it. Yet for the first time in his academic career, he didn't give a damn. All he wanted, with a burning need that bordered on agony, was Aidan. Wanted to see him. Hear his voice. And, he couldn't kid himself, wanted to lose himself in the

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man's kiss, his solid arms, and his sensual body.

The sociology department secretary, Jane, smiled when he passed her desk. "Hey, Nate, how's it going today? Are you finished with finals or do you have more this week?"

He paused and blinked at her, finding it hard to focus back on the here and now. "Um...I just had my last one this morning."

"You okay? You don't seem like yourself."

He dragged in a breath and forced himself to really look at her. Her usual bright smile faded, and concerned lines creased her forehead. She ran a tight ship in the department, but she was also a mother hen, and didn't hesitate to look out for the department faculty and students. "You look like you aren't feeling well, hon."

"I'm...just tired. Long weekend."

"Ah, studying. Well, you get some rest. I don't want you getting sick."

Too late. I already am. It's my heart.

"Is Professor Sheridan in?"

"He's not here. I thought for sure you'd know that."

Nate's lungs seized. "Know what? Where is he?"

Jane's eyebrows rose in obvious surprise that she knew something he didn't about Aidan. "He called last night and left a message on my voice mail here at work. Since he gave his last final on Friday, he's decided to go to Chicago early, to get ready for his summer class. I think he was planning to catch a flight late last night or sometime this morning."

Nate stared at her as new, deeper waves of shock rippled over him. He'd thought he couldn't possibly feel any worse. How wrong he'd been.

"But...does Dr. Knudson know? And...he still has papers to grade. And return," he mumbled. He was babbling, he knew, but when he'd opened his mouth, that's what fell out.

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“Yes, I believe he and Dr. Knudson spoke last night and he has his approval to go early. As far as the papers, Dr. Sheridan said he’d mail them to me later this week. I’ll make sure they’re available for the students to pick up.” Jane’s concerned lines deepened. “Nate...maybe you should sit down. I’m worried about you.”

She started to rise from her chair, but Nate held up a hand. “No, I’m okay. I’m...okay. Thanks, Jane.”

He made his way down the hall to the office he shared with Aidan, feeling Jane’s worried stare weigh heavily on his back. He was relieved when he turned the corner and was out of her sight.

The office was just as it had been the last time he’d been here. The pens and pencils from Friday night’s lovemaking even still lay scattered across the floor. Nate bent to pick them up and return them to the metal cup, which he replaced on the desk.

He didn’t know what he’d expected to find here. Okay, yes he did. He’d hoped Aidan might have left him a note. Or something.

But it sounded, from what Jane said, as if Aidan hadn’t ever returned. He’d called. Last night, while Nate lay tossing and turning.

The shut-out was complete.

“Okay, that’s it,” Nate growled, sick of the god-awful feelings churning inside him. “I’m done with this crap.”

He left the office and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 4

The last slanting rays of sunset, in burnished red and russet orange, striped the road as Nate parked his bike in front of the green Victorian a little after eight o'clock that evening. He pulled off his helmet and, not bothering to lock it onto his bike, tucked it under his arm as he climbed the porch steps.

He'd spent a frustrating as hell afternoon. He'd left the university fully intending to go home, get some clothes, and go to Chicago to sort things out with Aidan once and for all. No more letting the man run away. He'd been determined to confront him directly.

But after calling the hotel in Chicago, he discovered not only had "Dr. Sheridan" not checked in, he hadn't changed his reservations and was still expected there the following weekend. Nate had begun to worry again. A phone call to the campus travel agent, who usually made traveling arrangements for university folks, further confused him. The agent told him Aidan hadn't been in contact with her about

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changing his flight date, and when she checked the airline database, confirmed that he hadn't traded in his ticket directly with the airline either.

Nate didn't know what the hell was going on, but the only place he knew to check was Aidan's house again. He'd called his home number and gotten no answer, but that didn't mean Aidan wasn't here. He just might not want to pick up the phone.

If no one *was* home this time, however, he didn't know what he'd do. He'd probably be forced to sit tight the rest of the week, then go to Chicago on Sunday, when Aidan would be there for sure.

He'd just raised his fist to knock when the door opened.

Aidan stood there, dressed in faded jeans, gray T-shirt, and leather bomber jacket. His keys were in his hand, as if he'd been on his way out somewhere.

They stared at each other, and Nate wasn't sure which of them was more shocked. He noticed how pale Aidan was, saw dark circles under his eyes. He looked as exhausted as Nate felt, and a warm tingle of longing and the need to hug him close and make everything all right, swept over him.

But he couldn't get past the hurt that still felt like a hot poker in his gut. His gaze fastened on the keys in Aidan's hands and the poker gave a sharp jab.

"Leaving again already?" he muttered, unable to keep the bitter tension out of his voice.

A storm swirled in Aidan's green eyes. He glanced at his hand as if just now remembering he held the keys, then back up at Nate. "No, not anymore." He shoved the keys in his jacket pocket, stepped back, and held the door open.

Nate looked at him for several seconds, then entered the house, his shoulder brushing Aidan's. He tried to ignore the jolt of electricity that sizzled between them at the simple touch, and at how his traitorous

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cock twitched in response.

Aidan shut the door behind him and shrugged off his jacket, which he tossed over the deacon's bench in the entry hall. Nate set his helmet on the glistening hardwood floor inside the door and pulled off his jacket also.

Without saying a word, Aidan moved down the hallway, past the oak staircase, and into what Nate knew was the living room.

He finally followed and found Aidan had gone through the French doors out onto the secluded deck. The homes in the neighborhood were close, on small lots. But heavy maples and elms stood sentry around the yard, nearly hiding the tall houses from sight. Between the trees and the huge lilac bushes that flanked the privacy fence and deck, it was like being tucked into a sweetly-scented, private world.

Aidan stood near the railing, his back to Nate, arms hanging at his sides, as if he were too tired or too defeated to even find the energy to lean on something. He stared out at the faint oranges and pinks that were rapidly descending into twilight.

Nate wanted to go to him, wrap his arms around him, and bring them close again. But he didn't. Because it would only be temporary. They couldn't find true closeness until Aidan was willing to open his heart all the way.

"Obviously you didn't go to Chicago like you told Jane."

Aidan shook his head.

"Why not? And where were you going tonight? Back to wherever you ran off to over the weekend?"

Aidan's shoulders seemed to slump just a bit more. "I went to the Cape this weekend. My grandparents still keep a summer cottage there. I...I needed to think."

Hurt welled in Nate's chest. Aidan had been safely tucked away at the family "summer cottage" on Cape Cod, while he'd been here worrying himself sick with his heart in shreds.

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"Is that where you were going tonight? Back there?" His voice was so tight he almost didn't recognize it."

"No. Tonight I was going out to find you."

Nate's heart stopped beating. Then resumed again with a painful throb. "Why?"

The long silence was nearly deafening.

Finally, Aidan sighed and ran a hand through his hair, still not facing Nate. "I thought at first the best thing would be for me to leave. Go to Chicago early. I thought that would be easier for you, to just have me gone. But when I got to the airport today, I stood there in the terminal..." His hand shot through his hair again, and Nate saw it was shaking. "God, I don't even know how long I stood there. An hour. Two. Maybe more. Hell, I don't know. I couldn't make myself go up to the counter to change out my ticket. All those things you said to me on Friday night kept clamoring in my head."

"Things?"

Aidan turned finally, and although the sky was now darkening into shadows, there was enough warm yellow light bleeding out onto the deck from inside Nate could see the emotional upheaval in Aidan's gaze. "You told me I was scared of living. Really living." He rubbed his temples as if they were hurting. "I went back to my car and took a drive, a long drive, trying to sort out the mess I'd made. I finally realized I owed you an explanation. A real explanation."

Nate studied him for a long moment. "You were the student, weren't you?"

It was something that had been gnawing at him for the past three days—what had happened to make Aidan afraid of getting close. It had only been this evening he'd begun to suspect.

Aidan's eyes closed, as if he could somehow shutter out the question. But he didn't turn away as Nate was afraid he might.

"Yes," he whispered.

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Nate moved toward him then. Couldn't have stopped himself if he'd wanted to. It was instinct. He grasped one of Aidan's hands, twining their fingers together. "Tell me."

Aidan's eyelids fluttered open. "I was twenty-one, an undergrad. Old enough to know better." A shaky breath escaped him. "I hadn't come out, not even to my mom, until a few months before. You know how it is...you've known inside that you're different, but once you finally admit it out loud, you have the urge to explore, gain some experience. I was naïve when it came to relationships, and I guess he—the professor—saw that."

He speared a hand through his hair again and leaned his hip against the porch railing. But he didn't let go of Nate's hand. Nate had the sense he was depending on it almost like a lifeline, to keep him steady.

"Looking back on it I can see, of course, that he was only using me. I found out later he hadn't been as open about his orientation as I'd thought. He was still semi in the closet, and I was a way to get a few thrills. I was too foolish to recognize that, though. I thought I was in love with him. Or at least in serious infatuation."

He sighed heavily.

"Once I began to recognize what was happening, I protested. But he made blackmail threats to me, saying that if I didn't do what he wanted or if I said anything against him, he'd fail me in his classes, or guarantee I'd never graduate. And worse, he took something I'd told him in private and threw it back up in my face as a threat. He said he'd contact my dad and tell him about us."

Nate winced. He knew Aidan's parents had divorced when Aidan was young. His father'd had an affair, or several—Nate couldn't remember the specifics. It had been bitter, and his dad had basically deserted the family, only to show up a couple of times a year to make life hell for everyone. Aidan was close to his mom and his wealthy, socialite grandparents, and his mom had been supportive when Aidan

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had come out. His dad, however, when he'd discovered Aidan was gay, had gone ballistic. Eventually, several years later, he'd washed his hands of his only son. Nate didn't think they were even in contact anymore.

But at that point, before the ultimate falling out, to have Aidan's prof threaten to contact his dad about Aidan having an affair with him? Damn, that would be the worst kind of miserable.

He squeezed Aidan's hand in a gesture of solidarity. "What happened?"

"When things turned....violent..." Aidan's eye's closed again briefly. "When it got bad...I went to the department head. I didn't know what else to do. At first I don't think he even believed me—that's when I discovered my professor wasn't as 'out' as I'd thought. Another teacher came forward, though, on my behalf. She said she'd suspected I wasn't the first who'd been through this with this particular man.

"It was ugly. It dragged on for months—inquiries, statements, all very quietly, mind you. I was labeled a 'disturbed' student, implying I had made the whole thing up. The teacher finally stepped down—but they never said publicly why. The official statement was something about him leaving the university to pursue other interests."

"That is just fucked up," Nate muttered. "So no one ever knew what he'd really done? What kind of a bastard he was?"

"No. And once he was gone, I was told, in an oh-so-hush-hush conference with the department head and the dean of the college, that if I ever brought it up again, to anyone, my academic and professional future would be ruined. They also made it clear I was no longer welcome at that school. They'd transfer all my credits, but I wouldn't be coming back in the fall.

"I not only transferred to a different school, I moved to a different state. At my mom's advice, I dutifully saw a therapist for a while, then I just...tried to put it all behind me."

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“But you’ve never stopped looking over your shoulder, have you?”

Aidan shrugged. “It was a long time ago. The climate for gays and lesbians is different now, more open, than it was fifteen years ago. And the public is much more aware of, and vocal against, sexual harassment. Plus, I’ve made a good name for myself. At this point in my life, if anyone from my past tried to stir up old dirt, I’m mature enough and wise enough to know how to fight them. But you... I don’t ever want any shadows to darken your future, Nathan.”

The usual little shiver of need shot through him at hearing Aidan use his given name.

“Surely you don’t believe you’d ever be capable of behaving the way that bastard did? You’re not made up that way, Aidan.”

He squeezed Nate’s hand and released it, then turned away from him to look out into the darkening night again. “I know that. I just...” His shoulders sagged again. “I don’t want anyone to ever look at you and think maybe you’ve gotten any kind of special favors because...”

“Because I’m sleeping with the teacher?”

Aidan nodded slowly, as if in pain. “You’re so damned smart. You have a phenomenal future ahead of you. And you’ve earned every grade, every award you’ve ever gotten. I don’t want anything to ever tarnish that.”

Nate studied his back, wondering why Aidan wasn’t looking at him again. Then it hit him. The only time Aidan didn’t look at him was when he was hiding something.

And Nate knew what it was.

He grasped Aidan’s arm and turned him around, then pulled him close so they were cock to cock, balls to balls. Desire clouded Aidan’s eyes, and Nate knew exactly how he felt. But right now, this wasn’t about the sex. It was about being close. He cradled Aidan’s face between his hands and kissed him. No tongue, but with enough heat to leave them both panting.

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"I appreciate your concern for me, and I don't doubt it's real. But I think we both know that's not what's really going on here."

He watched Aidan swallow. Heard, and felt, the soft gusts of breath slide through his parted lips.

"Aidan, I'm not like them—the other men who deserted you."

Aidan's dark brows drew together and for a moment Nate thought sure he was going to deny it. But then his mouth closed and he swallowed again, grimacing as he did it, like he had a lump in his throat.

"I'm not like your dad. I'm not like the bastard professor. And I'm not like whoever your partner was before I met you, the one who left you and hurt you."

He kissed him again, taking his time, caressing Aidan's lips with a light touch, exploring their shape and feel. Aidan trembled at the onslaught and his hands slid around Nate's waist.

Nate pulled his mouth away and gazed deeply into Aidan's eyes. "I'm not like them," he said again. "I'm not going anywhere."

Aidan's breathing was stuttered. His eyes filled with sadness. "I always seem to run them off. I might... I'll probably..."

Nate pressed another kiss, gentle and brief this time, to his lips. "You're not going to run me off. You've been trying to do it the past several days, yet here I am." He looked at Aidan expectantly. Then he smiled. "Do you think if I was the running type, the quitting type, I would have spent my afternoon packing to follow you to Chicago so I could fuck some sense into you?" He ground his groin against Aidan's, punctuating his point.

A low groan escaped Aidan. His eyes closed, then flickered back open.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm in love with you, Aidan. I'm not some kid who's still playing the field—I'm a grown man. I'm going into this with eyes wide open. I want a full-time, forever partner,

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through the good times and the bad.” Nate rubbed his knuckles along Aidan’s cheek. “I want you.”

Aidan’s gaze met his, hot, needy, but also with a welling tenderness that turned Nate inside out.

“Nathan...”

He smiled. “Aidan.”

“I’m sorry.”

“This damn well better not be another one of those moments where you tell me you’re sorry but you can’t do this.”

A small huff escaped Aidan that was part laugh, part choked emotion. “No. This isn’t that kind of sorry.” Moisture glistened in his eyes. “I’m sorry I hurt you. Sorry I walked out on you this weekend. When I got to the Cape, I sat in my car for hours before I ever went into the house. I couldn’t stop wondering what the hell I was doing down there by myself, lonely and miserable, when I could have been in a soft, warm bed somewhere with you.”

Nate laid a hand against Aidan’s chest, savoring his heat and the feel of hard flesh. “If it makes you feel any better, I wasn’t in much better shape. I spent Friday night, all night, until the sun came up, sitting on your front porch, waiting for you to come home.”

Aidan’s forehead creased. “No, God no, that doesn’t make me feel better. I’m sorry I put you through that. Damn it, Nathan, when I’m with you, when I think about you, I get all twisted up inside. Half the time I don’t know whether I’m coming or going. I know sometimes I have a hard time opening up. But with you, I find myself so open, feeling so much...” His voice lowered to almost a whisper. “Sometimes it scares the hell out of me.”

“What scares you?”

Aidan’s eyes shimmered with intensity. “How much I care about you.”

Nate’s chest constricted. “I know exactly how you feel.”

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Aidan grasped the back of Nate's head with one of his hands and pulled their heads close together. And then they were kissing. Tongues dueling, trying to go deeper, taste more. Their hunger for each other was a live thing, twining around them, sucking them into a swirling vortex.

Aidan tore his mouth off Nate's to press a kiss against the sensitive hollow between his neck and shoulder. "I want you upstairs, in my bed."

"Thank God." Nate stepped away from Aidan and gave him a slow, heated grin. "Soft bed...much better than porch railing or desk top."

Aidan's smile set his balls to aching. "Smart ass."

Nate kicked off his shoes, bent over to tug off his socks, then, standing back up, pulled his long-sleeved T-shirt over his head and threw it on the lounge chair nearby. "Only when I know I'm right," he taunted.

His nimble fingers worked open his belt buckle, popped the snap on his jeans, and slid down the zipper, giving Aidan a view of his bulging cock through his gray boxer briefs. He waved the flaps of his open jeans at Aidan, still grinning. "Want it?"

"Jesus," Aidan whispered, his voice hoarse, his eyes glazing over.

"Then come and get it!" Nate turned and sprinted into the house.

He was halfway up the carpeted staircase when Aidan caught him around the thighs and pulled him down onto his stomach. Nate landed with a sharp huff of breath. But when Aidan's hands latched onto the waistband of his jeans and dragged them and his boxer briefs down around his thighs, he forgot all about having the air knocked out of him. His nerve endings came to life, every inch of his skin sizzled, and his blood began to boil.

Aidan continued to pull at his pants, and with one final jerk, they were gone, leaving Nate bare-assed and exposed.

He tried to turn over, to face Aidan, but Aidan wouldn't let him,

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keeping him pinned down with the press of his shoulder against the back of Nate's thighs.

"Oh, no. You tease, you pay the price," Aidan murmured, his voice rich with passion. With a grunt, he grabbed Nate around the waist and pulled Nate's hips backward until he was on his hands and knees.

Nate had roughhoused and horsed around with men before, but this was something different altogether. His body hummed like a tuning fork that had been struck and left to vibrate indefinitely.

Aidan's big warm hands spread his ass cheeks, and new swells of bone-tingling eroticism shot through him. *Fuck*. The idea of being so open and exposed for Aidan, with Aidan totally calling the shots, made him hot as hell.

Then wet, sinful heat pressed against his opening.

"Christ!" Nate spasmed, and a groan surged all the way up from his balls. "Oh...shit... Shit!" he panted, as Aidan's tongue swirled round and round his opening. When it pushed a short distance inside, Nate bucked and squirmed, but Aidan held him in place and continued his erotic torture.

Nate's bones had melted from the heat of the first touch, and as Aidan's hot tongue continued to slide in and out, pushing deeper each time, flames licked over and through his body, dissolving him into a thick pool of liquid heat.

His balls burned and his cock ached like a sonofabitch. He managed to get one of his hands around it, knowing he wasn't going to be able to hold out long. He'd never, in his life, been so utterly aroused.

Aidan's tongue was now making swift jabs that left Nate moaning and thrashing. "Aidan...damn..."

He jerked his cock, once, twice, already feeling his testicles tightening. "Shit..." Another frantic jerk and the first tingling of orgasm built in the base of his shaft.

Aidan's tongue was relentless, fucking him hard. Strokes of bright

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red flashed behind Nate's tightly closed eyes. *Oh, God...close...* "So close..." he gasped.

When Aidan's fingers lightly stroked the base of his balls, that was all it took. In a surge of molten heat, seed coursed up his shaft and burst free with so much force it was painful. Before he could catch his breath, another surged out, spilling over his hand like hot lava.

"Arrrgggggh....unnnh!" He was reduced to groaning. He simply couldn't make words form. "Ahhhhhg!"

Finally, after Nate had shuddered and gasped one last time, completely spent, he collapsed onto the steps. He knew he was rubbing his cum all over Aidan's carpet, but somehow just didn't care at the moment.

Aidan sat on the step between his legs and stroked his back. His touch was gentle, soothing as Nate came down from the intensity of his orgasm.

When Nate groaned and rolled over onto his back, Aidan's smile was pure sex. Well, not pure...Nate couldn't miss the tenderness shining in his eyes.

"Not such a smart ass now, are you?"

A tired grin curved Nate's lips. God, he loved seeing this side of Aidan. Teasing. Open. And sexy as hell. "How is it I'm completely nude and satiated, and you're still fully dressed?"

Aidan's lips twitched and his gaze sparkled with promise. "Who says I'm done with you? I told you I wanted you upstairs in my bed, and I'm damn well going to have you there."

Holy. Crap.

Nate didn't know how it was possible after the mega-eruption he'd just had, but damned if his balls weren't tingling again.

Aidan rose and held out a hand to him, and Nate let the man pull him to his feet because, truthfully, he wasn't sure he could stand up on his own right now. Then, still smiling, albeit somewhat wickedly,

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Aidan pointed up the steps. "Bed. Now. Go. Or I'm not responsible for what else might happen on these steps."

Nate didn't need any further urging.

By the time he'd pulled back the covers on Aidan's king-size maple four-poster and lowered himself onto the soft, cool sheet, Aidan was as nude as he.

"Damn, you did a striptease coming up the stairs and I didn't get to watch?" He ogled Aidan's firm body and mouth-watering package in the moonlight slanting through the silky sheers of the huge, open window. He stretched out on his back and held out his arms in invitation.

Aidan crawled onto the bed between Nate's legs. "Do you want me to put my clothes back on and start over?" His voice was a low purr that scudded through Nate's veins like sultry heat.

"Hell, no. I just want to touch you, feel you against me."

Aidan lowered himself on top of him, and Nate moaned at the thrill of their bodies melding together.

They kissed for ages, savoring each other's taste, exploring, letting their hands roam. The scent of lilac drifted through the window, its fragrance blending with that of male desire, only making Nate harder, yet also filling him even more completely with emotion. Damn, he loved this man.

He rolled them over until Aidan was on his back and Nate knelt between his thighs.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, looking down at Aidan.

"Yes."

Such a small, simple word, yet it conveyed so much. Nate accepted it for the gift he knew it was.

"This time, I want to be inside *you*."

Aidan's breathing quickened. "Yes. Do it."

"Do you have—?"

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“Drawer.” Aidan’s voice was thick with desire.

As Nate leaned over him and opened the drawer in the bedside table, a smile curved his lips. Now who was finishing whose sentences?

When he pulled out a condom and lubrication, Aidan took them from him. “Let me.”

He sat up and licked Nate’s cockhead until Nate moaned in pleasure. The wet heat of Aidan’s mouth teased and played over Nate’s rod until he vibrated with almost painful desire. Just when he thought he’d go mad from the stimulation, Aidan gave his slit a final kiss, then eased the condom over his thickly-veined erection.

Breathing hard, Nate watched as his lover generously lubed his sheathed cock, growing even more enflamed at the sight of Aidan’s large hand surrounding it, coating it, and then stroking it a few times in his slippery palm.

A deep down hunger, something almost primal, a craving Nate had never experienced before, gnawed to life within him. It pulsed at the core of his balls and spread slowly through his cells like magma. Aidan’s gaze locked with his, pulling him into a hot, desperate tunnel of raw sensation and churning emotion.

Nate pressed him back onto the bed and gave him a fierce, open-mouthed kiss. Then he lifted Aidan’s hips. When Aidan’s legs spread apart, giving him easier access, he rubbed himself against Aidan’s erection.

God, he wanted to ram his cock into Aidan’s body right now, pound into him over and over until they were both senseless and sated. It took all his self control not to give into the wild urge. Instead, he wrapped his hand around his covered cock for a moment, lubing his fingers. When they were slick, he swirled the tip of his middle finger over the puckered opening on Aidan’s pelvic floor.

Aidan’s eyes closed and a soft moan escaped him as Nate eased his finger into his passage. He moved it in and out, pressing against the

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walls, encouraging the tight rings of muscle to relax until he was able to slide a second finger into the heat. He worked and stretched some more, now with both fingers, loving the way Aidan clawed at and shifted on the bed, eyes still closed, as his pleasure built.

“Need you...” Aidan gasped, his hips gyrating as he moved against Nate’s fingers. “Need you in me.”

The quietly desperate words were more than Nate could take. He needed, too. Needed to feel his cock buried in the squeezing depths of Aidan’s body. He pulled his fingers out, anchored Aidan’s hips with his hands, and pressed the tip of his rigid shaft against the quivering hole.

Aidan’s eyes opened, his lust-clouded gaze locked with Nate’s, and he hissed in a breath at the pressure. Moments later he groaned as Nate’s bulbous head stretched him, spread him, easing past the tight muscles with a slow but unapologetic insistence.

Nate wanted to sink himself to the balls, longed to thrust and rut and be consumed in his lover’s body. Yet the need to put Aidan’s pleasure first, to bring him the deepest fulfillment possible, continued to rein him in. The sound of Aidan’s heavy breathing, the sight of his long cock jutting upright from his groin like a granite obelisk, begging for its own release, infused Nate with satisfaction.

As Aidan’s opening swallowed him inch by inch, his hips twisted under Nate’s hands, trying to bring them closer together faster. But each time he attempted to work Nate deeper, Nate would tighten his fingers on Aidan’s hips and quit moving. It only took a couple of such instances before Aidan learned not to fight it. Learned that slow and steady was better than no movement at all. But that didn’t stop his hoarse groans, or his desperate gaze from begging. Which only made Nate even harder and more desperate himself.

Still...prolonging the pleasure was too rich to abandon.

He relished this moment, enjoyed seeing Aidan spread below him. Yet at the same time, he loved the fact that while he and Aidan were

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both comfortable playing the dominant roll in lovemaking, he knew they'd always be equal partners in love and life.

"Please..." Aidan panted, his gaze burning into Nate's. His hands clutched at the sheet next to him, balling it between his fingers. His hips arched. "Please...no more slow. Do me hard...fast..."

The words snapped Nate's barely restrained control. Unable to stop himself, he thrust deeply, and growled low in his throat when Aidan's passage swallowed him to the root.

"Jesus!" Aidan gasped. "Oh...God..."

Lights flashed behind Nate's eyes as Aidan's body spasmed around his buried prick. "Fuck...so tight...hot," he groaned.

With another low moan, he slid partway out, leaving Aidan to pant his frustration. But only temporarily. He thrust again. Then again. His dick throbbed and burned and his balls ached. When Aidan pushed his ass tighter against Nate's groin, forcing him deeper still, the pressure squeezing Nate's cock was intense, the heat searing. They both cried out.

Aidan's eyes closed and his head tipped back, an expression of sublime pleasure-pain on his face. When his eyelids fluttered open, he stared up at Nate with a breathtaking intensity. "I love you, Nathan Turner."

The sound was so raw, so heartfelt, so beautiful Nate couldn't breathe for several seconds. Tears stung his eyes, and he was touched even more when he realized Aidan's eyes glistened with them as well.

"I love you, too. And I'll always be here."

"I know. I believe you."

Nate saw in his eyes that he really did.

They moved together with an explosive passion that filled Nate's heart so full he could barely breathe. Their bodies surged together, hard, frenzied. Hands splayed over hot, sweat-slicked flesh, mouths met and tangled. They both worked at Aidan's erection, hands colliding,

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sliding together to bring him to release, even as Nate pounded his own plundering cock into Aidan's welcoming body.

Their explosions when they came were simultaneous—Aidan's in bursts of scorching cream that coated his stomach, and Nate's in hot, jetting streams in Aidan's ass.

They clung together until long after the last spasms shuddered through them.

Eventually, Nate was able to work up the energy to move, and his softening cock slid out of Aidan. He discarded the condom, then they found each other's arms and snuggled under the covers, legs entwined, enjoying the simple peace of just being close and together.

"There is something to be said for a soft bed."

Nate chuckled and looked into Aidan's smiling, loving gaze. "Did you doubt me? Ye of little faith."

"Well, you know, when you're as old as I am..."

Nate rolled his eyes and laughed again. "Lord help me, why do I have a feeling I'm going to be listening to this old man sob story the rest of our lives?" he teased.

"I like the sound of that...the rest of our lives." Aidan's voice was quiet and slightly hoarse.

"I told you..." Nate kissed him tenderly. "Always. Through the good times and the tough ones."

Aidan brushed the damp thickness of Nate's hair off his forehead. "Did you sleep this past weekend?" he asked, tone nearly as soft as the breeze fluttering the thin shears on the window.

"No. Did you?"

Aidan shook his head. "I'm tired. But I don't want to close my eyes. I don't want to miss a second of time with you."

"You won't be missing anything." Nate settled a hand over Aidan's heart, loving the feel of its slow, steady thump against his hand. "We'll be right here together the whole time. Maybe we'll even share a

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dream.” He smiled at him, his eyelids growing heavy.

“We already are,” Aidan murmured before kissing him. “I can’t bear the thought of being away from you all summer. Please. Come to Chicago with me. We’ll make it up to your family somehow.”

Nate’s smile deepened, and an abiding contentment settled in his soul. “I love the way that sounds...*we’ll* make it up to them.”

“We will. We’ll figure something out. I just can’t imagine being apart from you right now.”

“I’ll go to Chicago on one condition.”

“Name it.”

“I don’t care if there are two bedrooms in that damned suite, we’re only using one of them. And one bed.”

Aidan’s slow smile sent shimmers of heat through his veins. “Deal. And at the end of the summer, if you can still stand being around me full-time...how about if we have just one bed here in Boston, too.”

Unadulterated joy fluttered in Nate’s heart. “Are you suggesting we shack up, Professor Sheridan?”

“God, yes,” Aidan whispered, his expression dissolving into that breathtaking mix of hot need and heart-rending tenderness Nate knew he’d never grow tired of.

Sleep, he was certain, was going to wait a while longer.

M.L. RHODES

Award-winning author M.L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly twelve years. Along with the erotic romance fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also published everything from poetry, to magazine articles, to traditional romance, to steamy romantic suspense novels. In her fiction works, her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine*, *The Romance Studio*, and *JERR* and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

In her man love stories, she enjoys pairing together strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men can and do fall in love with one another every day, and M.L. believes in celebrating that!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M.L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, surf on over to her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com. She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at ML@mlrhodeswriting.com.

* * *

***Don't miss Souls Deep by M.L. Rhodes,
available soon at AmberHeat.com***

As a child, Griffin Hilliard's special abilities were attributed to an overactive imagination. But by adulthood, his psychic talents were so

strong he'd become a threat to his politically powerful family. To protect their dirty little secrets, they arranged an "accident" for him. He survived, but now he lives on the run, only one step ahead of his family's hired assassins. Until one night, when he's finally caught...

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