

NEVER LET GO



M. L. RHODES

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“Everything okay?” Will asked, almost not wanting to hear the response.

“Too many clothes. Not enough skin.” Ethan stood, toed off his shoes, then kicked aside his pants and briefs.

Will had been tempted to help, but instead found himself mesmerized at the site of Ethan’s lean, graceful body. The moonlight, bathing him in silver, enhanced every muscular curve of his arms, pecs, ass. His erection bobbed up and down as he moved, making Will’s mouth water.

“Do you have any idea how damned beautiful you are?” Will murmured. “Or how long I’ve wanted to see you like this?”

The easy, cocky smile was back on Ethan’s face. “You saw me just like this the summer between our junior and senior years of high school. Remember when we were camping up in the Pecos and went skinny dipping in the river?”

Will chuckled at the memory, but a new throb surged in his cock at the same time. “Yeah, I remember. It was your brilliant idea to strip and swim in the moonlight.”

“But the water was fucking freezing! Remember?”

“I remember thinking my dick was going to fall off.”

Ethan unfastened Will’s pants. In a fluid movement, he slid them and Will’s boxer briefs down his legs and threw them over the edge of the bed. “And I remember thinking,” he

said in a low, hoarse voice, “how much I wanted to touch your dick. Just like this.” He wrapped his fingers around Will’s shaft and squeezed...

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BY

M. L. RHODES

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NEVER LET GO
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*For everyone who's ever fallen in love
with their best friend...*

CHAPTER 1

Will McLaren watched his sister and his best friend glide across the dance floor in a waltz that would have done them proud on *Dancing With The Stars*. They moved beautifully, their steps in perfect sync on the ballroom's polished parquet floor. Jessie's wedding dress was a graceful swirl of white satin and lace as Ethan turned her under his arm.

They looked striking together, Ethan's blond sophistication a perfect foil for Jessie's upswept dark hair and mischievous, sparkling eyes.

Will noticed he wasn't the only one observing in admiration. Half the guests at the reception had paused in their conversations to watch and smile at the two. Which was how

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it had always been. Jessie's outgoing personality, sense of humor, and down-to-earth beauty had always made her popular. And Ethan...from the day Will had first met him, their sophomore year in high school, Ethan had held people around him captive with his good looks and reckless charm. He could talk his way into—and out of—anything with a smile and a few words of promise. Put the two of them—Jess and Ethan—together and it was an irresistible combination.

Good thing Jessie's new husband wasn't the jealous type. Ruben Garcia blew his new bride a kiss and flashed her a white-toothed smile as he waltzed by with old Mrs. Sheltenbaum, who'd lived next door to Will and Jessie's family forever. Jessie blew him a kiss back without ever missing a step, then laughed when Ethan leaned in close to her and whispered something in her ear.

Ethan's own smile was teasing and captivating, and when he caught Will's gaze from across the dance floor, a hot ripple of desire started low in Will's groin and spread outward from there. Damn, the man was sexy as sin.

But, as always, Will didn't let his thoughts or reaction show. He stashed them away in the special recess of his mind labeled "Things I want and can never have."

Ethan gave him an affected eye-roll that said, "How'd I get stuck out here dancing with your pain-in-the-butt little sister?"

Will chuckled, knowing better. Ethan was loving every second of it. He was always hungry for excitement, and neither he nor Jessie had ever shied away from being on stage, so to speak. They'd both always been dynamic, with no

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qualms about being the center of attention.

Will, on the other hand, had always been content to stand on the sidelines and watch, as he did now. Jessie teased him about his “social reticence”—psych speak, apparently, for shyness—but always followed that up by saying he made up for it by being hers and Ethan’s steady rock. In Will’s mind, being compared to a rock was something akin to being called a stick-in-the-mud, so he wasn’t convinced it was a compliment. And, anyway, he didn’t consider himself shy—he just preferred to do his own thing in his own low-key way, leaving the glitz and fanfare to the two most important people in his life.

He pushed his glasses up his nose and wondered if anyone would notice if he stripped off the tuxedo jacket he wore. He’d had it on since late morning and dressing up was not on his list of favorite things. But when Jessie and Ruben had asked him to be in the wedding party, of course he’d agreed. Jessie’d always had him wrapped around her little finger.

As he watched Ethan twirl Jess again, he was struck by how quickly time passed. It didn’t seem that long ago she’d been the tag-a-long kid sister who took singular delight in being a pain in his and Ethan’s collective asses as she followed them everywhere and demanded to do whatever they were doing. In truth, he and Ethan hadn’t ever minded having her hanging around. They’d never told *her* that, of course. God knows she hadn’t needed any encouragement. He grinned at the memory.

Actually...things hadn’t changed much. The bossy and

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painfully honest girl had grown into a bossy and painfully honest woman. *Lord help Ruben.* Will hoped the man knew what he was getting into.

But when he saw Jessie blow another kiss to her husband, his heart swelled with pleasure that his sister had found happiness and love. Ruben knew exactly what he was getting into and adored Jessie for who she was. They were some of the lucky ones. Will suspected they'd still be blowing each other kisses on their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

So why then, with Jessie settling down into marital bliss and him being truly happy for her, could he not shake the odd, dull ache that had settled in his gut last night at the wedding rehearsal and hadn't gone away since?

He didn't have to look too hard for the answer. His baby sister, nearly three years younger than he, had found love and forever with her soul mate, while he, creeping up on thirty years old sooner than he wanted to think about, could only dream of such a thing. And he had dreamed. For years.

But some things weren't meant to be.

He sighed and tugged at the almost-too-tight bow tie cutting off his air.

When Ethan's easy smile caught his attention again, it became even harder to breathe for a moment.

The man exuded raw sex appeal, whether he was dressed in tailored Armani, as he was now, or wearing jeans and a T-shirt. With his dark blond hair fashionably tousled, his lean build, and eyes the color of a Caribbean sea, he set the benchmark for every man in the room no matter where he was.

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Hell, even the jagged scar over his left eyebrow, a remainder of a teenage injury that'd happened before Will met him, should have marred his features—would have on anyone else's face—but didn't. It only made him look more devastating. There wasn't a woman here in the Marriott ballroom who wouldn't have fallen all over herself to have his attention focused on her for five minutes.

Will sympathized with them because, though Ethan had been here in Albuquerque for a visit the past few days to help celebrate the combination of Will getting his Ph.D. and Jessie's wedding, he'd soon be off again. His position as an international buyer for an information technology company took him all over the globe, and Will was certain the man left heartbroken women in his wake wherever he traveled. He'd never been one to sit still or stay in one place for long.

The waltz music drifted to a close, to be replaced by a slow, eighties ballad.

Jessie and Ethan made their way across the floor to Will.

"Not dancing this one?" he asked them, shoving his melancholy aside and smiling.

"And monopolize Ethan any longer, when all the women in the room are salivating to dance with him?" Jessie's dimpled grin belonged more on a twelve-year-old tomboy than a grown, newly-married woman. "Thanks, but I'd rather not fight them off."

Ethan kissed her cheek. "Sweetie, none of them have ever stood a chance against you. They're too afraid of that mean right-hook of yours."

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Jessie gave an inelegant snort, but the grin never left her face. “Need I remind you who taught me that right hook, Ethan Gallagher? Any damage I might have wreaked with it over the years falls squarely at your own feet.” She waved a hand at the table decorated with ice sculptures and an elaborate fountain punch bowl. “Now go, slave boy! I need refreshment, and my darling husband won’t appreciate you dancing me ragged, then letting me dehydrate on my wedding day.”

Ethan grinned at Will. “Obviously married life hasn’t changed her bossy attitude a bit, has it?”

Will chuckled. “Nah, but now she’s Ruben’s problem, not ours.”

“Remind me to thank him later.”

“Very funny, boys. Now, chop, chop,” Jessie demanded. “I need a drink.”

“Don’t look at me,” Will told Ethan. “You’re the one she’s ordering around right now. Better hop to it...slave boy.”

Ethan gave him a raised eyebrow look that said he was going to pay for that comment, but smiled indulgently at Jessie. “Okay, princess, since it’s your special day, I’ll humor you. You want anything?” he asked Will.

“Nah, I’m good, thanks.”

“And make sure it’s the spiked punch,” Jessie called after him as he headed across the room. “I need alcoholic fortification.”

Will watched Ethan go, noticing he didn’t get far before a duo of Jessie’s single, sexy girlfriends intercepted him.

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“So, you haven’t danced yet, big brother, except with me and then Mom earlier.”

“That’s right, and that’s the way it’s going to stay. It’s not my thing. You know that.”

“I was hoping you might find at least one of my co-workers intriguing. Shayla, for example.” She pointed to a tall, leggy redhead standing alone near the punch table. “She’s a sweetheart. Not flamboyant. Smart. I think you’d like her.”

“Jess, quit trying to set me up. I appreciate it, but...” His voice trailed off as his gaze focused on the blonde and brunette now clinging to Ethan’s arms. The blonde actually had the audacity to slide a hand down and grope Ethan’s ass for a moment. Will fought back a flare of irritation.

“You know...” Jessie said, twining her arm through Will’s, “one of these days you might consider telling him how you feel about him.”

“Hmm? What?” Will tore his attention off the trio now making their way to the refreshments and looked down at his sister.

“I know you don’t want me to set you up. But damn it, Will, why do you think I keep trying? It’s not for my health. And I know you aren’t interested in the women I point out to you.”

“Then why the hell do you keep doing it?” he asked, half-teasing, half-serious.

“Because I keep hoping one of these days, if I push hard enough, you’re going to admit to the real reason you aren’t interested. I’ve been waiting for years for you to admit it, but,

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my God, trying to get you to talk about anything personal is worse than trying to convince Mrs. Sheltenbaum that mangy cat of hers isn't her dead husband reincarnated."

"What in hell are you babbling about, Jess?"

Jessie gave another unladylike snort, rolled her eyes, then leaned in close to him. "I'm talking about Ethan. And your feelings for him. And when you might possibly ever decide to tell him how you feel."

"He's my best friend. He already knows that."

"That's not what I mean. Will..." She lowered her voice. "Have you considered just telling him you're in love with him?"

"What?" he wheezed. A blind-sided punch couldn't have caught him more unaware...or sent a bigger shockwave reverberating through him. "Jess...I'm not...I don't know what you're..."

"Hey, it's me, remember?" she said in a gentle voice, pulling him into an alcove of the ballroom until they were half-hidden behind a potted palm and had a bit of privacy. "I may be your baby sister, but I've got eyes. And I probably know you better than anyone else. Will...you don't date. You never really have except when someone's set you up or pushed you to. And the way you look at Ethan when he's unaware...with this raw longing on your face, like you'd give your last breath to have him notice you in a way that goes above and beyond just friendship."

At his sister's words, his throat closed up so he could barely breathe. "You're imagining things. Ethan's my friend.

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That's it. And I do so date. Remember Connie Acevedo from my cell bio seminar last year?"

Jessie sighed and shook her head. "Yeah, I remember her. And I also remember that, even though she always had stars in her eyes around you, you were all business with her—grad credits, dissertations, blah, blah, blah. You didn't date her, though I'm sure she would have loved it. You were lab partners, as I recall."

"And we studied together all the time. Went out for coffee. She had me over for dinner several times. For what it's worth, she's the one who broke it off."

"You can't break off something that doesn't exist. And you told me she left to take an internship on the west coast."

"She did. Which is why we quit seeing each other. She decided to do the internship in Seattle and work on her dissertation in absentia."

"But originally she was planning to stay here. Now why do you suppose she changed her mind and went off to Washington state, Will?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but Jessie cut him off.

"Let me tell you, shall I? She left because she wanted something from you that you couldn't give. She wanted you to look at her the way she looked at you. And it wasn't ever going to happen. Because there's only one person you look at that way..."

"I told you, you're imagining things. And for God's sake, even if I did like men in that way—which I *don't*—Ethan's straight as they come. Look at him—he's like a movie star

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with women hanging all over him.” Another little bitter twinge of...damn, it wasn’t just irritation, it was jealousy that crawled through his veins. But he ignored it, instead focusing his attention back on his sister.

He thought he’d sounded convincing in his last speech. Jessie’s expression, however, told him she hadn’t bought it, which caused him to break out in a cold sweat.

“Will—”

“No. Stop right there. I’m not having this conversation with you. And besides, it’s your wedding day, which means all conversations should be focused on you”—he tapped her pert nose with his forefinger—“and your husband and the beautiful married life you’re going to share.”

“If you’re worried about Mom and Dad, they wouldn’t care, Will. We all love you and just want you to be happy. It doesn’t matter to me and it wouldn’t matter to them either if you were interested in men instead of women.”

“Jessie!”

“And about Ethan...how do you know he might not be harboring secret longings about you, too?”

“Jess, enough! Ethan’s straight. Period. And if I were to tell him I was interested in him in that way—which I’m *not*—well...you don’t just tell the straight guy you’ve been best friends with for thirteen years, ‘Oh, and by the way, I’m in love with you and want you to be my boyfriend.’ Jesus. That would be instant friendship death.”

He smiled to soften the words. “Getting married has gone to your head and made you a little nuts. You want everyone to

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share your happiness, so you're seeing romance where there is none."

But Jessie clearly didn't have a clue how to take a hint. "Will, just think about what I've said."

He turned her so she was facing the dance floor and pointed out that Ruben was still in blue-haired Mrs. Sheltenbaum's clutches. "I think your husband's in need of rescuing. You'd best go save him before Gladys tramples his feet too badly, and he passes out from the overwhelming scent of her rose water."

Jessie sighed, but a little smile curved her lips. "Yeah, but how can I resist a man who's such a trooper?"

"He's a good guy, I agree. So go...save him."

"Okay, okay. I just don't want you to always be alone, Will. No one should be alone. And you're a good guy, too. Promise me you won't worry what anyone else might think and you'll just...be happy."

"Yes. Fine." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Now go. Go!"

With one more meaningful glance at him she swished her way across the dance floor, stopped to pull their dad into the throng, then made a trade, sliding into her husband's arms, while their dad stepped in with Gladys Sheltenbaum.

If his insides weren't still in knots from the recent conversation, Will probably would have smiled. As it was, he was doing well to keep breathing. He didn't move out of the alcove. With three hundred people milling about, he wasn't willing to give up the small bit of privacy it offered. Not until

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he was able to pull himself together and paste a calm, smiling veneer back on his face.

He pushed up his glasses with a shaking hand. What the hell had Jessie been thinking to confront him with something like this here, today, in such a public place?

But it wasn't the venue as much as her words that left him shaken. Had he been that obvious? Jessie said she'd seen him looking at Ethan with longing. Had anyone else seen it? Worse still...had Ethan?

No. He'd always been careful. And Ethan hadn't acted any differently around him on this visit than he ever had, so Ethan hadn't noticed. There was no way.

He sighed in relief at that realization.

Still, he couldn't quite shake the thought that someone else might have noticed. He suddenly felt exposed, like everyone was looking at him. Which was asinine, of course. No one had overheard his and Jessie's conversation. No one could possibly know Jessie had just rocked his world with her words and all-too-painfully spot-on observations.

Damn it, this was insane. He just needed to get over it. Get over this annoying twinge in his chest whenever he thought of Ethan twined in the embrace of what Will was sure was a woman in every port. Ethan wasn't his to be jealous over, and never would be. And what the hell was wrong with him anyway, longing for his best friend like this? Ethan was straight. What kind of fricking pathetic case was he to covet the one man he couldn't have? There were other interested men out there. He knew because he'd been to gay bars over

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the years, had even been hit on big-time by a guy in the biology department at UNM this past year.

But no. He didn't want them. He'd rejected most of them outright. And the few he'd slept with hadn't held his interest longer than a few weeks at most. All because none of them could compare to Ethan.

Ethan was also the reason Will hadn't ever come out to his family, and had humored Jessie the handful of times she'd set him up and basically forced him to go out with women. If he told his family he was gay, he knew Jess was right and they'd accept it—his parents might have a few moments of shock at finding out at this point in his life, but they'd deal because that's just the kind of open-minded, accepting people they were. But if his family knew, it would too hard to hide it from Ethan. And even though Will could never have Ethan romantically, their friendship was too important to him to risk losing it.

No, some things were best kept secret.

For how long? Are you going to spend your entire life pretending to be something you're not, sneaking around, finding quick fucks in the dark, never having an open relationship, all because you don't want one person to know? A person who should, by definition of being a friend, accept you for who you are?

"I can't think about this now. Can't deal with this now," he whispered, his gut tied in knots.

What had Jess been thinking to stir this up here?

His gaze, out of instinct, found the man in question, still

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lingering at the refreshment table with the two women. He was smiling and nodding and being, in every way, his charming, sexy self. The women were eating it up. They always did.

Jesus. This was crazy.

Will knew he had to let this go. Ethan was off limits. Always had been. He *knew* that. He needed to get over it, move on, find someone else.

So why the hell was this particular visit of Ethan's even harder than the previous ones over the past few years? Why did it get harder every time to keep his hands to himself, as well as his damned fantasies about him and Ethan doing things that guy "friends" didn't do? He had to stop this. Now. Before he said or did something—or God forbid, Ethan caught him looking—and he destroyed the best friendship he'd ever had.

It was Jessie's wedding that had gotten him in this funk. That's why it was harder this time. Because he saw Jessie and Ruben together, and he wanted what they had. He wanted it so bad it was a raw ache. Why did it have to hurt so damn much?

"Hey, where'd the princess get off to?"

Startled, Will turned to find Ethan standing next to him. Alone. Without a female entourage.

"How'd you do that? I just saw you over at the table not thirty seconds ago."

Ethan's grin caused a very un-friend-like stirring in Will's groin.

"What can I say...I'm stealthy. Where's Jess? I have her punch. Spiked and all."

For the first time, Will noticed Ethan holding three glasses

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of the stuff. He'd obviously brought one for Will, too.

He gestured toward the dance floor. "She went to rescue Ruben from Mrs. Sheltenbaum."

Snickering, Ethan passed him a glass of punch. "The mad cat woman? And good God, she stuck your dad with the old bat. Unkind, Jess. Very unkind."

Will gulped the punch in a few long swallows, grateful to feel the slight alcoholic burn beneath the fruity sweetness. He set the glass down on the edge of the palm tree's planter, and reached for the glass Ethan had brought for Jessie. "Since she's not here now, you going to drink that?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow at him in the way he did that was just too damned sexy. "Having a craving for frou-frou booze tonight, are we?"

"Booze is the key word. I'm feeling weddinged out at the moment."

And maybe a little alcohol would anesthetize the damn ache inside him that had only gotten worse since Ethan's arrival at his side. The man was close enough Will could smell his expensive aftershave and feel warm heat radiating off his body.

"I hear you there." Ethan passed the second glass to Will, then lifted his own. "To Jess, Ruben and their blissful happiness."

Will could only nod. His throat was suddenly too tight to speak. He downed the second glass of punch.

Ethan did the same, then made a face. "There's so little booze in this stuff we'd have to drink thirty glasses to get a

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tiny buzz. By that time we'd be puking from the sweet fruity goodness. What do you say we adjourn to the hotel bar and get something that packs a more efficient wallop?"

"God, yes. Please."

Jessie and Ruben wouldn't miss them. The formal sit-down dinner had already been served, the cake had been cut, the traditional toasts made. At this point it was party time and dancing for the guests.

No better time to make an exit and find some solace...even if it was in booze.

CHAPTER 2

“Easy.” Ethan held out his hand to help Will climb out of the rental sports car.

Will grasped it, tried to use it to pull himself up, then gave Ethan an endearing, half-drunken grin when his hand slipped free and he slumped back into the passenger seat.

Ethan grinned, too, unable to help himself. “Damn, Will, I haven’t seen you this wasted since you found out Calvin Rassmussen beat you out for that honors scholarship our senior year of high school.”

“I had better grades than he did. And better test scores!” Will scowled, but even that looked kind of adorable in his current intoxicated state.

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"I know."

"And he sucked up to old Englemann," Will added in a huff. "Always took her lunch trays to the trash for her and erased her chalk boards. He knew she was the one who was gonna make the final decision."

"She was a harpy to everyone but him," Ethan agreed. "The scholarship should have been yours."

He grasped Will's arm, draped it across his shoulder, then pulled his friend up and more or less out of the car. Will sagged against the vehicle once he was standing.

"I never told you what I did to Calvin to get back at him for stealing the scholarship out from under you, did I?"

"Shit. What?" Will was all wide-green-eyed innocence, staring at him.

"I snuck over to his house late that night after it was announced and painted 'Ass kisser!' on his car."

"You didn't?"

"I sure as hell did. Remember that god-awful orange-yellow Gremlin he drove?"

"The Gourd. We called it the Gourd."

Ethan chuckled. "Yeah, hell, I'd forgotten that. We did, didn't we? Well, I painted 'Ass kisser!' in big black letters across both doors."

"Jesus. You really did that?" Will was leaning more heavily on the car now, but a shit-eating, albeit slightly embarrassed, smile curved his lips.

"I did. He hurt my best friend, made him get drunk—which if you'll recall, was a state I'd never seen you in before

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that night. And never since then either, come to think about it. Until now. Something bothering you, Will? Something that has you twisted enough to get three sheets to the wind?"

"How d'you know I don't go out drinking all the time? You don't live here anymore. You dunno what I do."

His words held an undercurrent of rebellion, but he was blushing—Ethan could see it under the streetlight. Oh, yeah, something was eating him.

"So you've become a party animal since my visit last fall? Living it up with the night life?" Ethan kept his tone light.

Will's expression turned sheepish at that.

"Come on...let's get you inside."

Will mumbled something unintelligible, but cooperated when Ethan draped his arm over his shoulder again and encouraged his friend to lean on him. Will was a few inches taller than he and broader shouldered, but his weight wasn't a burden, and Ethan easily helped him along the sidewalk, then up the stairs to the porch of the tiny rental house where Will lived.

The roses were in bloom across the front of the porch, their sweet scent filling the warm, dark May night. It made Ethan a little homesick and brought back pleasant memories of living here in Albuquerque as a teenager and spending time with Will and his family. But behind the nostalgic shimmer lurked the old ugly memories as well—memories of his dad in drunken rages, coming after him with a belt or his fists, to take out his anger and hatred on Ethan. He'd cut all ties to his father when he'd left Albuquerque after high school, but the

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memories were harder to purge. They crept in sometimes, like now, forcing him to relive the fear, the pain.

During his high school years, Ethan had escaped as often as possible to Will's house—the one place he knew he could finish his homework without having someone standing over him in fury, and sleep through the night without fear of being dragged out of bed and beaten.

The McLaren family had been his refuge, his oasis in the desert, welcoming him in without asking uncomfortable questions, treating him like family, and more importantly, offering him a love and respect Ethan had never known up to that point. Will, in particular, had been his anchor. Smart, strong, quiet Will, with his gentle smile and unfailing loyalty. Will had kept him sane in a world that, at that time in Ethan's life, felt like it'd gone to hell.

And because of that, Ethan had sworn to himself a long time ago he'd do whatever he had to to honor their friendship and keep it alive, give back some of the support Will had freely offered him over the years, and above all protect Will from the secrets and darkness that made up Ethan's life. Will had never known the ugly truth of Ethan's home life, had never known how many times he'd come to school on hot days in long pants and long-sleeved shirts not because it was "stylish," which is what Will and everyone else had thought, but so no-one could see the bruises.

"House key?" he prompted.

Will made a couple of fumbling attempts to stuff his hand into his pants pocket, without success.

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“I’ll get it.”

Ethan slid his fingers down into the front pocket, feeling the warm heat of Will’s skin through the fabric, the hard muscle of his thigh, and—he dragged in a deep breath—the half-erect bulge of his friend’s cock, which he tried to ignore. Tough to do, though, when his hand’s close proximity seemed to stir it even more to life. Or maybe that was just his imagination.

He hissed in a soft breath. *Fuck. Concentrate on what you’re doing here. It’s not like you to let something like this get under your skin.*

His fingers hooked Will’s key ring and, with a sigh of relief, Ethan pulled it out, found the house key, and worked it into the lock.

“In you go,” he said, helping Will through the doorway.

They crossed the living room and when they entered the dark bedroom, Ethan seated Will on the edge of the bed. His friend gave him another little half-drunken smile before slumping onto his back.

“All right, time to confess,” Ethan told him, as he got Will’s large form turned so his head was on the pillow, then lifted his legs up onto the bed. “Something or someone has gotten you in a funk or you wouldn’t have tied one on like this. So talk. What is it?”

“Nothin’. I’m fine.”

Ethan studied Will’s guilty expression, pieced it together with the fact Jessie had just gotten married and Will’s unrest had started somewhere between the rehearsal last night and the

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wedding today...and decided in a heartbeat what it was. He smiled. "Who is she?"

"Wha—?"

"You're jonesing for some woman, aren't you?"

"No!" Will said, a little too quickly and defensively.

"Was it someone at the wedding? One of Jessie's friends? Maybe one of the gals who stood up with her?"

"There's no woman," he said, turning his head away.

Ethan tugged off Will's shoes and socks, then unfastened his belt and pulled it off also. He didn't bother with his fitted white shirt. Will had shed the black tuxedo jacket, yanked off the silk bowtie, and unbuttoned the first few buttons on his shirt the moment they'd hit the hotel bar.

"Come on, 'fess up. Does she know how you feel?"

"I told you, there's no woman. I don't want to talk about it." Will's voice was muffled since he was scrubbing a hand over his face beneath his glasses as he spoke. Then he dragged his hand through his hair as well, leaving the dark thatch of it standing nearly on end.

"Okay..." Ethan sat on the bed next to him. "Since you're clearly in denial, let's just call her your 'secret lover' then, shall we? So tell me, Dr. McLaren, have you told her you're crazy about her? Or, as usual, have you been too quiet to speak up?"

"You're bein' a pain in the ass," Will mumbled.

"And rightly so, apparently, since it seems you'd continue wallowing in secret lust if I wasn't here to pry the details out of you and offer my support. So here's my take...knowing you

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as I do, I suspect you've had a hard-on for her from a distance for a while now. But for whatever reason, you haven't made a move yet, preferring instead to suffer in silence instead of just telling her how you feel. How'm I doing so far?"

Will wouldn't look at him.

"Mm-hmm, that's what I thought. All right, Mr. Strong-and-Silent, why haven't you gone for her?"

Will finally turned his head and looked up at him with something akin to hungry desperation in his gaze. "I can't," he finally said with a hoarse sigh. "Off limits."

Will's pain radiated off him in waves, causing Ethan to suddenly feel bad he'd pushed. But at the same time, if Will was this upset, it sounded as if he needed to talk and get it off his chest.

"Off limits for professional reasons?" he guessed, wondering if Will had fallen for one of his biology profs during his grad program at UNM. But if that were the case, now that he'd finished school, it shouldn't matter.

Or maybe... Oh, shit. He winced, hoping like hell Will hadn't fallen for a married woman.

"For friend reasons," Will said.

A rush of relief shot through Ethan that it wasn't for "wedded" reasons. He didn't think he would have been able to stand seeing Will in a painful dead-end like that.

"As in you're already friends and don't want to risk screwing things up by becoming lovers?"

"Told you...I don't want to talk about this."

Will looked even more pained now, if it were possible.

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From the thin slip of moonlight shining through the window, Ethan could see his agony. Damn. Whatever was going on, it was really tearing Will up. He hated seeing his friend like this.

A thick, dark hank of hair had fallen over one of Will's eyes. Ethan struggled against the sudden, tender urge to reach out and brush it back.

It must be seeing Will hurting that was causing these little chinks in his armor tonight. Usually he had better control, not even allowing himself to think such things, much less have to fight back the craving to act on them. If he had nothing else to show for his life, he'd become an expert over the years at keeping a tight rein on his emotions and personal desires, presenting whatever external façade was necessary, no matter how he felt inside.

"Will," he said, keeping his voice soft, "it's obvious you've got it bad. And I understand where you're coming from with the friend thing. But you look miserable, and if it's eating at you that much, you have to just tell her."

"Can't."

"Look, if it hasn't already, your silent longing for her, wanting more and not getting it, is going to affect your friendship anyway. It's better to just be honest."

Will's troubled gaze burned into him. "Jess said..." He hesitated.

"What'd she say?"

"She said...something similar."

"She's a smart gal, our Jess." Ethan sighed. "Look...are you in love with this person?"

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Will didn't answer, but he squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, as if it hurt to even think about it.

Oh, yeah, he's in love.

Damn, this was harder than he'd ever thought it would be. He'd always known one day Will was going to find someone. And that was as it should be. But a part of him deep down inside felt raw and empty at the thought of a woman claiming Will's heart. His own selfish feelings didn't have a place here, though. He owed it to Will to be supportive.

"Will, maybe telling her is worth the risk. Yeah, it's possible it might do something weird to your friendship if she doesn't feel the same way about you. But if you have strong feelings, you shouldn't hold them inside. That's not being fair to yourself. If this person is who you want, just...tell her how you feel."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It is."

"No. It's really not." Will spoke so softly it was barely a whisper. His gaze was still focused on Ethan, but the intoxicated haze that had been in his eyes earlier had disappeared, replaced by that tortured, hungry look again. "It's complicated. It's...very...complicated."

"In what way?"

Will didn't answer.

"Come on. Talk to me. Maybe I can help. In what way is it complicated?"

A long, silent moment passed with Will's intense gaze piercing him. Then his hand came up to cup the back of

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Ethan's head, and he was both pulling Ethan toward him and rising to meet him at the same time.

"In this way," Will breathed, a split second before their lips touched.

An electric current shot through Ethan as Will's mouth brushed his, momentarily leaving him in shock while his senses tried to assimilate the taste, the feel, his paralyzed thoughts and his emotions all at once.

Then, suddenly, his brain kicked back in. He pulled free and pushed Will back onto the bed. "What the hell?"

Will's face immediately crumpled, and he turned away. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I shouldn't have... Knew it was... Damn it." His voice was filled with abject misery.

Recovering from the initial jolt of shock, but with his mind and senses still reeling, Ethan stared at his best friend. "Will..."

"Go away."

Ethan's thoughts raced. What the hell had just happened? Had it been Will's drunkenness and hurt reaching out for comfort from a warm body, any convenient warm body, and would Will be appalled in the morning at what he'd done?

Or...damn, was there something more going on here?

"Look at me," Ethan said.

An almost imperceptible shake of the head was all he got. So he reached over and gently grasped Will's chin, forcing him to turn.

"Look at me."

When Will's eyes finally opened, they were clouded with

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pain.

Ethan knew he needed to say something, but for long seconds he was rendered speechless at the churning emotion in Will's eyes and etched on his face. This wasn't just embarrassment. It was...

His heart pounded. *Good God.* Was it possible?

Down inside Ethan a whispered flicker of knowing sparked, and the door to the deeply buried chamber of his own long-suppressed emotions cracked open.

"Shit. There is no woman, is there?" he murmured, searching Will's face for confirmation.

He found it in the lines that suddenly creased Will's forehead, and the way his Adam's apple moved up, then slowly down in his throat, as if swallowing were painful.

"I told you there wasn't," Will whispered.

Stunned, Ethan gaped at him. For several seconds he couldn't even speak. And when he did, it came out more accusatory than he'd meant it to. "All this time... All these years... Jesus, I thought you were straight."

"Well, now you know the truth," Will said, his tone miserable and tinged with bitterness. "Go ahead and say it 'cause you'll be right. Yeah, I'm queer. And, yeah, I know I've fucked up our friendship. So why don't you leave, and let's just get this over with."

"No. I'm not leaving."

"Why? God, please don't drag this out and make it any worse than it already is."

Will tried to turn away again, but Ethan wouldn't let him.

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He cradled Will's face between his hands, soaking up the sight and smell and warmth of him.

His best friend. Could he really have been so blind all these years not to realize, not to even suspect? Will's reticent nature with women, his lack of dates...for years Ethan had chalked it up to Will being shy, and had totally bought into Will's excuse that he was too busy with school to have a serious relationship. Hell, Will had always been a brain and taken academics way too seriously, so it was completely believable.

Ethan didn't know whether to laugh, be mad as hell, scared as hell, or just kick himself in the ass for being so caught up in his own deceptions he hadn't noticed Will's. In his own defense, he hadn't lived here in Albuquerque in years, so the same way it had been easy to keep secrets from Will had made it easy for Will to hide his, too. Although...he'd bet anything Will's family didn't know or someone would have let it slip on one of Ethan's visits.

"You stubborn fool. You stubborn...quiet...fool." He shook his head. "I'm not leaving because there's something you don't know about me either." He paused, giving Will a few seconds to soak up the words.

"What are you saying?" Will's expression was still troubled.

An odd sense of lightness spread through Ethan. "I'm saying that what you just told me was a hell of a bombshell, no doubt...but not for the reason you think."

Holding his gaze, Ethan pulled off Will's glasses and set

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them on the bedside table. Then he lowered his mouth to Will's in a gentle kiss.

When Will's eyes suddenly opened wider and Ethan could see the truth begin to sink in, he kissed him again, deeper, purposefully.

He knew the moment Will's shock wore off because Will gave a soft groan and began to kiss back. His lips were warm, willing, and he tasted of the bourbon and Coke he'd been drinking earlier. He buried his hands in Ethan's hair, his fingertips massaging his scalp, then angled Ethan's head and deepened the contact until their tongues slid and thrust together and moans escaped them both.

They kissed for a long time, exploring this new development between them, and for Ethan it was a revelation to discover that not only did his best friend apparently want him, he was a hell of a sensuous kisser, too. A fucking mind-blowing kisser.

Damn!

Will's scent, his touch, were still those of the man he'd known for thirteen years. But this new intimacy between them stirred old desires to life. Desires Ethan had kept under lock and key deep within him, never to be set free. Yet suddenly, in light of Will's revelation and smoldering kisses, they were free, and completely out of Ethan's control. Every second that passed, the floodgate inside him creaked open even farther, and he craved more. More kissing. More touching. More skin. The feel of Will's hands on his cock, and the taste of Will's cock in his mouth. The sweaty glide of their bodies against

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each other, tangled in the sheets in the moonlight.

Fantasies he hadn't dared to even think about since he was a teenager bloomed to life again inside him, making him lightheaded and weak-kneed with raw hunger.

When he felt one of Will's hands move to his belt, though, reality kicked in.

He pulled back and stared down at his friend, whose gaze had gone soft and sexy and lust-filled. *Fuck*. Ethan was already so hard his dick was a painful throb in his pants, and the look on Will's face urged it to new heights of agony.

"Will...you've had a lot to drink," he rasped, his voice barely functioning as he tried to keep his desire in check. "I don't want us to do anything tonight that you might regret later."

There. He'd said it, though it had about killed him, since his body had other ideas...ideas that involved getting himself and Will naked as fast as possible, then screwing like mad as they made up for way too much lost time.

"So...you don't want this?" Will's quiet tone hinted at his earlier pain, with a touch of confusion mixed in.

Which hadn't been Ethan's intention at all, and he felt like a real shit for not realizing that, of course, that would be Will's reaction to his withdrawal.

He pulled his friend up to a sitting position so they were facing each other, then brought Will's hand to his crotch. "Believe me, I want."

Heat sparked in Will's gaze, and his palm cupped Ethan's stiff, aching shaft and began massaging it through the fabric.

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“I just need you to be positive this is what you really want, Will. This has happened fast. We’ve both had our share of surprises tonight. Maybe because you had too much to drink you *think* you want this, but you really aren’t sure.”

Will’s hand—and God love the man, he knew exactly what he was doing with that skillful, groping hand—continued to move with confidence over Ethan’s cock. He wasn’t touching Ethan like a drunk. He was touching him like a man on a mission. With his other hand, he stroked the back of Ethan’s neck.

“I’m not as drunk as you seem to think. And I’ve had thirteen years to be sure of what I want.” His dark brows drew together. “Are you sure this is what *you* want? I have to admit, I’m kind of floored by the direction this night’s taken.”

His deep voice—an intriguing mix of ultra-masculine and gentle—was even sexier than Ethan had always remembered. It vibrated through his senses like the primal thrum of a Chinese gong, rippling from vein to vein, nerve ending to nerve ending in slow, seductive pulses.

“Yeah, well the shock is mutual, believe me.” Ethan gave him a half-smile, but inside, his head was beginning to be heard over the throb of his lust and haywire emotions.

He knew he shouldn’t even consider crossing this line with Will. Kissing was one thing. They could stop here, move on as they had been, and chalk the kissing up to a moment of craziness. But going all the way...that was something else all together. There were too many complications—his job being the first and biggest. If he and Will did this, took this final step

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out of regular friendship and into...well, whatever it might evolve into, his job was going to create a damned gaping chasm between them. It was inevitable. Because he was going to have to leave. Probably tomorrow morning. He could be gone for months, though he hoped like hell it wouldn't be that long. And while he was gone, he'd be out of touch most of the time—not in any place he'd be able to call or contact Will.

In his gut, he knew Will would be hurt because he wouldn't understand. And Ethan wouldn't be able to explain.

And if his being gone most of the time didn't kill things between them, the secrets would. Sometimes it felt like his whole fucking life was nothing but secrets—little ones, big ones—all tangled together in knots he wasn't even sure *he* could sort out anymore. He couldn't have a long-term relationship with anyone because of them. Intimate relationships were built on trust, and who the hell could trust him? The man with a thousand faces, who spent his life wearing a mask on the outside to hide what was really going on inside?

So he fucked, but didn't allow himself to care, didn't allow himself to get involved. The problem was, with Will he already did care. This wasn't a nameless face, this was his best friend, the one person he cared about more than any other. This could never be just "fucking." And he'd rather cut off his own arm than lose Will's friendship if the intimacy turned bad.

Will nuzzled his lips against Ethan's. His hand staked its claim on Ethan's erection. "I want you, Ethan. Here. Tonight.

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No regrets.”

All common sense, all reason disintegrated in the scorching heat of those words. Words Ethan had never dreamed he'd hear coming out of his best friend's mouth directed at him.

In that moment, he knew there was no turning back. He couldn't have, even if he'd wanted to. Will had always been his weakness, the one person in the world who'd found a way through the armor around his heart. He'd do anything for this man. Risk everything for him. Tonight...and always.

CHAPTER 3

“Yes...”

The sound of Ethan’s needy, breathless surrender slid through Will’s veins like velvet fire. It stirred his own desire to an even higher flame, but also curled its way around and into the huge, hollow ache he’d lived with for so long, replacing it with heat and fulfillment.

When Ethan pulled him into another hungry kiss, Will returned it with all the long-held-back passion he’d pretended for years he didn’t feel, yet had always been there, burning at the back of his mind and deep in his belly.

Ethan kissed like a man who was used to having his way, who took what he wanted, who could be tender, but kept that

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hidden behind a wall of devil-may-care confidence, as if he didn't want anyone to get a glimpse of such vulnerability. Except Will did glimpse it, felt it. And it just made him want Ethan more than ever.

"I want to feel you," Ethan breathed against his lips. His hands moved down to the buttons on Will's shirt, while Will's did the same to his. Ethan finished first, parted Will's shirt and shoved it over his shoulders and off. Then he pushed Will back down onto the bed and straddled his legs.

His palms roamed over Will's chest and abs.

The feel of Ethan's warm, exploring touch only brought Will's arousal to a new and fevered pitch. But what he loved even more was the expression of raw lust and appreciation on Ethan's face in the moonlight.

"Shit, Will...when'd you get so fucking buff?"

"I've been working out, going to the gym for a couple of years now."

"You already had a hell of a body, but now...damn." The last word was little more than an appreciative sigh.

Will smiled, but it turned to a quick intake of breath when Ethan leaned down and licked a trail of fire around one of his nipples, then left a damp path on his way across his chest to do the same around the other one. He sucked in another breath when the wet warmth of Ethan's tongue journeyed downward. By the time he paused to make several long, slow laps across Will's abdomen just above the waistband of his pants, Will was nearly panting.

He reached up with the intention of removing Ethan's

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black dress shirt, wanting to feel skin under his own hands, but kept getting distracted by the other man's roaming mouth, which had now latched onto one of his nipples and was alternately licking, then sucking it. When Ethan bit down lightly, the sensation zinged straight to Will's cock like a bolt of lightning, causing him to arch off the bed.

"Christ!"

Ethan continued his sensual torment, bringing Will's nipples to hard, throbbing nubs, and slowly driving him mad. Achy heat settled in Will's groin. His balls grew heavy, and his cock pulsed.

When he finally couldn't take any more, he sat up, eased off Ethan's shirt the rest of the way, pausing to make a few pointed licks and sucks of his own, then unbuckled Ethan's belt, unfastened his pants, and brushed his hand along the hard line of his friend's erection through his black briefs. Ethan sucked in a deep breath.

With Ethan on his knees as he was, straddling Will's legs, Will had easy access to his cock. And, damn, he'd never wanted anything more. He'd fantasized about scenarios like this one for years, but had never dreamed he'd get to live it.

He pushed Ethan's slacks down around his thighs, then lowered his mouth to the substantial bulge trying to burst free from the black package that held it so neatly.

The warm scent of masculine musk and just a hint of whatever soap Ethan had used during his last shower, assailed Will's nostrils, making him even hornier. He grazed his teeth along the head and down the shaft, eliciting another hiss of

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breath from Ethan. But when he pulled the crown into his mouth and began sucking through the fabric, while at the same time brought a hand up to cup Ethan's sac and heavy balls, Ethan's breathing turned to gasps. His hands threaded through Will's hair.

When Will glanced up, it was to find his friend with his head tipped back, his eyes closed, and a look of exquisite agony creasing his lean, handsome face.

"That feels so good. Better than good. Touch me for real."

Will shoved the damp briefs down to pull tight at Ethan's thighs, allowing his cock the freedom to bob upward in invitation.

Before Will could finish admiring it, Ethan was nudging it against his lips.

He grasped Ethan's ass in both hands and smiled up at him. "Did you want something?"

"Shit, don't tell me you're a tease?" Ethan's eyelids were half-closed, and his voice rasped with ragged hunger.

"Why do I get the feeling you'd like that?"

"Right now what I want is your mouth on me."

Will ran his tongue around the ridge of Ethan's crown, savoring the slightly salty flavor of him, then moved down to lick long strokes along his hot, turgid shaft until it glistened wetly in the moonlight.

His own balls heavy with lust at the sight and taste and sound of Ethan's desire, Will returned to the head of Ethan's cock, bathing it, delving into the leaking slit with the tip of his tongue, then finally drawing the thick head into his mouth,

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eliciting an appreciative shudder from Ethan. He rolled his friend's balls in one hand, and with his other, held Ethan's ass and drew him closer, slowly, inch by inch, swallowing his length as he did.

"Oh, God...fuck...Will..."

Oh, God...fuck... was pretty much what Will was thinking right then, too. He had Ethan Gallagher's cock in his mouth. The one person he'd never thought this could happen with.

He wasn't sure if he was dizzy from the after-effects of his unusual-for-him alcoholic binge earlier or because of what was happening at the moment. But he suspected the only thing he was drunk on right now was Ethan. His taste, his scent, and the way his shaft twitched and pulsed in his mouth.

Will pulled back just enough for Ethan's length to almost slide free, then swallowed it again, this time deeper still until his nose was buried in the warm curls at Ethan's groin. Ethan groaned.

Will fought between wanting to suck hard and fast, gorging himself like a starving man, or taking his time to savor every millimeter, every sensation. He settled for somewhere in between, going for long, slow, sweeping licks, followed by bursts of hard, deep strokes and suction.

"Damn...oh, yeah."

Oh, yeah. Will's own member was so hard it hurt, smashed as it still was inside his pants, but it was worth it to hear Ethan's desperate grunts, to feel Ethan's cock thickening and lengthening in his mouth, to feel his control slipping away.

But then Ethan was holding his head and pulling free.

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“Wait. Stop... Stop,” he commanded.

His chest squeezing, Will looked up at him, wondering if he'd changed his mind after all.

“Everything okay?” he asked, almost not wanting to hear the response.

“Too many clothes. Not enough skin.” Ethan stood, toed off his shoes, then kicked aside his pants and briefs.

Will had been tempted to help, but instead found himself mesmerized at the site of Ethan's lean, graceful body. The moonlight, bathing him in silver, enhanced every muscular curve of his arms, pecs, ass. His erection bobbed up and down as he moved, making Will's mouth water.

“Do you have any idea how damned beautiful you are?” Will murmured. “Or how long I've wanted to see you like this?”

The easy, cocky smile was back on Ethan's face. “You saw me just like this the summer between our junior and senior years of high school. Remember when we were camping up in the Pecos and went skinny dipping in the river?”

Will chuckled at the memory, but a new throb surged in his cock at the same time. “Yeah, I remember. It was your brilliant idea to strip and swim in the moonlight.”

“But the water was fucking freezing! Remember?”

“I remember thinking my dick was going to fall off.”

Ethan unfastened Will's pants. In a fluid movement, he slid them and Will's boxer briefs down his legs and threw them over the edge of the bed. “And I remember thinking,” he

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said in a low, hoarse voice, “how much I wanted to touch your dick. Just like this.” He wrapped his fingers around Will’s shaft and squeezed.

Will dragged in a deep breath and fought back the urge to come right there. “You wanted to touch me?” He was pretty sure the shock rippling through him wasn’t just from Ethan’s hand on him.

Ethan crawled between Will’s legs, urging them apart with his knees, until he was leaning over Will, his hand still clutching Will’s cock. “Oh, yeah. I wanted to so bad I thought my own prick was going to break off, it was that hard. I kept hoping you wouldn’t notice. Or if you did, that you’d think it was because of the rush of being bare-assed naked out in nature.”

“I did notice, and that’s exactly what I thought.”

“Well, you thought wrong. It was you. Seeing you all nude and tall and broad-shouldered, like some fucking beautiful Adonis.” Ethan was making long, slow strokes with his hand now, all the way from the head to the base. His fingers were warm, firm, and felt so damned good.

Will reached up to grasp Ethan’s neck and pulled him down into a kiss. “I didn’t know. Jesus...I never knew. And that night, I was too damned caught up in staring at your cock and ass, while at the same time trying to keep you from seeing my hard-on, to notice you were looking at me, too.

“I wanted to touch you...wanted to suck you.” Ethan slid down to lie on his stomach between Will’s legs. “Like this...” He lowered his mouth to Will’s erection.

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The slippery, wet heat of his mouth was almost too much for Will. His hips surged off the bed, but that only served to bury him deeper in Ethan's mouth.

After just a few strokes, Will's balls burned and were beginning to draw in.

"Oh...God...I'm not going to last long like this, Eth. I want this, want *you* too much..."

Ethan pulled his mouth off, letting Will's shaft pop free, wet and aching, giving Will just enough of a break to regain a tiny amount of control. And then he was back, the recesses of his mouth just entirely too accommodating. Within seconds, Will was on the edge again. He wanted to come, but at the same time, craved Ethan's taste as well. He hadn't gotten enough of it earlier.

"I want to suck you, too," he gasped as Ethan hit a particularly sensitive spot with his tongue.

Ethan paused, looked up. His eyes glazed over with lust. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Hell, yeah. Come up here."

His friend moved up on the bed, turned, and settled his knees on either side of Will's head. When he leaned forward to reach Will's groin, and raised his hips, Will didn't hesitate to sample what he was being offered. He teased his fingertips over Ethan's balls, lightly up the crease of his ass, and at the same time, curved the fingers of his other hand around Ethan's enticing cock and brought it to his mouth.

"Fuck, this is good," Ethan said, his voice thick with need.

"Oh, yeah..."

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Ethan's mouth returned to Will's cock, laving wet trails up and down it, then, in a moment of pure ecstasy, the incredible heat completely engulfed Will.

Jesus. He still couldn't believe this was happening. All these years. All the long years of secretly wanting, and suddenly here they were.

All further thought was lost as the sensation of Ethan's mouth working him over, and the feel of Ethan's steely thickness sliding in and out of his own mouth buried him in sensation. They built a rhythm of in and out, sucking and licking and rocking against each other, that made Will's skin tingle and his balls throb. Damn, he was close. So close...

He knew Ethan was, too—could feel his cock swelling, growing harder still in his mouth. Ethan's hips jerked. His body began to quiver. But it was his soft groans of pleasure that finally did Will in, humming and vibrating up through his sensitive shaft, into his core.

Will's orgasm, when it hit, pounded through him until he couldn't breathe, relenting momentarily, allowing him to drag in air, then pounding him again. He moaned around Ethan's cock and clutched his ass, pulling him in as deeply as he could. Seconds later, Ethan's hips convulsed and the hot, salty taste of his cum filled Will's mouth and slid down his throat, which only seemed to intensify his own release even more. Ethan poured into him and Will took it all, loving it, swallowing and swallowing until his throat ached, acutely aware Ethan was doing the same for him.

When the last shudder rippled through them, they

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collapsed, spent. Ethan rolled off him onto the bed and rested his head on Will's thigh. The feel of it there, and Ethan's slow, gentle fingertip caresses against Will's abdomen—like this comfortable intimacy between them was the most natural thing in the world—caused a lump to form in Will's throat.

He wanted to say something, to tell Ethan how he felt...about this, about him. But nothing seemed to want to come out.

The only sounds in the room were their heavy breathing and the faint hum of the air conditioner.

Eventually, Ethan sat up, then moved up to lie next to Will, facing him, one arm tucked under the pillow, the other draped across Will's waist.

Will laced his fingers through Ethan's and turned his head to look at his friend. For long seconds they stared at each other without talking. Will watched a hint of tenderness, then a new surge of desire, then what looked like worry flit across Ethan's expression.

Which stirred up a knot of worry in his own gut.

Everything in him buzzed with the rightness of being with Ethan. But with a worried frown creasing his brow, Ethan didn't look completely convinced it was right. Oh, God...was he having regrets? And if that were the case... *Please don't let this fuck up our friendship.*

Maybe it already had.

I don't want to lose him...

Will opened his mouth to ask Ethan what was wrong, but Ethan spoke first.

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“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” he asked softly.

The question caught Will off guard. “When exactly would I have told you? And how?”

“You could have just said. I would have understood...obviously.”

“And I was supposed to know that because...? Besides, I can ask you the same question. Why didn’t you tell *me*?”

Ethan looked troubled at that, making Will wonder again what was going on in his friend’s head.

“It’s...complicated, Will.”

“That’s my line.”

Exactly his line, in fact. The same thing he’d told Ethan just a half-hour ago.

“Look, the past is the past. Obviously neither of us realized, but now we do.”

“What about the women?” Will asked, hating himself for it, but unable to stop it from coming out.

“Women?”

“All the women over the years? The ones you’ve always had hanging on you. The ones you’ve presumably taken to bed?”

Another one of those unsettled frowns creased Ethan’s forehead and tightened the lines around his mouth, but he quickly hid it. He leaned up on his elbow and pressed a kiss to Will’s lips. He tasted like cum. And faintly of booze. And hot as hell.

“Will...trust me when I tell you a woman’s never held my heart.”

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“But—”

Ethan kissed him again, this time taking his time, sliding his tongue into Will's mouth, sucking on his lower lip, nipping. By the time he pulled away, Will was dizzy again, drunk on Ethan and craving more. To the point he almost—*almost*—forgot what they'd been talking about. But not quite.

“I don't understand. But I want to.”

“I know. But tonight, let's just...be together,” Ethan said softly. “Just you. And me. Without any outside world.”

Will knew he was being a sucker for Ethan's sweet talk and even sweeter body, knew putting off the questions and answers wasn't going to solve anything, but the truth was, the thought of just the two of them here, together, alone, without the “outside world” sounded like heaven.

“You're too charming for your own good. You know that, don't you?” Will said, rolling to his side and sliding a knee between Ethan's legs.

Ethan's lips curved. “Years of practice.”

“Mm-hmm. And not a shred of pride in you about that fact, I see.” He reached down to stroke Ethan's half-erect cock, and almost chuckled when Ethan huffed out a ragged breath and his jaw went slack. “But obviously a sucker for a little fondle.”

“Damn, you are a tease, aren't you?”

“You're not the only one who knows how to get his way. I may not have your pretty smile and devastating charm, but sometimes all it takes is getting back to the basics. Taking the matter in hand, so to speak.” He continued stroking, and loved the way Ethan's prick was coming to life at his touch.

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Ethan was making soft grunts now and his hips were subtly thrusting toward Will's hand.

"Where's shy Will McLaren and what have you done with him?"

"He's never been as shy as you and Jessie seem to think. But if you'd rather have that..." He unhanded Ethan.

"No! God, no." Ethan grabbed his hand and brought it back to him. "I like this just fine."

Will did chuckle at that. But it was short-lived, turning into a groan when Ethan began to reciprocate, wrapping his warm hand around Will's burgeoning erection. Ethan draped a leg over Will's thighs and drew him closer, until their hands and cocks were snugged together, moving together.

They kissed and fondled, and fondled some more, until they were both breathing fast and furiously and things were getting more than a little heated.

"I can't believe I'm hard again already."

"You want me," Will said simply.

Ethan rolled him to his back and moved over him. His gaze burned into Will's with heated intensity. "You have no idea how much."

Will brought Ethan's head down to his and kissed him. "Why don't you show me?"

Ethan captured his lips in another hard kiss and ground his groin against Will's. "Do you have condoms and lube?"

"Bathroom. Drawer on the left."

"I'll be right back."

He left the bed and crossed the hall. Without his glasses

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on, Will couldn't see into the bathroom, but he heard the bathroom drawer open and close. And then Ethan was back, the bed sinking under his weight as he moved between Will's legs again, spreading them, urging him to raise his knees.

He heard the snap of the top on the lube, then felt the cool, slippery press of fingers against his ass. He closed his eyes and hissed in a shaky breath.

"This okay?" Ethan asked.

"God, yes."

"Good. Because I want to fuck you. First with my fingers..." Ethan slid a finger into him, pushing gently past the tight rings of muscle, pulling it out a little way, then pushing in again, until finally it slid home. "...and then with my dick."

Will shuddered as the words, like an electric current, shot to his balls.

Ethan swirled his finger in a slow circle inside Will, then pulled out. But before Will could offer a complaint, he started again, this time with two fingers, pushing, stretching him open. When they were buried deep, Ethan curled them up and gave Will's prostate a soft nudge.

"Shit!" His hips lifted off the bed and Ethan captured him there, supporting him with one hand and not letting him move, while with his other he continued to plunder Will's opening, in, out, in, in out, twisting his fingers, rubbing Will's prostate.

Will writhed, half-delirious from the raw pleasure scudding through his nerve endings.

"Feel good?" Ethan asked, his voice low, husky.

"What do you think?" Will managed to gasp in response.

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"I think watching you like this is one of the hottest things I've ever seen. Damn, Will..."

Will groaned, not capable of much else at this point. He reached down and grabbed his own cock, squeezing tight at the base for a moment, then palming and stroking it.

"Fuck...and just when I think you can't get any hotter..." Ethan sounded on the edge of desperation himself.

His fingers disappeared and Will protested. But when he heard the rip of a wrapper and saw Ethan rolling on a condom, his body clenched in eager anticipation, hoping this was going where he wanted it to go.

Ethan lifted Will's legs and draped them over his shoulders, then Will felt more cool lube being rubbed into his opening.

"I want you in me," he rasped. "Hurry."

The head of Ethan's cock probed against him.

"I don't know if I can go slow," Ethan said, not sounding remotely apologetic about it. "You're too fucking hot and I want you too badly."

"I don't want slow. I just want you." Will was beyond caring about anything except how fast he could be impaled on Ethan's hot, sleek shaft.

Holding Will's hips, Ethan pressed, slid out a bit, pressed again, slid out, then with a guttural cry thrust all the way.

Will's body shook at the forceful invasion, then tightened around Ethan's cock as if it were welcoming it home.

Ethan paused, embedded to the root. The closeness, the connection was overwhelming. Will felt Ethan throbbing

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inside him, a part of him. A part he'd been missing, craving, empty without for so long.

"Christ," he whispered. "Eth... I..." He didn't know how to get out the words about what he was feeling.

"I know." Ethan surprised him by sounding as shaken as he was.

And then he was moving, sliding almost out of Will, plunging back in. Thrust. Retreat. Thrust. Retreat. He angled Will's hips so the head of his cock dragged against Will's prostate on the downstrokes, sending jolts of white-hot fire through Will, until Will was begging, though he wasn't sure exactly for what. "Please...Ethan...oh, God...please...please..."

He captured his cock in one hand and began to beat himself off in rhythm with the movement. With his other hand, he reached back to clutch the headboard of the bed as Ethan's thrusts became increasingly harder, pushing him forward.

Ethan's face above him was frozen in the throes of agonizing ecstasy. "Will...I fucking want to stay inside you like this for the rest of my life. I never...want to be...out of you..."

"Then don't be. Stay in me."

"So tight... so fucking hot. I can't last... I'm gonna... unnh... fuck!"

Ethan's thrusts intensified, going deeper. Will's ass ached at the reaming being inflicted upon it, but in a completely consuming, sexual pleasure/pain way that only heightened his

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own arousal and brought him that much closer to his own release.

Ethan tensed, threw back his head, cried out Will's name, and shuddered as if it came from the depths of his soul.

The pressure was intense, and Will lost it, too, letting out a grunt as hot, sticky seed erupted out of his slit and dripped down his hand.

Ethan shuddered again, then again, still pumping into Will as if he were possessed. Will clung to the bed, letting him, wanting it. If he couldn't get out of bed in the morning, he didn't care. This was where he wanted to be. Where he'd always wanted to be.

When Ethan finally ran out of steam with one last, weak moan, and slid out of Will, Will pulled him down into a lingering, open-mouthed kiss. Ethan kissed back with a tenderness and vulnerability Will had never known he possessed.

Eventually, Ethan pulled off the condom and threw it away. They cleaned up, then, in silent, exhausted intimacy, slid under the covers and let sleep claim them.

"Love you, Eth," Will whispered as he was drifting off. "I've always loved you."

CHAPTER 4

Ethan was awake at dawn, lying on his side facing Will and the window, watching the sky lighten from black to slate to pale gray through the partially open slats of the blinds.

Not that he'd ever really slept. At least not well. Last night he'd been sated, overwhelmed with emotion, yet blissfully exhausted, and had wanted nothing more than to fall asleep in Will's arms.

But Will's softly spoken, heartfelt declaration had sliced straight through his heart like a surgical blade. Guilt and self-recrimination had been bleeding out ever since.

Will loved him. Had always loved him.

After the way they'd connected, touched, kissed, made

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love, Ethan had known what was happening between them was more powerful than he'd guessed it could be. And he'd be a liar if he said he hadn't always cared about Will more than a regular "friend" should. For years he hadn't allowed himself to think about it or delve too deeply into what that meant. But it had always been there.

Hearing Will voice the words last night, though, had, in a flash of reality, driven home to Ethan all over again that this wasn't a one-night-stand or a fling they could walk away from. It wasn't playtime, or an adventure. This involved real feelings. And real hearts that could get broken. This was Will. His best friend. The one person in the world he never wanted to see hurt.

Yet what had he done? He hadn't listened to the cautions in his head. He'd pushed them aside and allowed his selfish, raw desires to take over.

Experience had taught him that didn't often turn out well. He still had the scars to prove it. When he'd been fourteen, he and the kid down the street had been home alone one day after school at Ethan's house, had gotten curious, decided to look at what the other had to offer, which had evolved into some exploratory fondling. The whole time the voice in Ethan's head had told him his dad was going to be home soon and if he caught them at this, he'd get a beating. But the game had continued and they hadn't gotten caught. That time.

But the next week, just as they both had their pants around their ankles and the kid was going down on Ethan, his dad had walked in. The kid had been sent home and Ethan had been

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beaten nearly to death. That was the day his dad had thrown him and a handful of their belongings in the car and driven from California to New Mexico. He'd said if anyone found out he had a faggot for a son, he'd be humiliated and never be able to hold his head up again.

When they got to New Mexico, Ethan had been allowed to go back to school, but with the ominous warning always buzzing in his brain that if his dad ever found out he'd touched another boy, he'd kill him. He was mean enough when he was drunk that Ethan had fully believed he'd do it. So he'd pretended to like girls, had dated them, and eventually slept with them. At least until he was away from home and had the freedom to find his pleasures where he wanted. But secretly, inside, he'd always know what he really wanted. And Will had always been at the top of that list.

He squeezed his eyes closed, unable even now, when he knew he should be trying to detach himself from his emotions, to stop the surge of contentment in him at the sound of Will's even breathing, the feel of his warm, sleep-heavy body pressed against his own, the sight of his dark head next to him on the pillow. Being with Will last night, lying here with him right now, was like having a slice of heaven in the midst of hell, and he didn't want to give it up. The only time in his life he'd ever felt truly at peace, truly whole, was when he was with Will. That had been the case when he was a teenager and had been true more than ever last night.

But not this morning. Because this morning, or at some point during the day, he was going to get "the call." The

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fucking call that would tear him out of this warm, safe haven, out of Will's arms, and send him across the world. Most of the time he was ready for it, and, if not exactly eager, resigned to the fact it was his life and he was good at what he did. Right now, though, he'd give anything to stop it. To have even one more day here with Will before he had to walk away.

It wasn't going to happen, though. He'd been lucky to be able to get time off this past week as it was. It wasn't often he was able to schedule time away in advance, simply because he never knew how long a job would last. And once he was committed to a job, there was no leaving it until it was done. Sometimes that meant a day or two. Sometimes a few weeks. Sometimes a few months. And up until last night, that had been okay.

Now...it tied his gut in knots.

What the hell was he going to tell Will? Will knew he was going to have to leave, return to his apartment in Arlington, Virginia, then, as far as Will knew, resume his travels as an international buyer. In the past, he'd never asked too many questions or delved too deeply into Ethan's exact whereabouts. They talked on the phone periodically, emailed when Ethan was able to. But Ethan wasn't stupid enough to believe that'd be enough anymore. Will would expect more.

And, damn it, he deserves more.

They hadn't set any ground rules last night before they shed their clothes and went at it. There'd been no predetermined understanding that this was for one night only, or fucking only with no other emotional attachment allowed

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beyond the friendship they already shared. And Ethan had always been a stickler for ground rules before he went to bed with anyone. Always. Why hadn't he listened to the voice in his head last night?

Yeah, but this is Will.

All the more reason he should have set some rules. When you didn't set rules ahead of time, it got messy. Expectations cropped up. Disappointment was inevitable. People got hurt.

Why, why, why had he let this happen with Will? He should have been the strong one. The unflinching one, who held up a hand to stop it before things went too far. He never should have let down his guard. There was no excuse for it—he was a fucking expert at subterfuge. It had started as a kid, being forced to keep secret his dad's drinking and abuse, playing pretend in front of teachers and friends, using charm and smiles and witty dialogue to distract people. He'd become so good at it over the years that now he made a living at it.

All he'd had to do last night was keep his mouth shut, reassure Will there was no harm done with the kiss, that it didn't matter whether he was straight or gay, they'd always be friends, tuck him into bed, and go back to his hotel room.

Instead, Will's confession, the kiss, the supercharged emotion of the moment had completely caught Ethan off guard, had thrown him for a loop, and for the first time in God only knew how long, he'd lost his edge. He'd let Will's sweet words and enticement suck him in and add fuel to the already raging blaze in himself...

And now here they were.

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He was so fucked. There was no way good way to fix this. Every scenario he thought of ended badly.

Ethan huffed out a sigh.

Will stretched, then his eyelids fluttered open. He smiled in a half-awake haze. “Hi,” he said softly.

Ethan’s heart turned inside out. He knew he needed to keep his distance. But he just couldn’t do it. “Hi.”

“It’s too early to be awake,” Will murmured in a sleepy, sexy voice that caused Ethan’s cock to stir. “It’s not even light out all the way.”

“I know.”

Will wrapped an arm around Ethan’s waist and tugged him closer. He rested his forehead against Ethan’s and closed his eyes again. “Come back to sleep with me.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Ethan admitted, his chest aching.

Will’s big warm hand stroked his back in a strangely soothing motion. “Of course you can. Close your eyes...relax.”

Ethan did close his eyes and tried his best to relax. And then, finally and surprisingly, he was floating...floating...in that half-world between awake and sleep.

Once again Will had offered just the peace and comfort he’d needed. It had always been that way. Will had always been good for his soul. He could only hope in the full light of day he could offer Will the same comfort.

“No matter what ever happens,” he murmured, “don’t give up on me, Will.”

“Never,” came the sleepy response.

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Ethan clung to that as he slipped into oblivion.

* * *

A harsh beeping noise startled Ethan out of a sound sleep. What the hell?

For a moment he couldn't get his bearings. He felt like he was floundering in a vacuum. What day was it? Where was he? What was that *damned noise*?

Reality came rushing back like a shrieking demon, sending sharp, shooting spasms of agony through him as it ripped him fully from the tranquility of sleep.

He untangled himself from the covers and Will's arms and legs, threw himself out of bed, and searched the floor for his pants.

"What is it?" Will asked, his voice fuzzy with sleep.

"My pager. I need to find my damn pager."

"People still use pagers?"

"I do." It would be a generic message for him to call in or come to a certain location...in code, of course, so to the outside eye it would appear completely inane.

He finally located his pants under Will's, half-hidden beneath the bedspread they'd kicked off during the night.

The beeping grew louder and was relentless.

"Shit. Shit!" he muttered under his breath. He dug a hand into his pants' pocket and pulled out the compact unit. He thumbed the button to shut off the sound, read the brief display, then glanced at his watch, which he hadn't taken off last night.

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A knot of sick resignation settled in the pit of his gut. It was time to go. And he wasn't even going to get the luxury of an extended goodbye.

But maybe that was better.

Without looking at Will—because he couldn't bear to look him in the eye when he told him the news, chicken shit though he knew it was—he found his briefs and tugged them and his pants on. “I have to leave.”

“Right this second?” Will sounded more awake now, and Ethan heard him shift on the bed.

“Yeah. It was work. I have to catch a plane and be back in Arlington by this evening.” In point of fact, he had to catch a government hop that was leaving Kirtland Air Force Base in forty-five minutes, and he still had to go by his hotel room and get his stuff. But he couldn't tell Will that.

“Okay...” Will sounded uncertain now. “Well, I'll make some breakfast before you go.”

Ethan found his shirt draped across the chair at Will's computer desk. He slid his arms into it and began buttoning. “I don't have time.”

“You don't have time to eat something?”

The first hint of hurt tinged Will's voice...and it about killed Ethan to hear it.

Fuck. It shouldn't have to be this way.

Keep your cool. Keep your distance. It'll only be harder if you get sucked up in the emotion.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Will, who was sitting on the side of the bed now. He'd put on his glasses, but

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hadn't bothered to cover himself.

Jesus, the man was beautiful. Six-feet-two-inches of muscular planes and angles, eyes like the rich summer grass in Virginia, and a face like a sexy angel. Will had never seen that, though. He'd always considered himself "barely average and a studious geek on top of it." Will's own words, and he truly believed them. But he was so much more.

"I'm really sorry," Ethan said. "I know this is sudden, and I should have told you last night that I was expecting to hear from work today."

"It's Sunday."

As if that somehow negated him having to leave. Because in Will's world, where kids had moms and dads who loved them, and families actually sat down at the dinner table together, Sundays were a day of rest, when people didn't work. They slept late, read the paper, had a lazy breakfast, then spent the day relaxing or having fun.

"Yeah, but that's the way it goes sometimes. The company calls and I go when and where they say because they pay me lots of money to do their bidding." He offered up what he hoped looked like a humorous smile, trying to play it casual, and shrugged. "I'm used to it."

Will's dark brows drew together. "I'm not."

Fuck.

Ethan sighed, hating this, hating himself not only for putting Will through this, but having to lie to him.

"I know." He cupped Will's cheek, leaned down, and kissed him. Lightly. Because if it were more than that, he

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honestly wasn't sure he'd be able to keep his cool. Then he sat on the bed near—but not too close—to Will to put on his shoes.

"I'm not ready to let go of you yet."

"You're not letting go of me...I hope. Just sending me off to do my job—you know, like 'Have a good day, honey. I'll see you tonight.'"

"Except I won't see you tonight."

Ethan winced internally. Damn, that had been a bad choice of words on his part.

"No, but I'll be back." He forced another smile. Except this one felt forced, and probably looked it as well.

"When?"

"I don't know exactly. I'm going to have to go out of the country and I'm never really sure how busy they're going to keep me and how long I'll be away."

Will frowned. "That's fairly vague."

Ethan dropped his foot to the floor and turned to face Will. He wrapped his fingers through Will's, unable to resist the need to touch him. God, he wanted to do more than touch. He wanted to push him back onto the bed and make love to him again, this time in the daylight, where he could see every expression on Will's face, every inch of his beautiful body as they fucked. But a hand was all he dared risk right now.

"I'm sorry, Will. I know this sucks, and I know the timing's terrible. I wish I didn't have to go. I don't have any choice, though."

"Well...we can talk, right? While you're gone."

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Damn and double damn.

“We can maybe talk sometimes. But...when I’m out of the country I’m not always able to call or do email. It’s...kind of hectic.”

He watched Will drag in a slow, deep breath, as if he were trying to steady himself. But the expression on his face gave away his emotions. He was hurt.

“So...you’re leaving and you don’t know when you’ll be back. We can’t really talk except occasionally. Does that mean we’re going back to the way it was before? Are you going to continue to stop in here once or twice a year out of some sense of duty?”

In all the years Ethan had known Will, he’d never heard that particular thickness in his voice, like he was struggling to hold off tears.

Don’t touch him. If you do, one or both of you are going to lose it. And that will only make things worse because you’ll still have to leave and you still won’t be able to tell him anything.

“No, how can you even think that? You’re my best friend, Will. Coming here for visits has never been about duty.”

Will’s throat convulsed, then he swallowed hard. “Your best friend,” he whispered. “Yeah. Okay. So I guess things *are* back to usual, huh?”

Will stood and took the few steps across the room to the dresser, opened it, pulled out a pair of gym shorts and put them on. Then he turned to face Ethan.

“Sometimes I have to wonder what really goes on in your

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life, Ethan. We talk only when it's convenient for you, your trips here to visit are usually short and then you have to rush off to places you don't ever mention. You never share details about where you live or what exactly you do when you're working. You've never once asked me to come visit you in Virginia. It's like your life is just this big, hazy gray area for me. Sometimes I've even wondered if maybe you're married and didn't want me to know for some reason."

Ethan's eyebrows shot up at that. But before he could respond Will continued.

"But you know what I really think? I think when you left Albuquerque after high school, you did it because life here wasn't good enough for you. You needed to be somewhere more exciting, somewhere more glamorous, with people who were more glamorous. You went to college in New York City, you live in the hustle-bustle of the D.C. area, you travel the world. You come back here for the occasional visit because we're friends and for whatever reason you can't put that behind you. But you don't want this life and your other life to mix because you've moved so far away from all this that keeping connections here drag you down."

Ethan heart pounded. "Will, no, that's not true. That's not at all true."

"I don't know what you do when you're away from here. I've long suspected you have a harem of women across the globe, waiting for you when you're in their particular town. Now, I don't know...maybe it's not women. Maybe it's men. Or maybe it's both." The lines around his mouth tightened and

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his eyes grew dull. "And now I guess I'm just one of them."

"No. Will..." Ethan stood and crossed to his friend, but when Will held up a hand to keep him from touching him, he stopped, his chest aching. "You're not one of them." Then he shook his head and swore under his breath because that hadn't come out right. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You're not one of them because there is no 'them.' And even if there were, how could you ever think you'd be just another warm body to me?"

Ethan's pager beeped again, startling the hell out of him.

"Fuck!" He pulled it out. Read it. Checked his watch. He had to leave.

"You'd better go," Will said, his voice hard. His eyes, behind his glasses, however, were not. They were swirling depths of green agony.

"Damn it, I'm sorry. I wish I could stay. You don't know how much I wish I could. But listen to me...we need to talk. Really talk. So I'm going to call you as soon as I land, okay? And then the moment I'm back in the States, I'll come see you." He didn't care how he'd manage it...he had to. He couldn't leave this hanging between him and Will any longer than necessary. "I don't know when I'll be back, but I will come."

Will looked past him to the window where full morning sunshine shot through the blinds.

"Will...I promise. It's not what you think. You're important to me. More than you know."

Will gave a brief nod, but still wouldn't meet Ethan's gaze.

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“Yeah, well...you’d better leave. That’s what you do best.”

A blow to the heart couldn’t have hurt worse. Ethan could barely breath. Everything he’d always secretly wanted was within his grasp...yet he couldn’t have it. For all the wrong, fucking reasons.

He stepped closer to Will and grabbed his head. Will started to shove him back, but Ethan held him tight. “Don’t push me away,” he growled. “I know all the words in the universe aren’t going to convince you of anything. So, fine. But don’t push me away and not give me a chance to show you what you mean to me.”

He pulled Will’s face close and kissed him. Hard. And deep. Pouring all his need and longing into it, determined to make Will realize he was and always had been the most important person in Ethan’s life. And after last night, more so than ever.

Will’s hands slid up tentatively to clutch at his back, then gripped tighter, pulling him closer.

They kissed until they were out of breath, until Ethan’s internal clock told him time was up and he had to go. *Now*.

He tugged his mouth off Will’s, but couldn’t step away just yet. He rested his forehead against his friend’s.

“You told me you wouldn’t give up on me,” he whispered. “Please don’t. I’ll be back, Will. I promise. Just as soon as I can.”

Will closed his eyes as if the words were too painful, but then he opened them and slowly nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay. Need you...” Ethan murmured, caressing Will’s

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stubbled cheek. “So damn much.”

He kissed him again. A quick, intense sealing of that vow.

Then he pulled away, gave Will one last look, trying to memorize every detail to hold him until he could return, and walked away.

CHAPTER 5

Three years later

Ethan steered his Corvette into the far-right lane of I-40 as he approached the Louisiana Boulevard exit. Traffic at eleven-thirty on this Friday morning was already heavy as the residents of Albuquerque headed off for their lunch hours or skipped out from work early to start their weekends. The sun shone, but the wind was whipping like hell—typical New Mexico spring winds. Dust hovered in the air like a thin veil of mist, but those who lived here knew better. It was a mist that stung the eyes and crunched between your teeth if you opened your mouth. Dark clouds bloomed over Sandia Peak,

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suggesting a storm later in the day.

In spite of the wind, and air that was unusually cool for early April, Ethan had the window down partway. He'd discovered on his drive across the country that he had to keep fresh air flowing. Otherwise, bands tightened around his chest, squeezing off his breath, and the sensation of black suffocation descended on him.

He'd chosen to drive instead of fly because of that. The plane ride would have been considerably shorter, but the thought of being trapped inside the confined space of a jet airliner with people crammed in on either side of him, and no possible way to escape if he felt the darkness closing in had been more than he could even think about. The car was slower and also confined, but he could put down the top or roll down the windows for air, and more importantly, stop and escape any time he felt the need. The two days it had taken him to get here from D.C. had passed painfully slowly, but in the end, he was still glad he'd done it this way.

What he'd face now that he was here, though, he couldn't even guess.

An ache in his chest made him struggle to take a deep breath. But this wasn't the same as the sensation he had from being closed in. This was pure, sick anxiety over how he was going to face Will again.

Will... God, I've missed you.

His knuckles shone white on the steering wheel and, realizing he had a death grip on it, he forced himself to relax.

Easier said than done.

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He eased the sleek sports car off the interstate and headed north on Louisiana.

He noticed some new fancy stores had been built near the mall. They weren't the first changes he'd seen since he'd hit the city limits. Albuquerque had grown during the three years he'd been gone. Some parts had stayed the same, but others were almost unrecognizable.

Is that the way it'll be with Will, too? Will there be some comfortable familiarity, or will he have grown into a different person?

Anxiety gnawed at him again, and though he struggled to keep it at bay, he failed miserably.

As he wound his way through the residential streets, he wondered again for the probably the dozenth time if he was handling this the right way. Should he have called first? Asked if Will even wanted to see him? God, what if Will had found someone else?

He couldn't listen to the honest answer, which was that, yes, he should have called first. Because he was too afraid if he'd called, Will would have refused to talk to him or, even if he had talked to him, would never have agreed to see him. And Ethan needed to see him. Needed to look him in the eye and explain. It wasn't something he could do over the phone. Will deserved better than that.

At noon on a Friday, Will would no doubt be at work. But Ethan couldn't go to his place of business. He couldn't face Will for the first time since he'd walked out the door that morning so long ago, in a public place. Whatever was going to

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happen between them, whatever Will's reaction might be, Ethan couldn't deal with an audience. So he'd decided to go to Will's house and wait until Will came home.

The plan sounded stupid when he thought about it. Probably even a little pathetic. And...*shit*. What if Will didn't even live there anymore? The thought hadn't occurred to him until he'd driven into Albuquerque, but he'd reassured himself then, and again now, that Will was as constant and dependable as the day was long. He'd lived in the little rental house for years, and Ethan decided it was very likely he was still there.

For a fleeting second he considered calling directory assistance to be sure, but pushed that thought away as well. He was just a few blocks away now. He'd know soon enough.

The knot that had been in his stomach for days got a bit heavier as he turned a corner and spotted the small stucco rancher. It was too earlier yet for the roses to be blooming on the trellis across the front porch, but the lawn was green and recently mown, and the cottonwood tree near the short driveway had already begun to leaf out.

Ethan cruised to a stop on the street, not directly in front of the house, but in front of the house just before it, under the low-hanging branches of another old cottonwood.

Chicken shit.

Yeah, he probably was, but on the off chance Will might be home, or if not, when he arrived later, Ethan didn't want his Vette sitting like a shiny black sore thumb in front of Will's house, advertising he had company.

He pulled off his sunglasses and studied the house, looking

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for signs of life. Three years ago Will had been driving a fifteen-year-old BMW he'd bought cheap from one of his college professors when the rattletrap Thunderbird he'd driven since high school had finally crapped out on him. The blue Beemer wasn't in the driveway or on the street.

Taking a deep breath, Ethan opened the door and stepped out of his car. All was quiet around the house. He wasn't expecting Will to be home, but he approached, climbed the steps to the porch, and, his pulse racing, rang the doorbell.

God, what am I going to do if he's here? If he actually opens that door?

But seconds ticked by with no response.

He rang again.

Nothing.

Ethan exhaled a shaky breath, not sure if he was disappointed or relieved. Or maybe both.

He'd just turned to head back down the steps when he heard the creak of the door opening.

His heart shot up to his throat. *Shit.*

Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, he stopped, turned...then felt his mouth fall open.

A truly gorgeous hunk of a young man—probably in his mid-twenties—stood in the doorway, smiling a sparkling, white-toothed, movie star smile. He was dressed in gym shorts and a muscle tee—with plenty of muscles to do it justice. A fine sheen of perspiration shone on his skin. His hair was almost bleach blond. He looked like he ought to be on the cover of a sports magazine, posing on the beach, volleyball in

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hand.

Was this Will's lover? *Oh, God, I'm too late.*

The thought almost made him sick to his stomach.

"Sorry about that," the hunk said. "I was on the elliptical and didn't hear the door the first time. Can I help you?"

Ethan steeled himself to stay calm and give away nothing. "I was looking for an old friend. Will. Will McLaren."

"Will..."

"Yeah."

The hunk appeared to ponder that for a moment, then said, "I don't think I know anybody by that name."

Relief poured over Ethan that this blond, tanned muscle god wasn't Will's squeeze. But it was quickly followed by a sense of loss that Will wasn't here, and wasn't going to be. He obviously didn't live here anymore."

"Sorry," he managed to get out. "He used to live in this house."

"Ah. Well, my girlfriend and I have been here since the fall. The couple who lived here before us moved, I guess because the place wasn't big enough for them to have all their grandkids sleep over. Or something." He rolled his eyes, as if the concept of grandkids was not only foreign to him, but sounded like a royal pain in the ass. "You might call the management company that handles the rental of the place. They might be able to tell you something about your friend."

"Yeah, thanks. But he's got family in town. I'll check with them."

"Cool. Okay, well, I've gotta go. Gotta finish my workout

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before I have to leave for my shift at the bar.” He smiled, waved, and shut the door.

And Ethan trooped down the steps and up the sidewalk to his Vette, his feet so damned heavy he wasn’t sure how he was managing to lift them.

Will wasn’t here. It made sense. He’d been working at one of the medical labs for almost three years now, no doubt making decent money. So he’d probably moved to a bigger place.

Or moved in with someone. He might very well have a lover now, be in a relationship with someone.

No. Ethan wasn’t going to even think that. Couldn’t.

But the fear lingered.

He managed to make it back to the car and slide into the seat before the pressing blackness hit. He did his damndest to try to stay calm and breathe through it, but by the time it passed, he was shaking and exhausted.

He’d never in his life needed Will and his quiet calm more than he did right now.

Please don’t hate me for what happened. I need you.

But first he had to find him.

* * *

Another doorstep, another doorbell, and another wait.

But this time the door opened within seconds.

“Ethan...”

Jess looked good. More mature, yet that only made her more beautiful. Dressed in jeans and a peach sweater that

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brought out the red highlights in her dark hair, she was the best thing he'd seen in a very long time. And, damn, her eyes were so much like Will's it was almost painful.

"Hi, princess." He offered her what he hoped was a jaunty smile, but was afraid he might have lost that particular skill.

She pulled him into a bear hug. Then, with tears glinting in her eyes, stepped back and looked him over as if she were studying one of her psych patients. "When you called a little while ago, I couldn't believe it. My God, you're really here. Come in." She held the door open for him and he preceded her through it, into the *salttillo*-tiled foyer. She led him through the house into a large gourmet kitchen.

"I'm so glad I was home to get your call. I took the day off today because I worked a double shift at the hospital last weekend. One of my fellow residents was sick, so I covered for him."

She pulled down two stoneware mugs from the cupboard and filled them with coffee.

"You look really good," Ethan said, and meant it.

"Thanks." She handed him a mug of coffee, then leaned against the counter to sip her own. She watched him over the rim, but not with censure. It was almost with sadness.

"You're looking for Will."

It was a statement, not a question. Leave it to Jess to get right to the heart of the matter. When he'd called her, all he'd asked was if he could see her. She'd immediately said yes, without question, and given him the address of hers and Ruben's new house up in the Northeast Heights.

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"Yeah. I went by his house where he used to live, but I guess he hasn't been there in a while."

"Will's not in Albuquerque anymore, Ethan."

Ethan's heart stuttered.

"He's moved up north. He's working for the Department of Game and Fish as a wildlife biologist in the Pecos."

Ethan had an instant nostalgic vision of the camping trip in the Pecos that summer in high school, where they'd skinny dipped in the river. Even after all these years, he could still see how beautiful Will had been in the moonlight, and remember how damned much he'd wanted him.

"I thought he had his dream job here in Albuquerque at the lab. He was planning to start it the week after you got married."

"And he did. But six months later, he quit and moved away."

"You make it sound sudden."

Her long fingers absently stroked her coffee mug. "It kind of was. He made the decision he wanted to leave and he did."

"That doesn't sound like Will." The Will he knew had had his life mapped out since high school. He contemplated for weeks, months, or even years before he decided to pursue something new. But who the hell was he to think he still knew Will? Apparently things *had* changed.

"I know it doesn't sound like him, but that's what happened. One day he was at the lab, the next he was telling me he'd quit, the next he was packing up to move because he'd already taken a new job."

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Ethan sensed there was more to the story and had a sinking feeling he was at fault.

“Why’d he leave?” he asked Jessie.

She shook her head and sighed. “Do you want his version or my version?”

“Both. If you’re willing to tell me.”

“He said he wanted to live somewhere different because he’d always been here in Albuquerque.”

“And you don’t believe that?”

“I guess it was partially true. He had always lived here. But he said his life here wasn’t very ‘exciting or glamorous,’ so it was time to try something different. I don’t know what the hell the exciting and glamorous stuff was supposed to mean. That had never been important to Will before.”

Ethan’s gut tightened. He knew what it meant.

“But I think there was more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

“Do you want me to pretty-up the truth or give you the blunt version?”

The same old Jess. If his heart wasn’t hurting so damned bad, he might have smiled.

“Don’t spare me. Just tell me what you think.”

Jessie nodded. “Okay. I’m not sure what happened between you two on my wedding night, Ethan, but something obviously did. Will’s never really talked about it, except to say you two had ‘words.’ But I feel pretty certain there was a lot more than words involved because after you left, he was torn up. And then he didn’t hear from you. No phone calls, no

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emails. I think after six months he couldn't take the waiting, the uncertainty, anymore, so part of his decision to move away was because he decided if you ever did show up, he didn't want to be here."

Ethan squeezed his eyes closed and rubbed them with his thumb and forefinger. "Shit. Is he okay?"

"It's been almost three years. That's a long time."

"I know. I just..." He dragged in a breath that barely made it through his tight throat. "I..." He choked on the words.

Jessie set down her coffee mug, crossed over to him, and wrapped her arms around him. She was nearly as tall as he was, and smelled of fresh-ground coffee and citrus shampoo. He leaned into her embrace and fought back the unexpected and surprising sting of moisture. It sounded strange, but this was the first bit of comfort he'd been offered since the last time he was with Will.

Jess patted his back in a slow, gentle motion that reminded him of Will, and the way he'd stroked Ethan's back that night in bed.

"I never meant to hurt him. That's the last thing I ever wanted. I...I couldn't come back, Jess. I wanted to, but I couldn't. There were real reasons."

Jessie cupped his face between her hands. Her gaze and tone of voice were gentle. "I believe you. I took one look at you at the door and knew something big had gone down in your life. You're not the same man I knew, the one I danced with at my wedding. But I don't expect you to tell me what happened, Eth. That's between you and Will. Just promise me

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you *will* tell him.”

“I don’t know if he’ll even let me see him. And I can’t blame him.”

“He’ll see you. He won’t be able to not see you.”

“I don’t know. He may be glad never to set eyes on me again, considering what you’ve told me.” He sighed. “You didn’t answer me before...is he okay?”

“He loved you. And don’t look so surprised I know. He’s my brother. I saw how he looked at you all those years. He loved you all that time, and I suspect he loves you still. But you know Will. He’s so damned quiet he doesn’t share much. Never has, and now it’s even worse.”

“Has...has he found someone?”

“He’s out now, about being gay. He told Mom and Dad not too long after he moved. They were afraid he’d moved because of that, because he thought they wouldn’t deal.”

No, it was me.

“And to answer your question...I don’t know for sure.” Jessie looked apologetic. “He’s dated some, but if there’s someone in particular, he hasn’t mentioned it. Like I said, he’s not real forthcoming with personal stuff anymore.”

Will not being close enough to Jess anymore to share his personal life bothered Ethan...more than he could say.

“Why, Jess? You two were always tight.”

A spark of sadness flared in Jessie’s eyes. “We still are. Sort of. We talk a lot and see each other every few weeks. It’s just...well, honestly, I think it’s hard for him to be around me.”

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“Why in hell would you think that?”

Jessie sighed. Picked up her coffee, sipped, set it down again, adjusted her ponytail. “I think it’s because I’m married now. Because he thinks I don’t need him anymore, now that I have Ruben.”

“That’s crazy. He adores you. I can’t imagine him feeling left out because you have Ruben.”

“No, not because I have him, exactly. It’s just... You and I, we always leaned on Will. We let him be our rock for so long—I even used to tease him about it. But then I got married and had a new life, and you left, and I think he felt like we didn’t need him anymore. I think the two people he loved most moved on and Will, in typical Will fashion, stepped to the side because he didn’t want to get in the way.” She frowned. “I also think maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

“I think maybe it’s hard for him to be around me and Ruben... because we have each other. Because we love each other.”

Ethan stared at her, not following her thought for a moment. But then he understood, and another solid rock settled on top of the pile already in his gut. “And he doesn’t have that.”

Jessie shrugged. “I don’t know. But sometimes I wonder.”

She pulled a notepad across the counter toward her, chose a pen out of the Acoma pottery bowl nearby, and jotted down something. Then she ripped off the top page and handed it to him.

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“I know you care about him, but I’m not going to pry and ask if you love him like a friend or something more. It’s enough that you *do* care. You wouldn’t have come to see me if you didn’t. And he cares about you, too. You guys have known each other too long, shared too much, to stay torn apart like this.”

She kissed him on the cheek, almost as if she were giving him her blessing. “Go see him, Ethan. Go see him, and whatever happened between you two, work it out. I love you both too much to see either one of you suffer like this.”

CHAPTER 6

“Hey, Maria, I’m calling it a night.”

Will flipped off the light in his small office and shut the door.

Maria Trujillo looked up from the desk where she sat and flipped her long, salt-and-pepper braid over her shoulder in the smooth movement she did a hundred times a day. “What, you’re deserting me? Just because it’s after six on a Friday night, you think you get to have a life or something?”

Will grinned at her. “Yeah, you know, I have that important social life to see to.”

“Speaking of...” She looked over the tops of her black reading glasses and gave him what, after two years of working

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with her, he referred to as “the look.” He knew exactly what she was going to say and cringed deep inside. But he didn’t let her see that.

“Yes, I know, your brother’s going to be in town this weekend.”

“That’s right. And I want the two of you to meet. The last three times he’s been up from Las Cruces, you’ve conveniently been busy. I’m not letting you off the hook this time.”

Ever since Maria had found out he was gay a year or so ago, she’d been trying to set him up with her younger brother. Will knew she meant well, and suspected that if her brother was anything like her he probably would like the guy. But he wasn’t looking for anything regular. He’d tried that a while back, and it had sucked in every way. *Because he wasn’t Ethan. None of them are ever going to be Ethan.*

Damn it! It pissed him off when that stupid-ass, little voice in his head did that. He was over Ethan. Had been for a long time.

Liar.

Shit.

To Maria he said, “I know and I haven’t forgotten. Your house for dinner at six tomorrow night, right?”

She pointed the end of a pencil at him. “That’s right. Joe’s been looking forward to meeting you. I know you hate the idea of being set-up, but trust me, Will. You two have a lot in common. And I consider myself an excellent matchmaker. I told you I set up my cousin and her husband *and* Dale

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Madison and his wife. I have a perfect track record.”

Will shook his head, but gave her a fond smile. “Just don’t get your hopes up too high. I’m not very set-up-able. Ask my sister. She tried for years.”

“Yes, with women. Of course that didn’t work out.”

Damn, he’d forgotten he’d told Maria that detail. He sighed, resigning himself to his fate.

“I’ll be there. Can I bring anything?”

“Just your gorgeous self!” She shot him a twinkling, dark-eyed grin. “Now, go, get out of here and let me finish this report so I can go home, too!”

Will zipped his coat as he crossed the parking lot to his truck. Damn, the wind was really blowing this evening, and it was chilly. It would probably be even colder at his house. A spring storm must be blowing in.

He slid behind the wheel of his Dodge Dakota 4x4, cranked the engine, then the heater.

Friday night Santa Fe traffic was heavy for this late, but he quickly discovered why. An accident blocked a section of Cerrillos Road. Will glanced at the clock on the dash—6:45. At this rate, he was barely going to make it home before dark. His stomach growled, and he contemplated pulling off for fast food and to maybe wait out the traffic, but he’d left home at five this morning and was dead tired. Home, a steak on the grill, and then bed were in order.

Yeah, a hell of a social life.

When traffic finally broke free, he had smooth sailing to the interstate, and once on it, made good time north to Pecos.

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When he'd moved up here, he'd looked at places around Santa Fe, but knowing he'd be spending most of his time in the Pecos Wilderness, had enticed him to live nearer there. Though his office was in Santa Fe, he spent most of his time in the field, so driving to Santa Fe a couple of times a week wasn't a hardship. And the rest of the time, his job was in his own back yard. In a manner of speaking. The Pecos Wilderness was over 200,000 acres. But he lived about as close to it as you could get.

As he drove through the town of Pecos and headed up into the mountains, the sun was just setting and the shadow of twilight already crept through the trees.

Will loved it up here. Loved the isolation, the quiet, the smell of pine. He honestly hadn't been sure if he would when he first moved. Yeah, he'd always enjoyed the mountains for camping and hiking, but to live so far away from everything...he hadn't been sure a guy born and raised in the heart of metro Albuquerque could do it without going stir crazy.

But he hadn't. Gone stir crazy. In fact, he'd felt more at peace here than anywhere he'd ever been. He'd surprised himself these last couple of years. In more ways than one.

He owned a log cabin-style house on twenty acres. The Pecos really was his backyard—his property ended and the wilderness began about a hundred yards off his back deck. He had a few neighbors, but all of them owned ten or twenty or thirty acre plots, and with the dense stands of ponderosa pine and aspen, he seldom saw anyone.

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As he jounced along the rutted dirt road that forked just ahead, with the right fork becoming his driveway, he caught a glimpse of his house in the twilight, and for a moment thought he saw a car parked in front of it. But the trees blocked his view before he could do a double take.

He almost forgot about it, until he came around the curve in the driveway that offered up a view of the cabin and the clearing in which it sat. And sure enough, there was still plenty of light to see that a car was parked in front of the house. He couldn't make out details until he was a few yards closer. Damn. It was a newer-model black Corvette. Who the hell drove a Vette up here in the mountains?

And then, like a shot of ice water through his veins, he knew.

Instinct almost had him slamming on the breaks, but he caught himself before he did it. Instead, he slowed to a creep, needing the extra few seconds to react.

It had to be him. No one else Will knew drove low-slung, fast sports cars. And always black ones for some reason.

Oh, God... His heartbeat had become a gallop beneath his breastbone, pounding so hard and fast he was almost lightheaded from it.

He'd always known this might happen one day—Ethan showing up out of the blue. For the first couple of years after Ethan left, he had, in fact, been expecting it. But then it hadn't occurred, and after a while, he'd forgotten to anticipate it. Had stopped looking around every corner for Ethan's blond head and charismatic smile.

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Why now? Why now, when everything in my life is going so smoothly?

Again he had the intense urge to stop his truck. Again he didn't, but only because in that instant he knew he could not let Ethan have that kind of power over him. Or at least he couldn't let Ethan see that he did.

Dizzy, almost sick to his stomach, he pulled up next to the Corvette—which had Virginia temporary tags, confirming his suspicions. The sports car was empty. Will's gaze made a slow trek around the yard and the house, and when he spotted Ethan, sitting on the steps of the porch, the earth dropped out from under Will. Or it felt like it.

Slowly, because his body seemed to be half-frozen, he opened the truck's door and stepped out.

Ethan rose, but didn't move to meet him. He seemed frozen as well, his hands tucked into the pockets of a tan canvas jacket. Dressed in stone-colored jeans and a black v-neck sweater under the jacket, he looked as Tommy Hilfiger as ever...and yet, there was something different.

As Will drew closer to him, he realized what it was. There was no charming smile on his face, no cocky set to his stance. And he looked pale, drawn-out, tired.

For a moment something in Will's heart clenched, wondering if Ethan was okay. But he hardened himself to it. After being gone for almost three years and having the nerve to come back and face Will, the man had reason to be unsettled.

Will stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up at

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Ethan, three steps above, who hadn't moved yet. Christ, his eyes were as blue as ever. But troubled in a way Will had never seen them.

"How'd you know where to find me?"

Okay, not the most brilliant opening line. And he cringed at how angry it had sounded coming out. But, damn it, he had every reason to be angry.

"I went to see Jess. She told me."

The sound of Ethan's voice slid like warm velvet over Will's skin, seeping into his pores, spreading through his veins. Something stirred deep within him that he hadn't felt in a long time.

Since the last time you were with him.

Oh, God. I'm in trouble.

"New car?" He pulled his gaze away from the other man's, needing to break the spell, and nodded toward the Corvette. Although what the hell he was doing making chit-chat like this was beyond him.

"Yeah. Will—"

"Have you had dinner?" Will cut him off, not ready yet to have to deal with any heavy stuff—excuses or apologies or whatever it was Ethan had come here for. It had been a long day, he was tired, hungry, and he just needed some fricking time to deal with the fact Ethan Gallagher had decided to darken his door again. He climbed the steps and moved past Ethan.

Ethan seemed to have been caught off guard by Will's interruption.

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“Um...uh, no. But—”

“Then come inside.” Will unlocked the door and held it open for him. “Unless, of course, you have to rush off and you don’t have time to eat?” he challenged, looking straight at Ethan.

A barely perceptible wince creased Ethan’s forehead and for just a split second he looked like he’d been hit by a two-by-four instead of words. But then he took a deep breath, nodded, and slid past Will to enter the house.

And Will was left to swallow the guilt that had consumed him when he saw how his comment had affected the other man...and to try to quell the tingle that crawled just beneath his skin at having Ethan nearby again.

Will shut the door, took off his parka, hung it on the hook in the foyer, and threw his keys on top of the burlwood bookcase in the living room.

He didn’t hang around to offer to take Ethan’s jacket. He really just needed to escape for a minute, to catch his breath.

In the kitchen, he pulled a couple of steaks out of the freezer, then went out the sliding glass door onto the deck to start the grill and put on the meat. The cold evening air filled his lungs and left him chilled, but it also helped ground him.

By the time he re-entered the kitchen, he felt better. This was his house, his territory, and whatever Ethan wanted, Will was in charge here. He wasn’t the same person Ethan had walked out on.

Ethan came into the kitchen. He’d shed his jacket, and Will was struck even harder than before by how changed

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Ethan was. He'd always been lean, but now he bordered on thin. His cheekbones had become prominent in his face; even the scar over his eyebrow stood out more noticeably. The fine-knit sweater he wore clung to his arms and chest, which still looked muscular, but not like before. And his jeans hung loose at the waist. His hair was longer, the ends curling against his neck and ears and almost falling over his eyes. But what sent a bolt straight through Will's heart was Ethan's eyes, and how haunted they appeared.

What the hell had happened to him?

It took every ounce of self control and self-preservation in Will not to pull him into an embrace.

Instead, he turned to the refrigerator without saying a word, afraid anything that might come out of his mouth at that moment would be something he'd regret. Some comforting or tender platitude that would come back to hurt him and make him feel stupid later when Ethan left. Because he didn't kid himself—Ethan *would* leave.

"Can I help with anything?" Ethan asked.

Will handed him a plastic bag of pre-made salad and a bottle of salad dressing.

Ethan took it, opened a couple of cabinet doors until he found a bowl, dumped the salad into it and set it and the dressing on the pine table there in the kitchen. Then he found plates and silverware and set the table.

Will felt his presence like a live current sizzling over his nerve endings no matter where Ethan was in relation to him. He didn't even have to see the man...but he always felt him.

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And smelled the faintest hint of the expensive cologne or aftershave he wore.

When the steaks were ready, and the garlic bread Will had toasted in the oven had the kitchen smelling like an Italian restaurant, Will motioned Ethan to sit. He fished a couple of bottles of beer out of the refrigerator, handed one to Ethan, then sat across the table from him.

Will took a sip. “Remember that time the end of senior year when we skipped the last two periods and sat under the bleachers at the football field, drinking the beer Casey Kennedy had snuck to school behind the backseat of his truck?”

A faint smile crossed Ethan’s face—the first Will had seen—and he had to look away for a second because, faint though it was, it still had the same effect Ethan’s smile had always had on him, sending heat and longing surging through him.

“I remember I had to promise to give you my Pink Floyd *Dark Side of the Moon* CD to get you to skip because you were so worried Mr. Daniels would call your parents that you weren’t in class.”

Will groaned. “I was such a geek, wasn’t I?”

Ethan paused with his fork hovering in the air and looked up at Will, focusing those beautiful Caribbean blue eyes on him and almost stealing Will’s breath. “Yeah. But you were by far and away the best of all of us.”

Will’s breath caught in his chest. “I got the best grades.”

“I’m not talking about that. You were the best *person* of all

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of us. Do you know how many of those guys we hung out with wanted to be you?"

Will shook his head, a denial on his lips, but Ethan seemed to know it was coming and responded before he could voice it.

"It's true. You had everything—looks, smarts, athletic ability, a supportive family, a genuine personality. You had the whole package. But what made you so damned likeable was the fact you didn't seem to realize just how awesome you really were."

Ethan suddenly looked down at his plate and continued eating as if he'd just realized he'd said more than he'd intended.

They ate in silence after that...a silence that wasn't quite tense, but wasn't quite comfortable either.

And Will hated it.

He'd missed Ethan these past years—not just with the brutal physical ache of being given a taste of how good they could be as lovers, then having it stolen away, but he'd also missed their friendship. He'd missed the occasional visits, the phone calls and emails that had kept them connected for so long. He wanted that back so badly it hurt, but was afraid their relationship had been too badly damaged to ever allow it.

Ethan tried again as they took their plates to the sink to broach the subject of what had happened. Actually, all he said was, "Can we—" but Will cut him off again, knowing the full question was going to be, "Can we talk?"

Although Will knew they were going to have to do it eventually, he also knew it was going to be painful and messy

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and things were going to be said that were hurtful. And he'd always hated conflict, hated fighting with his parents or Jess or anyone for that matter. He and Ethan had never fought. Bickered a few times, but never had a really big ugly falling out about anything.

Until now. And no matter how much he wanted to avoid it, there were things he needed to say, hurts and accusations he needed to get off his chest. He'd been holding onto them so long they were like a sore, eating away at his soul bit by bit. He'd thought he'd conquered all this, thought he'd found peace and moved past it. But the reality was that the moment Ethan had walked back into his life, it was all there again, as scurrilous and vivid as it had been three years ago. He'd obviously managed to stash it away or cover it with some pretty lies to himself meant to hide it, but it hadn't gone away.

Still...his brain was in a fog of exhaustion, and the problem was compounded by what he knew was emotional overload. If he could get some sleep and face everything, face Ethan, fresh, he knew he'd have a better chance of saying what needed to be said without losing his cool and screwing everything up even more.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was pushing toward nine o'clock. Early even for a geek to go to bed, but all Will wanted to do was close his eyes.

Okay, if he were brutally honest with himself, there were other things he'd like to do, too. He glanced at Ethan, who was standing in front of the hearth staring contemplatively into the fire Will had started while dinner was cooking. The firelight

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cast warm highlights in his blond hair, and created a golden aura around him.

God...if only. Why can't I make this stop? How can I feel so betrayed by him, so mad at him, yet still want him so much?

"I have two bedrooms, but the second one's my office," he said, giving himself a mental shake to stop dreaming and deal with reality. "You can sleep on the couch tonight if you want."

Without waiting for an answer, he left the room and went to the linen closet at the end of the hall, where he dug out an extra pillow and pillow case and a couple of blankets.

"Here." He piled them at the end of the sofa. "The couch isn't too bad to sleep on, actually. And you're welcome to keep the fire going, if it's warmer. I know it can get cold in here because of all the big windows."

He flipped off the overhead light switch so the fireplace gave off the only light. "You already know the bathroom's down the hall."

Ethan had turned to face him. "Will...we need to talk."

Will held up his hand. "Yeah, I know, but not now."

"When? Stalling isn't going to make it go away." A determined expression tightened his face.

"I'm not stalling, and yes, I know it's not going to go away. But I'm tired. I've been up since four-thirty this morning. I just..." He shook his head. "I can't do this right now."

"Can't do it, or don't want to?"

"Both. We're going to do this on my terms this time, Ethan, so you're just going to have to wait. I'm going to bed."

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'Night."

Will went into his bedroom and shut the door, hoping like hell he might actually be able to close his eyes tonight. But his heart pounded and his stomach roiled, giving him a pretty good idea sleep wasn't going to be a kind mistress.

CHAPTER 7

It started raining around midnight.

Ethan, sitting on the floor in front of the fire, reclined with his head on the couch and watched through the floor-to-ceiling cathedral windows as jagged streaks of lightning shot across the sky. When thunder rumbled moments later, it vibrated through the cabin and into his body via the polished plank floor and thick, braided wool rug.

It was like viewing the universe's version of an IMAX movie, complete with surround sound. The show was awe-inspiring.

And Will's house was the perfect viewing spot. The cabin was a beautiful place, as were the surrounding mountains. And

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Will himself...Ethan had been startled to discover there wasn't a hint of geek left in him. He'd always been tall and buff, but now he looked tanned and outdoorsy also. Sun-bleached glints of golden-red highlights streaked his hair. The glasses were gone—either he'd begun wearing contacts or he'd had eye correction surgery. And he carried himself now with a strength and confidence that hadn't been fully mature in him the last time Ethan had seen him. All in all, he looked healthy and in his element up here. Will had done well for himself.

Pride filled Ethan. But it couldn't mask the melancholy that had consumed him all night. Knowing Will was so close, just a few steps down the hallway, yet as far away as Ethan had ever been from him was a bitter pill to swallow.

He hadn't known what would happen when he saw Will again. But having Will invite him in, feed him dinner, offer to let him sleep on his couch, then go off to bed without ever broaching a single word about what had happened the night of Jessie's wedding, or where Ethan had been since then hadn't been on his list of possibilities.

He'd expected anger, but didn't know what to do with this new, remote, in control Will. Nor was he sure how to approach him. Every time he'd tried, Will had cut him off.

They needed to talk. Ethan hated this god-awful distance between them. His insides were raw from it. He didn't expect Will to take him back with open arms, didn't dare hope he might ever feel Will's kiss again, or the press of his body against his own. He suspected he'd single-handedly destroyed

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that possibility forever. But what he did hope was that maybe, somehow, they might be able to salvage their friendship. A tiny flicker of it had shone through at dinner, but had been short-lived.

He swallowed hard, trying to hold the desolation at bay, but not having much luck.

The rain pounded the roof and windows like millions of miniature battering rams. In an odd way it was comforting, as was the furious lightshow that continued to wreak its vengeance across the sky. After so long in the suffocating darkness of a tiny cell, Ethan would never again take such things for granted. He loved the openness of Will's house. All the windows, the sky lights, the high, beamed ceiling. Even in the dark, with nothing but the firelight, he felt at ease.

Now if only he could feel as comfortable around the house's owner.

I'm so sorry, Will.

He heard the creak of the bedroom door, and his heart caught. Footsteps padded down the hall, another door shut, and a short while later the toilet flushed.

When the bathroom door opened, Ethan forced himself not to look. The sight of Will in the altogether or even in bedroom attire would just be too hard. He'd want more, and knowing he couldn't have it would be torture.

But the universe wasn't on his side. Will's footsteps carried him into the living room. Ethan sensed him, smelled him, on the other side of the couch.

"You haven't been to sleep."

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Will's voice was soft, almost sounding like the Will of old.

Ethan still didn't look, just continued to watch the storm rage outside. "No."

"Me neither." With a sigh, Will sank onto the couch, not too far from where Ethan's head rested, and stretched out his legs.

Now Ethan did look. He couldn't stop himself. Not with Will's large, muscular form so close and radiating heat.

Will was dressed in dark-colored sweats and a gray T-shirt. His feet were bare. His dark hair looked like he'd been running his hands through it.

Ethan closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath to savor his warm, musky smell, and wished like hell things could be different.

"Is the storm keeping you awake?"

"No. I like it," Ethan said, keeping his voice low to match Will's, not wanting to disturb this odd, peaceful moment.

"Can I ask you a question? And if I do, will you give me a straight answer?"

Was Will finally ready to talk? Worry, but also relief edged through Ethan. He wanted this, but dreaded it at the same time. "Yes."

Will took a deep breath. "Had you slept with other men before me?"

"Yes."

"Have you slept with women?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. "So...do you like men and women the

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same? I mean, in a sexual way?"

Ethan turned his head to look up at Will. "No. I prefer men." *I prefer you. God, I want you, Will.* He had to turn away. He was afraid he'd give away the intense jolt of need that had just ripped through him.

A long minute passed, and Ethan felt every second of it with the beat of his heart and the thrum in his groin.

"That morning...you asked me not to give up on you."

A knot settled in Ethan's gut. "I remember."

"I did. Give up on you."

Ethan's eyes closed as pain engulfed him. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I waited and hoped, but every day it got harder and hurt more. So I came here. I thought maybe being in a new place, having a different job, surrounding myself with different people would help. But it didn't. At least not for a long time. I even tried finding someone else, someone whose smell could wash away your scent in my mind, whose touch could erase yours."

"Did it work?" The words barely made it past his dry, aching throat.

"No. It was a disaster. For six months I tried. But in the end all I did was make him hate me. And I guess I kind of hated him, too. Because he wasn't you."

Will's hand smoothed over Ethan's head. The unexpected touch shocked the hell out of him and caused hot moisture to sting the back of his eyes.

Will sank onto the floor next to him. The look on his face

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was as tortured as Ethan felt.

"I want you out of my system, Ethan. I want you out, so I can get on with my life."

Oh, God...the pain was too much. His chest tightened. Blackness welled inside him.

And then Will was cupping his cheek. Lowering his mouth to his. The kiss was brief. Gentle. Barely a brush of lips.

"I want you out. And yet...I still just plain *want* you." Will's dark brows drew together and he shook his head. "Damn it. You disappeared for three fucking years. And now you've shown up on my doorstep. For years I imagined how I'd handle it if you did come back, and for a long time telling you to go to hell was pretty much at the top of my list. But now that you're here, I find myself torn."

Will kissed him again, this one more lingering.

Ethan ached with need, with sorrow, with pain.

"Part of me still wants to send you packing and tell you I don't ever want to see you again. That you had your shot and you blew it, and no excuse or apology or whatever you came here to offer is going to make it right."

Another kiss, harder this time, with Will's tongue flicking out to trace Ethan's lower lip. Before Ethan could respond, though, Will pulled away.

"Another part of me missed you, missed our friendship, and wants it back. But I don't know if that's possible. Because friendships are based on trust. And right now..." Will's face loomed closer. "Right now...I can't trust you."

The kiss this time was predatory, with Will's tongue

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pushing Ethan's lips apart and boldly lashing the inside of his mouth.

A hoarse moan escaped Ethan. He hated this, yet loved it at the same time, wanted more.

But then Will disengaged. Again. Leaving Ethan feeling bereft, a little bit used, but also horribly turned-on.

"And then there's the third part of me," Will murmured. He leaned in and licked a trail along Ethan's neck, eliciting another low moan from him. One of Will's hands slid up beneath Ethan's sweater to squeeze and tug at a nipple.

Ethan's breath came out in ragged gasps and he clutched at the rug on either side of him, wanting to touch Will, but afraid that wasn't part of the rules of whatever siege Will was laying.

"The third part of me," Will continued, his voice a low rumble against Ethan's ear, "is heartily pissed off at you for showing me how good sex could be between us, then taking off and depriving me of it for so goddamned long."

One of his arms curved beneath Ethan's neck to support it, while the one under his sweater slid lower, to pull at the snap on his jeans.

"That part," Will growled, "has been remembering for three long years how hot we were together, and all it wants is to fuck you hard...and deep...and thoroughly, until you can't remember ever being with anyone but me, ruining you for anyone but me."

Ethan's snap popped. His zipper slid down. And then Will's hand was burrowing beneath the band of his briefs and touching him.

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Ethan closed his eyes and shuddered with the intensity of his longing, the agony of his breaking heart.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” Will was still growling, his voice low and raspy and sexy as hell.

“Yes.”

“Open your eyes and look at me when you say it,” Will ordered. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

Ethan’s eyelids fluttered open to find Will’s intense green gaze just inches from his face.

“Yes. I want you to fuck me.” His voice was little more than a whisper.

“Make no mistake...I don’t trust you.”

“I know.” Ethan swallowed back the sick ache in his throat.

“But you still want to do this?”

“Yes. God, yes. Will...I’m sorry.”

“Save it. I don’t want to hear that right now. Right now, I want your clothes off, and I want you on your hands and knees on the couch.”

Holy fuck.

Surging ripples of the most powerful lust he’d ever experienced spread through Ethan. Never, in a hundred lifetimes, would he have guessed his quiet, low-key Will had this kind of sexual power.

“Do it. I’m waiting.”

Will released him and sat back.

Ethan rose to his feet, fighting to stay steady on them. Watching Will the whole time, he stripped off his sweater,

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shimmied his jeans and underwear down over his hips until they pooled at his ankles, then kicked them off. He was already barefoot.

He was heavily aware of Will's gaze on his nude body, and also all-too-aware of the ravages two-and-half years of captivity had inflicted on his physique. Will noticed. He saw it in Will's eyes. Yet, the hunger in them didn't dim. In fact...for a moment, Ethan thought he saw a flicker of something more. But it was short-lived, and Will hid it.

It was enough to give Ethan a tiny flare of hope, though.

He climbed onto the couch on his hands and knees.

"Put your head down, but leave your ass up."

Ethan did as he was told, feeling more exposed than he ever had in his life, but also more aroused.

"Stay there and don't move."

Will's words were clearly an order, and as Will disappeared back down the hall, Ethan didn't even considering disobeying. He squeezed his eyes closed and wondered what Will was going to do to him. His heart ached that it had to be this way, that Will had made it so clear he didn't trust Ethan and that this was fucking only. But at the same time, his body vibrated at the thought of Will touching him in any fashion.

He felt Will return even before he heard him, and his body trembled in anticipation.

It didn't have to wait long. Will's hands were on his ass, spreading his cheeks apart. And then a long, probing finger spread some kind of heated lubed around his opening and up inside him.

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Ethan's hips jerked at the contact, at the sensation of the firm finger and slippery heat being pushed into him. There was a pause, then it happened again.

He didn't know what the hell Will was using, but it tingled up in him, causing a warm buzz inside his ass.

The finger began to slide in and out of him...and then there were two. Will took his time, pressing and stretching the walls of Ethan's passage, occasionally rubbing his prostate, and then, adding a third finger, until all were moving in and out, in and out, in an increasingly rapid and deeper rhythm.

Low groans slid unbidden from Ethan's throat, and he couldn't stop himself from thrusting his ass back to meet the invading fingers each time they pumped into him.

But then they were gone.

"Please!" Ethan gasped in protest.

"Please what?"

He felt Will kneeling behind him.

"Please, don't stop."

"I'll touch you when I'm ready to touch you. It's not your choice. I'm fucking you, remember?"

Oh, God... Will was punishing him. That's what this was. He'd known it before they'd started, of course, and it didn't make Ethan want it any less or want to stop. But it hadn't hit home until just now what that meant. That for now, he was at Will's mercy.

That realization both terrified and thrilled him. Not terrified Will would hurt him, but terrified of what Will might make him feel, was already making him feel.

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The fingers were back, with more of the hot, slippery gel. But then something else replaced them. Something soft yet turgid, warm but not human. It stretched him open wide, then was slowly pushed up into him.

Ethan panted, trying to relax, but no one had ever done something like this to him before. Over the years, in all his sexual encounters, *he'd* been the one in charge. The one who made the rules, who used the toys on others, who did the fucking. Allowing someone to do the same to him required an amount of trust he'd never been willing to give anyone. It meant allowing someone to put him in a vulnerable position, and after living with his dad, that was something he'd learned long ago never to do.

Never turn your back. It was a rule he'd lived by at home until he was eighteen and able to escape, and one that had kept him alive in his job.

But this is Will. It's okay...because it's Will.

"I'm not going to hurt you. You know that, don't you?" Will's voice still held that I'm-in-charge tone, but it was gentle, soothing in a weird way. As if Will had known what he was thinking.

Ethan nodded, having trouble forming words.

"Do you trust me?"

Another nod.

"Even though I don't trust you?"

A twinge of pain gripped his heart. "Yes."

Will slid the dildo almost out of him, then eased it back in again, a little deeper this time.

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Ethan grunted and his body trembled.

“Relax. Accept it.”

Ethan dragged in a deep breath, let it out, then again.

Will made another slow out and in stroke with it, pushing it deeper yet.

“Unhh...Jesus.”

Relentless, Will continued until he'd buried it to the hilt. And then he built a steady, thrusting, sensuous rhythm that Ethan thought might drive him mad with wanting. What he wanted was to feel Will's hands on him, stroking him, fondling his balls and painful, throbbing cock. Will seemed determined to avoid those things, though, using the toy as Ethan's sole source of stimulation, bringing Ethan close to the edge, but without giving him the real, warm contact he needed to go over it.

Desperate for relief, Ethan's fingers instinctively moved up to curl around his prick. If Will wouldn't touch him, then, while his own hand would be second best, it was still better than no contact at all.

All motion behind him stopped and he was suddenly empty. “I didn't say you could touch yourself,” Will growled. “Put your hand down.”

Ethan's body shook with frustration, with agonizing need. But he lowered his hand, surprised at how willing he was to give in to Will.

“You get no relief until I say so. You don't come until I let you. Are we clear?”

The authority in Will's words galvanized him, making him

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harder, making him ache more than ever.

My God. Shock surged through him. He liked this. Having Will dominate him in this way turned him on.

He would never have thought he'd find any kind of pleasure in being in a position of utter submission like this. Even when he'd been captured, taunted, tortured, and had his mind messed with in horrible ways, he'd never completely given up his control. They'd tried to make him, but none of them ever had succeeded in breaching that last little wall of defense he kept up to protect the core of him.

But Will, in his quiet, insistent, and even now, gentle manner, had pushed past that barrier and embedded himself in the depths of Ethan's soul. And what shocked Ethan the most was that instead of fighting it, he liked the way letting Will do this to him made him feel. He not only liked it, it aroused him and fulfilled him in a strangely compelling way.

God...what does that mean?

It means you trust Will even more than you ever imagined.

"Are we clear?" Will repeated, his voice harder.

"Yes, clear," he managed to get out in a strangled moan.

Will reinserted the phallus and resumed fucking Ethan with it, bringing him up to the edge with fast, hard movements, then easing off, going slowly, sometimes stopping completely, until Ethan was writhing and pleading for him to start again.

But the constant up and down rollercoaster of tension began to take its toll. He felt wrung-out, weak, yet still painfully aroused to the point he began to beg Will to please,

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please let him come, knowing his pleas would fall on deaf ears—Will had made it clear he had his own agenda and Ethan wasn't allowed to ask for anything—but unable to stop the desperate words.

“Do you know why I'm doing this?” Will's voice was deep and hoarse.

“Yes.” His voice shook almost as much as his body did, and he struggled to hold back a sob. “Because I left and didn't come back like I said I would.”

“And why else?”

“Because I made a promise and didn't keep it. Because I hurt you. God, that was the last thing I ever wanted to do, Will.” He knew he was babbling, but once the flow of words started, he couldn't seem to stop them. “I didn't stay away on purpose. I love you. I love you so damned much, I would have done anything for you. I still would.” The sob he'd been trying to hold off, hit him, wracked through him.

All motion behind Ethan had ceased at some point during his speech. He felt Will shudder. And then, in a tortured voice, heard him say, “Christ.” He pulled the object out of Ethan and tossed it aside.

Ethan cried out at the sudden withdrawal. But then Will's big, warm hands were on his ass, and something else was sliding into him...something hot, and sleek, and very real.

“Ethan...” It was a sigh of raw need and even rawer emotion. “Jesus, Eth...”

Will's arms wrapped around him from behind, then pulled him up, so he was no longer bent forward, but was instead

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resting with his back against Will's bare chest. The heat was incredible, and Will's cock filled him like nothing else ever could. Ethan closed his eyes and let all his love and desire for this man wash through him.

Will's gentle hands roamed Ethan's chest, then slid down and cupped his cock and balls. Will's shaft slid partway out of his ass, then back in again in a slow, sweet movement that made Ethan's heart ache.

"Damn, you're hot. It's like being wrapped in an inferno," Will breathed. "And you're so fucking beautiful." He reached up with one hand and pulled Ethan's head back against his shoulder, then lowered his mouth to it in a hungry, dizzying kiss that left Ethan reeling. He reached an arm up to curl around Will's neck, and kissed back.

Will fucked him slowly and deeply, all the while murmuring sex words and soft endearments that set fire to Ethan's veins and curled around his heart. His cock was stroked and pulled, his balls massaged, and always Will's long, thick length plunged in and out, filling him, claiming him.

"Come now." Will's soft, ragged words slid through him like warm silk. "Come with me."

Ethan's release hit him, wringing him inside out, feeling like it was pulling every drop of liquid in his body down into his balls, then releasing it like white-hot fire out his pulsing shaft. He spilled all over Will's hand, felt the warm, sticky fluid spread over his belly and trickle down his groin.

And when Will climaxed, he felt that, too, spasming deep

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inside him.

They shook and clung together long after their orgasms had passed. But eventually Ethan's legs gave out.

Will pulled out of him, lay back on the couch and tugged Ethan down into his arms so Ethan was half-lying across him. Will covered them both with one of the blankets he'd brought in earlier, then brushed the hair out of Ethan's eyes and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Sleep now," he murmured. "God knows you deserve it."

Too drained and exhausted to argue, Ethan did.

CHAPTER 8

Ethan awoke to the feel of warm sunshine streaming in on him. He dragged a hand through his hair, rubbed his eyes, and looked at his watch. *Jesus*. Nearly eleven. He'd been out for almost nine hours. He hadn't slept that long in one stretch since he'd been back in the States.

He still lay on the couch, covered with a blanket. With the house's open floor plan, he could see into the kitchen from where he lay, and Will was nowhere in sight.

Damn, he must have been really out of it not to have felt Will get up. He wondered what time that had been.

But more importantly, after last night, what would Will's demeanor be today? Would he be facing the angry, demanding

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Will? Or the one who in the end had kissed him, held him close, and made love to him with such tender passion it had nearly ripped his heart from his chest?

Heat and a confusing mix of emotions shot through him as memories of last night played through his mind. There was still so much to be said and explained between them, but he was uncertain how Will would react to him this morning.

Ethan struggled to a sitting position, the muscles in his body screaming in protest at the movement.

The fire had burned out, probably hours ago, but with the sun pouring through the huge windows and the skylights, the house was comfortable. He pushed off the blanket and sat on the edge of the couch, listening.

Silence pressed in on him from all around...and in that instant, he knew he was alone. The realization caused a knot the size of a boulder to settle in his stomach.

Maybe Will went back to his bed and he's still asleep?

Ethan knew it was wishful thinking—and hated the idea Will wouldn't have stayed with him, instead returning to his own bed alone—but he rose, winced as his body protested some more, aching in too many places to count, and wrapped the blanket around his hips.

He padded down the hall to Will's bedroom. The door was closed, so he knocked lightly, then, when he received no response, harder. The silence was deafening. He pushed open the door to find the massive, pine, four-poster bed made but rumpled at the end as if Will had sat there, maybe to put on his shoes. No Will himself, though.

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Will's home office proved empty as well.

The bathroom was unoccupied, but had a slight humid feel to it, and the towel on the rack was faintly damp. Ethan guess it had been at least a couple of hours since it had been used.

With a sinking heart, he went to the foyer and looked out the window next to the front door. The blue Dodge truck was gone. Ethan's Corvette sat alone in the driveway.

It was Saturday. He couldn't imagine Will working on a weekend, but he didn't have any idea what kind of hours or days he kept. It hit him hard that he didn't know this new Will very well at all.

Will...damn it, where are you?

Aching with loneliness, he returned to the living room and pulled on his jeans, which had been folded and placed on the ottoman nearby, along with his briefs and sweater. Will had taken the time to fold Ethan's clothes and make his own bed, but hadn't bothered to leave a hint as to where he'd gone or when he'd be back? The reality of that bothered him more than he wanted to admit. There was a...finality to it. As if, when he got up, Will had carried out his usual routine, straightening up, showering, then gone on about his business like Ethan didn't exist.

Even the sun-flooded day and the sight of the breathtaking mountain scenery out the windows couldn't rouse Ethan from his despondence.

He shuffled into the kitchen. The coffee maker sat on the counter, but hadn't been used today. He filled it with water, discovered already ground beans in the refrigerator, added

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them to the filter, and pressed the switch.

It wasn't until he turned to find a coffee mug that he saw the note, propped up against the mug rack where he couldn't miss it. It had been written on a half-sheet of yellow legal pad paper in Will's tidy, flowing handwriting.

He picked it up with a lump in his throat.

*I'm sorry. I can't stay and go through
watching you leave again.*

Chest crushing beneath the iron bands that squeezed without mercy, Ethan clutched the note in one hand and the edge of the counter in the other.

Will had made it clear last night he didn't trust him. And in the harsh light of day...nothing had changed.

He thought Ethan was going to take off again. So this time he'd left first.

* * *

Dragging with exhaustion and heartache, Will climbed behind the wheel of his truck and started the engine and the heater, then sat, waiting for the heat to kick in full-force. For all the sun today, it felt more like February than April. The storm last night had moved out, but left a blustery chill in the air up here at altitude.

He'd forgotten to bring a pair of gloves and his hands had about gone numb as he'd hiked up near timberline to check on the population of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep he'd been

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monitoring. It had been a severe winter and some of last year's lambs hadn't made it, so with lambing season due to begin over the next few weeks, he felt compelled to keep close tabs on them.

The heater was finally pouring out copious amounts of hot air now, and Will held his hands up to the vents, soaking up as much as possible.

With a thrum of sadness, he wondered if Ethan was gone yet. Probably. He couldn't imagine he'd stick around after the way Will had treated him last night.

Will squeezed his eyes closed and let the guilt wash over him.

What in hell had he been thinking?

He hadn't. He hadn't been thinking at all. Only feeling. Reacting. And it wasn't something he was proud of. Yeah, he'd been pissed and hurt for a long time by Ethan's desertion, and shocked as hell to find Ethan on his doorstep last night. And, yeah, in spite of all that, he'd also been horny and unable to keep his dick out of the equation. But none of that, *none of it*, excused his behavior.

Jesus. He'd intentionally tried to punish Ethan for his presumed crimes, using control and sex as a way to bring him to his knees.

He winced at that, remembering how Ethan had quite literally spent the night on his knees.

But what pissed him off at himself most was that even now, today, whenever he remembered what had happened, he was consumed with guilt, but he also grew hard thinking about

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it.

What the hell was wrong with him? What kind of a pervert had he turned into? And the worst part of it was, that in his heart, he'd known the minute he saw Ethan up close that something had happened to him. The man who'd come back into his life yesterday was not the same man who'd left three years ago. Will had never seen Ethan so haunted. Not even when his dad would go off on one of his week-long drinking binges and beat the hell out of Eth had Will ever seen him brought down so low.

So, with every breath he took, Will's guilt magnified. It was bad enough he'd done what he'd done at all. But that he did it knowing full-well Ethan was already suffering...well, he couldn't think of anything much more despicable than that.

He'd hated writing that note this morning. How could he possibly express to Ethan how sorry he was, how if he could take it all back, he would? How he'd do anything to convince him to stay, so they could really talk, and so he could find out what was tormenting Ethan, then help make it better?

There was no way to say all those things. Not in a note. And not to Ethan's face because Will had suspected that when Ethan woke up this morning, his first and only reaction was going to be to get as far the hell away from Will as possible. He wasn't going to want to hear anything Will had to say. And Will didn't blame him.

But he also couldn't stand there and watch Ethan leave again either. It had been bad enough the first time, being the one left behind. Especially when he'd finally been able to

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admit he was at fault for Ethan's leaving and not coming back. He couldn't bear to go through that again. And he felt guilty for that, too. Hell, this morning he'd done his damndest to be as quiet as possible so he could get out of the house without waking Ethan and avoid having to face him. How low was that?

And so he'd tried to keep the note as simple as possible. He'd apologized and just hoped one day Ethan could forgive him for what he'd done.

He checked his watch and groaned. Almost five o'clock. He was supposed to be at Maria's house for dinner in an hour.

The thought of pasting a smile on his face and making nice with a guy he didn't even want to meet made him almost ill.

The thought of going home to an empty house, where memories of Ethan lingered, taunting him with what he wanted but couldn't have because of his own damned stupidity were worse.

God...what am I going to do? What the hell am I going to do?

He dropped his head onto the steering wheel and closed his eyes. All the conflicting emotion was tearing him apart.

I'm so lost.

Out of years of habit, he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out his cell phone, and punched in the number he knew by heart.

It only rang twice before it was picked up.

"This is Dr. Garcia."

"Jess..."

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“Will? My God, are you all right? You don’t sound good.”

“I...no. Is this a bad time?”

“Not at all. I was getting ready for work. I have a shift at the hospital tonight, but I don’t have to be there for a while yet. Talk to me. Did Ethan find you?”

Even just hearing the sound of Ethan’s name sent another jolt of confusing and powerful emotion through Will. “Yeah.”

“What happened?” Her voice was gentle. “Did you two talk everything out?”

“Not exactly. I...” He sucked in a pained breath. “I said and did some things last night, to Ethan, that were really awful.”

Silence came from across the line and he knew Jess was trying to sort out what he meant by that.

“I ran him off,” he clarified for her. “I treated him like shit and I’m sure he’s long gone by now.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“Christ, don’t go all Dr. Therapy on me.”

“I’m not, Will. I’m serious. How do you feel about whatever it was that happened?”

“Torn apart. Guilty. Sick to my stomach. That pretty much sums it up.”

“And you say he’s left already?”

“I don’t know. I have to assume so. I left the house early this morning, while he was still asleep. But after...well, after last night he had about a thousand and one reasons to go and pretty much nil to stay.”

“Do you still love him?”

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Will scrubbed a hand over his face and fought off the sudden dampness that clouded his gaze. Leave it to Jess to get to the heart of the matter. “Yes. I still love him.”

“Does he love you?”

“After last night—”

“I’m not talking about whatever it was that happened last night. Let’s put that aside for the moment. Does he love you? Not just as a friend, but in the same way you love him?”

The memory of Ethan’s admission and how it had come about tore through Will’s heart. “Yeah. But after what I did...”

“Will, if you love him and he loves you, then that’s all that matters. Everything else between you can be worked out.”

“You make it sounds so easy.”

“No, it may not be easy. But it’ll be right.”

Could it really be that simple?

“If he’s gone already,” Jess said, “then go after him and give him a reason to come home.”

Give him a reason to come home.

“How do you always know the right thing to say?”

“I don’t. But I do know you. And I know Ethan. And I know a good thing when I see it. A *real* thing that’s worth fighting for.”

Will closed his eyes and for the first time in almost twenty-four hours—for the first time in almost three years—he thought maybe he was beginning to understand.

“Thank you. Love you, Jess.”

“I love you, too, big brother.” He heard a smile in her

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voice.

“I’ve gotta go. I have some place I need to be.”

“Yeah, me, too. Call me, okay? Let me know what happens.”

“I will.”

Will folded his phone and tucked it back into his pocket, then looked at his watch again.

Give him a reason to come home.

Holding onto that thought, he put the truck in gear and headed down the narrow, rutted mountain road.

CHAPTER 9

The last thing Will had expected to see was Ethan's Vette still sitting in front of his house when he drove up.

His heart began to pound much as it had yesterday when he'd seen it from this same angle, though it was earlier in the evening this time, so faint shafts of evening sunlight filtered through the pines.

Why hadn't Ethan left?

But then a sobering thought hit him. What if something had happened to him? He'd already seemed fragile...what if the events of last night had put him over the edge somehow, physically or emotionally?

You're overreacting.

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Yeah, probably. But why the hell hadn't he asked Ethan yesterday what was going on and why he was so pale and thin? How could he have been so fricking selfish, so fixated on his own grievances that he couldn't even ask? What the hell kind of friend was he? What the hell kind of lover?

Not able to completely control his fears, he parked the truck and bounded up the porch steps two at a time. By the time he opened the front door, his heart was in his throat.

It swelled to enormous size when a quick glance around didn't give up Ethan's location.

Will looked in both bedrooms, the bathroom. Nothing.

Oh, Christ.

Trying to stay calm, he thought of possibilities. Maybe he'd gone for a walk.

Will crossed the kitchen and went out the sliding glass door onto the deck that extended across the back of the house. And that's where he found him.

Ethan sat on the top step of the short flight that led down into the backyard. One elbow was propped on his knee, his chin rested in his upturned palm, and he stared off into the trees as if he were far-gone in thought. Dressed in faded blue jeans, wearing Will's heavy fisherman's knit sweater, with the pale, cool evening sunlight glinting off his fair hair and the light breeze stirring the long strands, he looked both sexy as hell and heart-wrenchingly beautiful.

Ethan suddenly dropped his arm and sat up straight...and Will knew he'd become aware of him standing there. His head turned. For long moments they were frozen in time, looking at

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each other. Ethan eyes churned with emotion.

That was the impetus Will needed to move. It was time to get everything out in the open so they could figure out where the hell they were going to go from here.

He walked across the deck, his hiking boots sounding ominously loud in the quiet evening, and sank onto the step next to Ethan.

"I thought for sure you'd be gone," he said softly, trying to keep his voice steady and not overwhelm Ethan with his immense relief that he was still here.

Ethan winced, then sighed. "I know that's what you thought, and you have every right not to trust me. Every right to think I'd stir things up between us, hurt you again, then take off."

Shocked, Will sat up straighter. "No...Eth, that's not what I meant at all. It wasn't a matter of trust...I do trust you. I said things out of anger last night that I never meant. But, my God, after what I did to you, you had every reason not to trust *me*, every reason to leave. I deserved for you to leave."

Ethan's eyebrows rose, then drew together. "I'm not following you..."

"I was a complete asshole last night." Will dragged a hand through his hair. "Christ, I can barely stand myself. I don't know how you can sit here and even look at me right now."

"What the hell are you talking about? You weren't an asshole. Everything you said was the truth."

"No, it wasn't." Anger surged in Will. Not at Ethan...at himself. "All that time after you left it was so easy to be pissed

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at you, to wrap myself in this mantle of the betrayed friend and lover, act like you'd done me so horribly wrong, but the truth is...it was all a big fucking cover. Being angry, and venting my hurt and frustration on you, was easier than having to admit it was my fault. I know I'm the one who ran you off."

Ethan's mouth fell open. "Will you didn't run me off. Why the hell would you even think such a thing?"

"Because I'm the one who initiated that first kiss. The one who pressured you to have sex. And..." He dragged in a shaky breath. "...that night, I told you I loved you."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Nothing like laying it on so thick you'd need a shovel to get out from under it. I know you weren't looking for a relationship, and you sure as hell weren't looking for one with me since you'd spent thirteen years thinking I was straight. But I was like some naïve schoolboy, wanting instant happily-ever-after because it's what I'd been dreaming about for so long. So I just piled on the sex and a bunch of heavy emotion, suffocating you with it all, then expected you to fall into line with my dreams. Who the hell wouldn't run from something like that?"

"For such a smart guy, sometimes you can be so damned thick."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all...what makes you think I wasn't capable of handling everything you believe you 'piled on' me? Second, what makes you think I hadn't always wanted the same things you did?" He paused and raised an eyebrow in that sexy way Will loved so much.

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“And third, I didn’t leave that next morning because you scared me off. I left because I had to go do my job. I didn’t lie to you about that. And if you think for even a second I wouldn’t have stayed if I could, then you’re even dumber than I’m already thinking you are.”

“Okay. Well, maybe you did have to leave because of your work, but...you quit coming back.” The last words were spoken softly. “You quit calling, quit emailing, and when I finally sucked up my pride a few months later and tried to reach you, I got a message saying your home phone had been disconnected. I figured you were making it pretty clear I’d crossed one line too many, and things were over between us.”

Ethan leaned forward, buried his face in his hands, then rubbed his eyes. He sighed, and it was such a desolate sound it made Will’s heart clench.

Finally, he turned to look up at Will. “I need to talk to you about that. About why I couldn’t call, couldn’t see you. But the first thing you have to know is that my not returning sooner was *not* your fault, Will. When I left you that morning, I wasn’t just making up lies to pacify you. I had every intention of calling you when my plane landed, and coming back to Albuquerque the first chance I got. Things just didn’t...” His voice caught. “Things didn’t work out as I’d planned. Something happened that...” Another pause, as if he were struggling to hang onto some thin thread of control.

The sight of Ethan in such obvious distress was almost more than Will could take. He’d never seen him like this before. Ethan had always been the outgoing charmer, the one

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to find a way to make someone else laugh when they were down, not be down himself. The one who breezed his way through life with his good looks, cleverness and nimble wit.

Will had always known part of that was a façade created to keep the world from seeing into Ethan's dismal home life and background. Hell, Ethan had never even confided in *him* about his dad's drinking problem and the fact the bastard regularly used his son as a punching bag. Will had figured it out on his own and then made damn sure Ethan knew he could stay at his house any time. But even when things were at their worst in his home life, Will had never seen him this tormented.

Oh, God...why didn't I talk to him about this last night instead of doing what I did?

Will reached out and wrapped his fingers through his friend's. Ethan startled, as if having Will touch him was the last thing he'd been expecting. He looked up, met Will's gaze, then closed his eyes again briefly and squeezed Will's hand almost as if in thanks.

"I've never seen you like this. Talk to me, Eth. Tell me what happened."

Ethan sighed again. Then nodded.

"Do you want to go inside where it's warmer? It's getting pretty damn cold out here."

"Yeah. Yeah, that'd be good."

They moved into the house, and Will quickly stripped off his coat and built a fire. Ethan pulled off Will's sweater he'd been wearing, exposing a long-sleeved black T-shirt beneath it. Then he went in the kitchen and made coffee.

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A few minutes later, Will fed a large log onto the fire, and turned to take the mug Ethan handed him. Ethan sat on the floor where he'd been last night when Will had found him awake, and Will sat on the raised hearth, sensing Ethan wanted space right now. He hoped it wasn't because he thought Will would be too much of an asshole to listen without criticizing to whatever he had to say. Or maybe it was just because Ethan was so lost in whatever was troubling him he wasn't aware how desperately Will wanted to touch him, hold him, and make it okay.

Ethan sat with his knees raised, feet slightly apart, cradling his coffee mug in both hands, staring past Will into the fire. "Before I left, you said my life was a gray area for you...that I never shared details with you about what I did, or where I traveled."

His gaze slid over to meet Will's. "There was a reason for that, Will. I didn't tell you about those things because I couldn't. Because as far as you knew I was a buyer for an IT company and I traveled a lot because of it, end of story. But that wasn't the end of the story. That wasn't the story at all, in fact."

"I don't understand."

Ethan took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling for moment, before shifting his eyes back to Will. "What I'm about to tell you, I shouldn't be telling you at all. In fact, I'm forbidden to tell you, or anyone. But I can't keep pretending with you. Keeping secrets from you almost destroyed our friendship...almost destroyed..." He swallowed hard. "You

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can't tell anybody any of this, okay? Not even Jess. I'd trust you with my life, Will, and by telling you this...I pretty much am."

Will's heart stuttered under Ethan's intense stare. What the hell was going on? He didn't—couldn't—question the man's sincerity. He saw in Ethan's eyes that he'd meant every word he'd just said.

"You have my word."

Ethan set aside his coffee mug, stretched his legs out in front of him, and rubbed his eyes again.

"When I was a senior in college I was recruited by a company... I told you it was the IT company, but that was just a cover. I was recruited by the government to work in intelligence. They sent me to school, trained me, and put me out in the field to...well...to gather information."

Will's stuttering heart suddenly went mad, pounding like a brass drum inside his chest. "Like...a spy?"

Ethan nodded. "That's why I was gone so much, and why I wasn't in touch too often. When you're undercover like that, you have to put everything in your real life away and lock it up and pretend it doesn't exist. You have to because if you don't, it can get you killed. You're there for one reason and one reason only—to get the information you've been sent to get. And you do that using whatever methods you have to."

He gave Will a pointed look that made Will's skin crawl—a look that was as foreign to him as Ethan's haunted expression earlier, except this one showed him a hint of a much harder, darker Ethan.

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My God. What all had Ethan been hiding behind the mask he'd always worn?

Ethan rose to his feet and paced over to the window, where he stood, his arms crossed over his chest, staring out into the darkening night.

"When I left that morning after Jessie's wedding, I was supposed to have had a chance to go home to my place, then report for my assignment. That's why I said I'd call you when I landed. I'd thought I'd have a couple of hours to do that. But during the flight, I got a secured call saying I had to go straight to a meeting."

He turned to face Will. "Understand, Will, that when you go into a highly secured government area, there's no causal contact with the outside world. Personal cell phones are left at the door. No emails can be sent out or in. Only calls and communications that are going to other equally secured locations."

Will listened, fascinated by what he was revealing but also still numb with shock.

"From that meeting, I went straight to catch a military flight out of the country. But that assignment..." He paused, and to Will it looked like he was struggling to find the right words, like he was unsure how much detail he should or could share.

"The assignment didn't go the way it had been planned. Things went...bad." Ethan turned back to the window again, and his voice tightened. "I was captured."

The bottom dropped out of Will's stomach. Maybe he'd

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watched too many movies or read too many intrigue thrillers, but “captured” presented him with way too many images of things he didn’t even want to think about in relation to Ethan.

“What does that mean? What happens when someone doing your job is captured?”

“It can mean different things, depending on the situation and the country an agent is in. I...I was in a place where they deal with spies in a less civilized way. And the group that held me wasn’t sanctioned by their government. They were a law unto themselves, so...it wasn’t good. They suspected I was a spy, and they wanted to know things. Things I couldn’t tell them, but...that didn’t stop them from trying to make me...” His voice tapered off and Will felt Ethan’s pain rippling over him.

“Oh, God,” Will breathed. *Torture. He’s talking about torture.*

It took all his control not to go to Ethan then. But he didn’t. Because Ethan’s body language said he wanted to keep his distance. So Will watched and hurt along with him.

“Couldn’t our government... I’m out of my element here, Eth, so this might sound like a stupid question, but couldn’t our government get you out?”

“They did. Eventually. They made a trade for me.”

“How long was ‘eventually’?”

Ethan faced him then, his hands tucked into the back pockets of his jeans, his shoulders slumped. “Six weeks ago.”

“Six wee— Christ! They left you there all that time?”

Ethan nodded. “Everyone who goes into the business

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knows there are risks. And we all know there are going to be times and places where we're truly on our own."

Will stood. He had to. His heart was pounding, his chest ached, he couldn't breathe. He paced to the kitchen, back to the fireplace, dragged a hand through his hair. "Fuck! How the fuck could they do that?" He swung around to face Ethan, who was watching him with a look somewhere between sympathy, like he felt bad Will was taking this so hard, and a lost soul.

Once again Will wanted to go to him, wrap his arms around him, and hold him close. But he wasn't sure it was wanted. Was afraid, in some way, he might make things worse. So they looked at each other from opposite ends of the room.

Give me a sign, Ethan. Give me a sign you want me, and I'll do anything for you. Anything to take away the pain.

"Are you okay? I mean, did they hurt you in any permanent ways?"

"No, nothing permanent. I was in the hospital for a while, but I'm okay."

No, you're not. Will's heart ached. They may not have left permanent physical damage, but he suspected the emotional scars would always be there.

Oh, Ethan...

"How...how did you manage? How do you get through something like that?" he asked, his voice soft, and thick with unshed emotion.

Ethan's eyes closed. When they opened, they glistened with moisture, and focused on Will. "You," he whispered.

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“And how I needed to see you again so I could tell you how much I love you. You’re what got me through, Will.”

The emotional storm that had been building inside Will broke. He crossed the room and then they were in each other’s arms, clinging, kissing as if it could somehow merge them into one whole and they’d never have to let go of each other.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Will breathed. “I love you, too, and I don’t want you to hurt anymore, Eth. Please tell me what I can do, how I can slay some of these demons for you.”

Ethan’s whisper brushed across his lips. “Take me to bed.”

Heat shot straight through Will and settled in his groin. He pulled away enough so he could look into Ethan’s eyes. What he saw there was a raw need that almost knocked him on his ass.

But he had to ask. Had to know for certain because he didn’t want to make any more mistakes, didn’t want to do anything to lose Ethan. He loved him too damned much. “Are you sure? After everything?”

“Because of everything. Take me to bed, Will. Make love to me. Remind me again how good it is to be alive and here with you and not in some lonely, black hell hole.”

CHAPTER 10

Will led him into the bedroom, pulled down the covers on the big bed, then turned to kiss him. It was a slow, sensual kiss, with lots of tongue, and Ethan was reminded all over again just what an amazing kisser Will was. It was memories like this that had gotten him through the long, bleak time they'd been apart.

It had grown dark while they'd talked. But the bedroom, like the rest of the rest of the house, had a large window that looked out across the back of the property. No blinds or curtains impeded the view, allowing the silver glow from the rising moon to offer natural light.

Will's hands slid through Ethan's hair, stroking it, then

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moved down to cradle his neck. His thumbs brushed gentle circles along Ethan's jaw, while his fingertips teased against the nape of his neck, playing with strands of hair there.

"Do you know how much I love you?" Will whispered against his lips.

The words sent warm ripples through Ethan. "Yes."

"Good. But just in case you ever have doubts or you ever wonder, I'm going to do everything in my power to show you every single day. I've been an ass, Eth, and I don't want to lose you."

Ethan closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Will's lips roamed down his neck, settling just below his ear in the sensitive spot that made his toes curl.

"I don't want to lose you either," he whispered. "I was so afraid I would. There've been so many secrets. So many things I've wanted to tell you and couldn't. I don't want that anymore. I just want to be with you, out in the open. No more pretending to be someone or something else."

Will eased his hands up beneath Ethan's shirt. They were warm and gentle and the sensation of them smoothing up his sides, over the planes of his chest, down his abs was so damned erotic it made Ethan's skin quiver in pleasure.

"Will you stay here? Can you? Or do you have to go back to D.C.?"

He heard Will's pain in the question because Will didn't want him to leave, but also heard the underlying support that said even if he did have to go, Will would be here for him when he returned.

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His heart filled full at how damned lucky he was to have this man.

"I'm not going back. My days in intelligence are done, by my own choice. My heart's here. It always has been."

Will's mouth returned to his, and Ethan felt Will's joy in the kiss. He let his own wash through him and into their connection as well.

The kiss grew more impassioned, deeper, their hands more insistent. Their shoes and shirts disappeared. Soft huffs of breath filled otherwise silent air.

Ethan took a step back and unbuckled Will's belt, then unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. He sank to his knees on the floor and eased the denim and sexy-as-hell boxer briefs down Will's legs.

Will's cock, long and thick and already erect stood out proudly from his groin. The sight of it made Ethan's mouth water.

Will rested a hand on his head. "Ethan..." His voice sounded pained. "You don't have to be on your knees for me."

Ethan looked up at him and saw the genuine contrition in his eyes, but also didn't miss the barely restrained passion simmering in them as well. Will felt guilty for last night, but he wanted this as badly as Ethan wanted to give it.

"I want to do this for you. I want to suck you off."

"Then let's lie down so you don't—"

"No, I want to do it just like this. I know you feel bad about last night, but there's nothing for you to feel bad about."

Will's chest rose and fell with a shaking breath. "I need

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you to know I didn't plan what happened. I was just so wound up and upset, and I'd been lying in bed torn between wanting to have it out with you, and wanting to touch you, kiss you, make love with you. Then when I went out there and saw you were still up, it just kind of all boiled up to a head."

"It's okay, Will."

"No, it's not. I wanted to hurt you, let you know you couldn't take me for granted anymore. Then, when I saw you brought to the point I brought you to, and you said what you did...the reality of what I was doing hit home and I couldn't stand causing you any more pain."

"You didn't hurt me. I knew you were upset and angry, and I wanted to give in to you because I wanted you to see that I was willing to do whatever I needed to to earn back your trust."

"You didn't have to earn back my trust. I told you...I said that out of anger. God, Ethan, don't ever doubt that I trust you."

Ethan stood and brushed a hand against Will's stubble-roughened cheek. "Will, you have to quit beating yourself up over this. But the only way that's going to happen is if we're really honest with ourselves and each other. There's some stuff we need to get out in the open here, okay?"

Will's eyebrows drew together, but he nodded.

"Last night was the first time I've ever let anyone do to me the things you did. It was the first time I'd even let anyone fuck me. I've always been a top in bed."

"Oh, Christ." Will looked stricken. "I was the first?" He

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buried his face in his hands and groaned. “My God, I was the first and I *forced* you.”

“You didn’t force me to do anything. If I hadn’t wanted it, I wouldn’t have done it. And I know you well enough to know you wouldn’t have tried to make me against my will. It was completely consensual.”

“But that doesn’t mean you have anything else to prove to me, Ethan. Hell, you didn’t have anything to prove last night. You don’t need to keep getting on your knees for me.”

“I know I don’t have to, but here’s the thing. Even though I’d never trusted anyone to do that before, I did trust you. So completely that even though I kept telling myself I shouldn’t like it, I did. The truth is...I loved giving you that control over me.”

There was a long moment where Will dragged in deep breaths.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“After everything that’s happened to you, though... After your dad’s beatings— Don’t look so surprised. I always knew what he did. Why do you think I convinced you to stay at my house so often? But it’s not just your dad. After what you’ve been through these past three years...Ethan, how could you have liked submitting to me?”

“I told you...because I trust you. And because, in spite of the guilt you’ve been feeling, I think down deep inside, you got off on it as much as I did. I think there’s a part of you that very much liked seeing me on my knees. And that just makes

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me like it even better.”

Will looked shaken, but he didn’t deny anything. And that told Ethan a lot.

“If you and I both like something, there’s no reason for us not to do it. I’ll always be honest with you if something comes up that makes me uncomfortable. I expect you to do the same. But you can’t keep feeling guilty over something we both enjoyed.”

Will’s chest rose and fell, and Ethan noticed Will’s cock was doing the same, obviously not put off by the conversation.

“Look, I’ll tell you up front, I don’t think I could ever get into a full-fledged D/s lifestyle—the leather and flogging and bondage stuff.” He dragged in a deep breath. “That would be hard for me. Too many bad memories there. But give myself up to your care in the bedroom, bottom for you? God, yes.”

Will’s gaze flared with heat. But, as always, it was tempered with a gentleness that touched Ethan deep down inside.

“I love you,” Will said in a throaty rasp.

“I know.” Ethan pulled his face close and kissed him. Then he smiled. “May I suck your cock now?”

A surprised huff of breath escaped Will. But then a soft smile curved his lips also. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Me, too.”

He returned to his knees and breathed in Will’s scent, feeling his own cock harden against the seam of his jeans at the spicy, musky aroma. Then he leaned forward and slid his tongue over Will’s cockhead, savoring his flavor. “You taste

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so damn good.”

Will hissed in a sharp breath above him.

Ethan took his time, exploring Will’s beautiful prick with his tongue and fingertips. He teased the tip of his tongue around and under the sensitive ridge of the crown and rubbed Will’s balls, feeling them tighten in response. Then he made long, wet strokes along the shaft itself, exploring every nook and cranny, every vein, until Will gave a soft moan and his fingers slid into Ethan’s hair.

Ethan wrapped his hand around the wet, slippery cock, loving how it felt in his palm, loving how responsive Will was to every little touch or squeeze. As he caressed it, he lowered his head and laved Will’s testicles until they, too, were damp and slick. Then he carefully held the sac aside with his hand and tongued the root of Will’s cock and his pelvic floor, letting his tongue flicker back against his anus.

Will’s reaction was immediate and powerful. His fingers tightened on Ethan’s head and he groaned. “Yeah...like that....oh, God, yeah!”

Ethan grinned and continued, but the allure of having Will’s full, hot prick in his mouth was too much, and eventually he gave Will’s balls a gentle squeeze, then moved his attention back up higher. Gripping the base of the still-wet shaft in his hand, he brought the swollen head to his mouth and gently sucked it in, swirling his tongue around and around it, using his hand to make firm strokes at the same time.

But he wanted more. In a swift movement, he lowered his mouth onto it as far it would go, not stopping until he’d taken

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it all in and it brushed the back of his throat.

“Oh, Christ,” Will panted. His fingers tightened on the back of Ethan’s head and his hips surged forward.

Ethan didn’t move for several seconds, just held him in place and enjoyed the sensation of hot, pulsing fullness in his mouth. God, he loved this. Loved this man.

Finally, he eased Will out, bit by bit, but then slid him deep again, making Will shudder. He repeated it, until he was smoothly pumping up and down on Will’s cock and at the same time, playing with his balls again, rolling them between his fingers.

Will’s hips began to tremble and jerk. But then he grasped Ethan’s head. “Wait. Stop, Eth.”

Ethan pulled his mouth off and looked up.

Will tugged him to his feet and covered his mouth in a hungry kiss. “I don’t want to come yet,” he said, his voice thick with arousal. “I want to be inside you for that.”

Raw hunger scudded through Ethan’s veins. “Yes,” he whispered. “Please, I want you inside me.”

Will kissed him again, fiercely. “Take off your pants and lie on your back on the bed.”

Another thrum of electricity shot through him at Will’s directive. He pushed off his jeans, sat down, and slid to the center of the bed, then reclined with his head on one of the thick pillows.

Will opened the drawer of the bedside table, pulled out a condom and a bottle of lube, and sheathed himself. Then he moved to the foot of the bed. But he stopped and stared at

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Ethan. “Damn. Do you have any idea how hot you are like this, lying on the bed, waiting for me, with your cock jutting in the air and your legs spread?”

“Do you have any idea how hot it makes me to hear you say that?”

The bed sank under his weight as Will crawled onto it between Ethan’s legs. He moved all the way up and pressed a blistering, open-mouthed kiss against Ethan’s lips. “How the hell did we make it through so many years of knowing each other before we finally did this?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t tell you how many times I thought about it. How many times I jacked off to it.”

“Same here.” Will coated his cock with lube, then pushed Ethan’s knees back and eased his slick, gentle fingers up inside him, coating him as well. This time it was slippery and cool rather than warm and tingly.

As he worked his fingers deeper, stretching and relaxing the tight muscles, Ethan closed his eyes and let sensation take over. Before long he was panting and his hips moved in restless abandon against the soft sheet. Will’s big warm body pressing close and his intimate probing were powerful aphrodisiacs.

“You’re so damned beautiful,” Will murmured. “Does this feel good?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ethan moaned.

“What about this?” He curled his fingers up and in and lightly pressed Ethan’s prostate.

“Fuck!”

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"I'll take that as a yes." He heard the smile in Will's voice

He wrapped the fingers of his free hand around Ethan's shaft and began a devastating up and down motion, adding yet another sensation to the mix, and sending hot magma slid through Ethan's veins.

Ethan reached down and dragged his hands along Will's solid thighs, letting the coarse, springy hair tickle his palms, but when Will made another pass over his prostate, he ended up clutching Will's legs as his ass lifted off the bed.

"No one's ever touched you this way but me?"

"No one," Ethan managed to get out. "No ass play. Not with my ass anyway. That was my rule."

Will leaned down and kissed him as if he were staking a claim. "And that's going to stay the rule. No one else but me is ever going to touch it. I like knowing this is mine." He thrust his fingers deep, eliciting a soft cry from Ethan. "I like knowing my cock's the only one to ever stretch you open and fill you."

"I like it, too. Need you, Will."

Ethan's eyes fluttered open to find Will's intense, loved-filled gaze focused on him.

"I wanted you in high school. I wanted you as an adult. And I still do. But now...now it's so much more. God, Ethan, I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of you."

His fingers slid free and then his cockhead probed against Ethan's opening, pressing, pressing, and easing inside.

Will pushed Ethan's knees back farther, spreading him open wider, then leaned into him, burying his penis to the root.

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They both cried out. Will's eyes closed and ecstasy slid over his face.

The pressure, the fullness of his invasion thrummed through Ethan, sending dizzying flares of heat and pleasure radiating out from his ass. "Good...so good..." he moaned.

Oh, God, he wanted this always. He'd never known how fucking incredible it could feel, but didn't kid himself into thinking it would have felt this way with anyone else. Only with Will. His Will.

He looked up into his best friend and lover's eyes. "I love you, Will McLaren."

"I love you, too. I always have. There was never a single day that I stopped."

"Promise me you won't ever let me go."

"I'll never let you go. Not now. Not ever." Will pressed a hot, tender kiss to his lips.

And then their bodies surged together, hard, hungry, frantic to be closer, to go deeper. Their hands slid over sweat-slicked flesh, caressing, clutching until, eventually, they came as one to work Ethan's aching shaft, pulling and tugging to get him off. At the same time, Will thrust deep, pounding into Ethan's welcoming body in search of his own release.

"Come with me, Eth. Come with me and let me show you how good it is to be alive."

Their climaxes, when they hit, were powerful and simultaneous, surging through their connected bodies in wave after explosive wave.

Finally, sated, they held each other in the big bed and

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succumbed to exhaustion.

“We never had any dinner.” Will’s voice was deep and soft, breaking the peaceful silence that had surrounded them after their lovemaking. His hand slid up and down Ethan’s back in a slow, soporific movement.

Ethan rolled onto his stomach, hoping it’d give Will the hint to keep doing what he was doing. It worked. Damn, the man had a wonderful touch. “Sleep, sex, food. In that order,” he murmured, having a hard time keeping his eyes open. “Or maybe...hmmm...sleep, sex, sex, food.”

Will’s chuckle was the best thing he’d heard all day.

“How exactly are we supposed to keep up our strength for all that sex with no sustenance? I’m thinking food, sex, then sleep.”

“Too tired,” Ethan mumbled. “You wore me out. Sleep first. Then I’m willing to negotiate.”

He felt Will move closer, sit up, then straddle his thighs. His warm hands stroked up Ethan’s back, then back down to his ass, where they paused and dug in for a massage.

“Ohhh, God, that’s good,” Ethan groaned.

“Mm-hmmm. Thought you might like that.”

He worked Ethan’s gluts in silence for several minutes, then moved his hands up to massage his shoulders, his back, and ultimately returned to his ass. But although Ethan’s muscles were turning to butter under his attention, he was suddenly no longer sleepy. Everywhere Will’s hand touched him, an electric current scudded along just under his skin. A warm, *arousing* electric current.

NEVER LET GO

When one of Will's fingers slid along the crack in his ass, his eyes flew open and he looked back over his shoulder to find Will grinning that sweet, sexy grin Ethan had fallen in love with back in high school.

"You look awake now," Will said, sounding a bit smug.

"You totally conned me."

Will's fingers brushed along his crack again, causing Ethan's ass to clench in appreciation.

"I've told you before, you're not the only one who knows how to get his way. You've got the charming smile and pretty words, but I know what makes you feel good."

Ethan couldn't argue with that. *Jesus.*

"So here's the way it's going to work..." Will leaned down until his mouth was right next to Ethan's ear, so close his breath tickled his skin, and the full length of his buff torso was pressed against Ethan's back. "I'm going to feed you dinner—no clothes allowed—and then I'm going to introduce you to the magic delights of the jetted tub in the bathroom. The sex is going to happen during both those events, and it's going to be so good your spine's going to turn to liquid heat and you might not be able to walk for a week. Then, and only then, if you've been very good and very cooperative...you can sleep."

"Fuck!" The liquid heat was already at work, melting every bone and muscle in his body...except his cock. Which was rock hard and throbbing.

"That's right. Probably more than once." Will nuzzled his neck with a kiss. "Oh, and Eth?"

NEVER LET GO

He could only moan in reply.

“Have I told you in the past few minutes how damned much I love you?”

Ethan shook his head.

“Well, pay attention...because I’m going to show you.”

M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly twelve years. Along with the erotic man-love fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also had published everything from magazine articles, to steamy romantic suspense novels, to straight erotic romance. 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 M/M stories, she enjoys pairing together strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men 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.

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***Don't miss Falling, by M. L. Rhodes,
An Amazon.com #1 Best Seller in Gay Erotica,
and JERR Gold Star Award Winner
available at Amber-Allure.com!***

As the leader of an elite British group that hunts criminals of the magic world, Christian Wetherly comes to the U. S. undercover, posing as a British cop, to investigate a series of murders he suspects have been committed by a dark mage. He never expects, however, to find himself intensely attracted to the American police detective in charge of the case. Christian has long struggled with his hidden desires and hasn't admitted them to anyone. But Alec Anderson stirs something deep within him that's difficult to ignore.

Still...even if he could master his fear of coming out, Christian's dedicated himself to protecting the world from magic terrors. It's a dangerous life an ordinary human could never understand or accept. And to complicate matters, Alec's emotionally vulnerable, still grieving the death of his previous lover, a fellow cop killed in the line of duty. So Christian's determined to keep his true occupation and powers hidden from Alec.

Neither man can deny the powerful chemistry that burns between them, and both realize they're falling hard for one another, yet with so many secrets and complications, a relationship seems impossible.

When the two men become the target of the dark magic, however, and clues about an ancient legacy come to light that indicate Alec may not be exactly what he seems, can they find the strength to tear down all the barriers between them and risk their hearts in order to save each other's lives?

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