

...Grant shrugged. "Some submissives pretend they're helpless, at the mercy of their dominants. Not uncommon for a top to call his bottom 'boy,' or for a bottom to call his top 'daddy."

"That's...kinda perverted."

Another shrug. Grant apparently wasn't offended. "Everybody's got a kink."

"That's what this is? A kink?"

"No, this is lesson one," Grant said, with a slight grin at Eli's confusion. "Know your sub. Discover what turns him on, and what doesn't. From your reaction, I'd say feeling young and helpless doesn't crank your engine."

Eli laughed shortly. "Gigantic no on that one. Leave fathers and sons out of my sex life, please." He could have bitten his tongue at the sympathetic look Grant gave him.

Damn, I forgot he knows about the disaster that was me coming out to my family. C'mon, Grant, just pretend I didn't say that and get back to the kinky lessons, okay?

Something on his face must have clued Grant in, because the other man relaxed. "Can do." His gaze raked Eli's body, lingering on the bulge at Eli's crotch until Eli's toes curled against the pale Berber carpet.

Grant's eyes flicked up, met Eli's. He smiled, slow and sure. "So why don't you come over here and sit on my lap anyway?" Eli rolled his eyes. "Because...?"

Grant's throaty voice was pure sex. "Because I want to know how your tight ass feels nestled up against my cock, that's why..."

### BY

## ANNE THOMAS

### AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

http://www.amberquill.com

#### Just Friends An Amber Heat Book

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

> Amber Quill Press, LLC http://www.amberquill.com http://www.amberheat.com

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

> Copyright © 2007 by Anne Thomas ISBN 978-1-60272-061-9 Cover Art © 2007 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For the truly magnificent Mackenzie McKade. I couldn't have done it without you.

## CHAPTER 1

Eli Walsh stood at the bar of the Eagles Gentleman's Club, scrubbing a tense hand through his spiky brown hair and hoping like hell he hadn't made a mistake by coming here.

He shifted on the barstool, his skin-tight black jeans rasping across the cracked vinyl. The Eagles was a dive, with battered couches pulled up to the dance floor, and tiny booths with scarred wood tables tucked into dimly lit corners. The miasma of cigarettes, beer, leather and male musk was thick enough to swim in and left Eli hard and aching in his jeans.

He tipped his head back to ease the tension in his neck and followed the pattern of stains on the ceiling. A good mural would do wonders for this place. He imagined lying on a

scaffold, his nose just inches from the plaster as he did the work he loved. He'd paint something vibrant and bright, with sapphire blues, jungle greens, and sunset reds to bring a little color to the stark black and white of the clientele.

He doubted they'd notice. Why look at art when you could watch men grinding, men caressing, men sucking? The Eagles was a gay bar, true, but the black leather-clad patrons with nearly nude men kneeling at their feet weren't here for the décor.

Neither was Eli. He'd ventured into a fetish bar for the first time in his life because his best friend was here somewhere, lost in the sea of leather and vinyl and skin.

Eli hadn't even known Grant was into the kink scene when his friend's autocratic landlord told him about Grant's taste for S&M. Discovering Ian Forsyth knew more about Grant's sexual preferences than Eli did had hurt. He guessed it shouldn't have—he knew Grant and Ian had known each other for a long time. Ian owned the Bookshoppe above Grant's tattoo studio on Telegraph Avenue, and their apartments were opposite each other on the building's third floor. You were bound to find out stuff about a guy if you lived next door to him long enough, Eli supposed.

Still, it had bothered him that Grant hadn't said anything to Eli about his dating habits. They'd been friends for the better part of a year, drinking beer and shooting pool and comparing their art—Eli's on walls and Grant's on flesh. The two of them were close...or so Eli had thought.

But the knowledge that Grant was out cruising for a guy at

an S&M club had hit Eli like an anvil to the head—or more accurately, the heart. It made him realize that no matter how hard he tried to pretend otherwise, just being Grant's friend wasn't enough. He wanted, needed more.

So Eli had screwed up his courage, shed his shirt at the door—who knew a navy polo wasn't approved fetish attire? and decided to tell Grant that sometimes when they were on Grant's couch watching baseball, Eli fantasized about ripping open Grant's pants, pulling out the other man's cock, and fucking himself on it until they both passed out.

Or maybe he'd just grab a beer, find Grant, and pointblank ask him for a date. Casually. *Hey Grant, want to go out sometime?* 

Eli was confident. He was in control.

He was fucking terrified.

"Well, well, well, what's a pretty boy like you doing alone in a place like this?" A hot, unfamiliar hand dropped on Eli's bare shoulder, jerking him out of his reverie. "Wanna keep me company, pretty boy?"

Eli swiveled on the stool and faced a heavyset, older blond, his beer gut barely contained by a leather vest, a smug expression on his craggy face. Eli shrugged pointedly, but the guy's hand only tightened on Eli's shoulder.

Eli's eyes narrowed at the manhandling. "I'm looking for somebody."

"Yeah. Me." The man's voice was sultry and his light green gaze possessive, moving over Eli like a butcher sizing up a particularly tasty cut of beef. "Just look at you, with those

big blue eyes, that strong square jaw. Bet you were All-American in high school, weren't you? Had all the cheerleaders begging you to fuck 'em. But you like cock, don't you, boy? Like to be on your knees, dick in your ass or down your throat. I can help you with that." The hand on Eli's shoulder began to press down. "Go on, boy, drop. Bet that sweet mouth will feel damn good around my rod."

Eli slid off the bar and stared the leatherman down, smirking when the guy increased pressure on Eli's shoulder and got nowhere. "Get your hand off me, asshole." Eli's grin turned shark-like. "I bite."

Green Eyes' grip grew punishing. "Why, you little—"

"Little, Ted? Kid's got three inches on you. And he's taller, too." Wolf Grant draped a companionable arm over Eli's shoulder, the movement dislodging Ted's unwelcome hold. White teeth surrounded by a close-cut, reddish-gold beard gleamed in a pirate's grin. "Maybe you ought to get on your knees for *him.*" The six-foot five muscle-bound tattoo artist arched one ruddy eyebrow. "C'mon, Ted. Be a man. Admit you're finally ready to try life on the bottom."

Ted scowled at them both, then spun around and stomped off. Grant's arm slid away and Eli turned to find his friend's bright amber gaze thoughtfully regarding him.

"Jesus, kid." The laugh lines at the corners of Grant's eyes disappeared. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd pick up a guy." *Be casual. Be cool, for God's sake.* He was trying, he really was, but now that Grant was here in front of him, all Eli wanted was for Grant to touch him

again.

Grant, meanwhile, was staring at him in surprise. "You came *here* looking for a date?"

"I stopped by your place first. I was in the neighborhood, thought you might want to grab a beer. Ian told me where you'd gone."

Grant's gaze immediately turned wary. "You were looking for me then?"

*Oh, shit.* Eli's stomach dropped faster than an express elevator. He knew that look. It was the same one his first highschool crush had given him, when Eli had screwed up his courage and asked him out after a night of mutual masturbation.

"Hell, dude, that was just messing around," his buddy Jeff had said. "Guy stuff. I don't want to be your boyfriend, for God's sake. The last thing I need is for you to get all girly on me, Walsh. I thought we were friends."

"Figured I'd chase you down. Say hey and see exactly what kind of a place this is," Eli said quickly, that teenage memory washing his confidence away like dust in a rainstorm. Asking Jeff out had ruined their friendship; what if telling Grant he was attracted to him did the same thing?

Grant gave him a searching look, then his tense expression relaxed into his usual grin. "Huh. Didn't know you were kinky, kid. Or is this your first time in a place like this?"

"Damn. I'm that obvious? Maybe you better tell me how this shit works." Eli forced a teasing tone, but his voice went husky when he got a good look at what Grant was wearing. "By the way you're dressed, I guess you've done this before."

At Wolf Ink, his tattoo studio, Grant favored tie-dyed Tshirts, cutoffs, and sandals, whatever the weather. Eli figured Grant used the hippie look to put his clients at ease. Grant's sharp features, tattooed, muscle-bound body and shoulderlength red-blond hair made him look like a Viking warrior one good mad away from burning down villages and pillaging the womenfolk. The incongruity of him in rainbow colors and flip-flops made it obvious Grant wasn't nearly as scary as he appeared.

But Grant wasn't wearing tie-dye now.

Custom-cut black leather clung to long legs and powerful thighs, tight enough to make it clear Grant's impressive size applied to his package, too. Eli jerked his gaze away from Grant's crotch, but found the rest of his outfit just as titillating. Grant's exposed chest was covered only by an x-shaped black leather harness and ginger curls that narrowed to a thin line bisecting his abdomen. *The Road to Glory*. Eli followed that line of hair south, then jerked his gaze back to Grant's face. *God, stop thinking about Grant's dick before you embarrass yourself.* 

Grant didn't seem to notice, thank God. The tattoo artist was staring at Eli with a curious but otherwise affable expression on his chiseled features.

"So you wanna know about the leather scene, huh? Sure. Let's grab a beer, find a table and we'll talk." He started toward the bar, but stopped when Eli laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Problem?"

"Nah, would just be better to let me go first."

Grant's eyebrow rose again. "Because...?"

Eli took a breath and figured what the hell. Grant had never seemed to mind Eli's teasing before, though he'd never taken Eli up on the subtle flirting. Besides, all Grant had to do was look down and see Eli's hard cock outlined against his tight jeans to know where his thoughts had wandered. "Because if you don't I'm gonna be staring at your ass all the way to the bar, and drool is *so* not a good look on me, okay?"

Grant looked down. Eli's cock twitched and a spark of hope ignited in his chest at the flicker of speculation in his friend's eyes. Then it was gone, Grant grinning that familiar grin. He stepped aside with one long arm swept out in front of him. "After you, kid."

They grabbed beers at the bar, then settled into a booth in a relatively quiet corner. "So, you a top or a bottom?" Grant asked.

Eli choked and set his glass down quickly, coughing and eyes watering until he'd sorted out which pipe was for beer and which was for breathing. Grant just watched him with that damn raised eyebrow, relaxing when it was clear Eli wasn't going to choke to death.

"That's kinda personal, isn't it?" Eli asked once he'd calmed down. *Does this mean he's interested?* 

Grant's brow furrowed, then cleared. He gave Eli a small smile. "You really are new to this, aren't you? Sorry. Same terms, but they don't mean the same things. Wasn't asking if you liked to fuck or get fucked, though that does play into it."

He took a deep draught from his own glass and set it on the scarred wood table. One long finger traced patterns in the condensation. "In BDSM—bondage, domination, S&M— 'top' means the dominant, the one in control. He does the spanking, the tying, all the other fun nasty things the subbie boys love." He glanced at Eli from beneath long pale lashes. "Bottom means just what is sounds like, but more. The submissive one, who not only has all the naughty stuff done to him, but loves it, craves it. Gets on his knees for his Master and is happiest there. More than just fucker and fuckee, top or bottom is the role you take when you play in the land of kink. It affects how other people relate to you."

Eli's eyes widened at Grant's matter-of-fact tone. "You're really into this, aren't you?"

Grant shrugged. "Have been since puberty. Figured out I was kinky not long after I realized I was gay. Yeah, I've been doing this for awhile."

Eli thought about that. *This is what Grant likes. Hmmm.* "Is one role considered better than the other?"

Grant shrugged, shoulders rippling under the black harness. "Some people think bottom's the weaker role. I'm not one of them. Truth is, the bottom's the one with the power in the scene. Top gets to decide what gets done, sure, but the bottom's the one letting him do it, deciding how far it goes, and how much he'll take." He grinned faintly, gaze going distant. "I once saw a bottom turn around and take a flogger right out of his top's hand 'cause the guy wasn't paying any attention to how the bottom liked to be whipped. Top was so embarrassed he left the club."

Eli wondered what or who Grant was remembering to put that half-fond, half-sad expression on his face, but before he could ask, Grant shook his head and continued. "Lotta tops, especially the new ones, think the bottom's just there to make the top look good. That's crap, kid. A good submissive should be treasured, explored, pushed to bring out the desire for surrender inside him." Grant picked up his beer again, gave Eli a long, lazy look. "Hottest thing in the world, taking your sub to a place where there's nothing for him but you, your touch, your body, your voice." Grant's voice lowered and went straight to Eli's cock. "When you know, if only for that moment, that he's completely, utterly yours. Makes you feel like God."

Eli's dick was a hard, desperate ridge in his jeans, and precum soaked through the denim. He sipped his beer, concentrating on the golden bubbles rising to the surface until he could speak without betraying his lust. "So I guess you're a top, huh?"

Grant's smile was slow, sure. "Uh-huh." He leaned back, quirked a brow. "What about you?"

Eli shrugged, beginning to get the glimmer of an idea. "Don't know yet. Thought I'd take a look around, maybe talk to some people. Try a few things, see what I like."

An image flashed through Eli's mind, him on his knees, sucking Grant off while Grant's long artist's fingers stroked approvingly through his hair. He swallowed hard and firmly told his overexcited cock to calm *down*, dammit.

Grant stilled, lazy look gone. "BDSM virgins are a hot commodity," he said bluntly. Head tilted, he surveyed Eli. A line appeared between his fiery brows. "There are assholes in the scene, just like anywhere else. You could get hurt."

Eli frowned at that. "Look, I know you get a kick out of calling me 'kid,' making the most out of that whole eight years you've got on me, but I'm really not." He squared his shoulders. "I'm twenty-five, Grant, not sixteen. I know what I'm doing when it comes to sex. I'm careful."

"BDSM isn't just about sex," Grant countered. "It requires a helluva lot of trust to let somebody top you, and a lot more skill to do it to a sub of your own. You just dive in without knowing what you're doing and you could hurt somebody or end up that way. At best you'd get a reputation in the scene as a reckless novice. Then no one decent will play with you."

Eli opened his mouth to protest, then deciphered the look in Grant's eyes. Concern.

For him.

Well, that was definitely a step in the right direction. *Grant* cares about me. Not exactly the way Eli wanted, not yet, but it was something. The hopeful spark grew into a small, flickering flame.

"So what should I do?" Eli asked, watching the other man.

Grant settled back in the booth, arms folded across his massive chest. Eli tried not to stare at his nipples. "You need to figure out what you are before you get involved in the scene. Could be you'll end up as a switch, comfortable doing either role. God knows you've got the confidence to pull off being a top." He chuckled. "Told Ted off, no hesitation."

"He's a prick."

"True." Grant fell silent, chewing his lip and staring at Eli long enough to make the younger man's nerves hum.

"What?"

Grant's response was slow in coming. "If you're serious about exploring this lifestyle, you need someone to show you the ropes, so to speak. Secret to being a good top is understanding how your sub feels, judging reactions. Knowing when to push and when to back off, when to be stern and when to comfort." He drained his glass and considered Eli. "Good top learns how to take it before he dishes it out. And if being on the bottom gets you off, takes you places, then you'll know being submissive's your thing."

"So, what? I need some kind of teacher?" Eli asked, discouraged. The last thing he wanted was for Grant to set him up with somebody.

"A mentor, yeah." Grant's bright gaze never left Eli's.

Eli swallowed, afraid he was imagining the look on Grant's face. "Know somebody who could help me out?" he asked, his mouth dry and his throat tight with anticipation as he waited for Grant's response.

"Yeah," Grant said, raising his chin and pinning Eli with his gaze. "Me."

## CHAPTER 2

"You?" Eli stared at him, the buzz of music and laughter from the other patrons in the bar fading as he registered what Grant had said.

"Wouldn't be the first novice I've mentored." Grant grinned, the one Eli was used to, a little goofy, a little sweet, laugh lines reappearing beside his eyes. "Be the first one I was friends with outside the scene beforehand. Might make it weird, might make it fun. Your call."

Eli took a deep breath, still unable to believe his ears. Everything he'd wanted, dreamed about, was at his fingertips. It couldn't be that easy, could it? "Just one question. We are talking sex, right? Between us?" "Doesn't have to be sex, if you don't want. Penetration, I mean. But yeah, there'll be touching, and skin, and...intimacy," Grant said. "Things get intense during a scene. Might find yourself somewhere you weren't expecting, especially when you're on the bottom."

"But...I thought..." *Deep breath, Eli, there's gotta be a catch somewhere.* "I didn't think you were interested in me. That way, I mean."

Grant looked taken aback. "Well, it's not like we'd be dating. Closest comparison in the vanilla world is friends with benefits. I do this sort of thing a lot with first-timers." He misread Eli's dismayed expression. "Don't worry, you can't catch anything from me. I'm always careful, and I'm clean. Wouldn't risk you that way."

"Uh, right. Good. And, you know, same here." *He still just wants to be friends. There's your catch, kid. Knew this was too good to be true.* "I just...wanna be sure this won't mess us up. Hell, Grant, you're my best friend." With the specter of highschool rejection in his head, that was as close as Eli could come to admitting how he really felt.

Grant sat back, a pleased expression on his face. "I feel the same, kid. Never been as comfortable around anyone as I am around you." He leaned forward, gaze serious. "I think we'd be okay, as long as we both understand the deal. And when you've learned what you need, no problem going back to the way things were. I won't bring it up, wouldn't do anything to make you uncomfortable." Grant's eyes softened, his smile tentative. "I *like* you, Eli. I don't want to fuck that up anymore than you do."

"Right." Well, Grant couldn't be any clearer than that, could he? He wasn't offering romance, love—just friendship.

If I tell him how I feel now, what I really want, it'll fuck things up. I'll lose him.

No way was he going to risk that.

But if he did this, Eli could *show* Grant how he felt, without saying a word. They would be..*intimate*. Grant would see how good they'd be together, would *want* to be more than friends. Wouldn't he?

Eli raised his gaze, renewed hope lifting the corners of his mouth. "So...sex. Guess that means you're gonna see me come." He was struck by a sudden thought. "Uh, I am gonna come with this deal, right?"

Grant's whole demeanor changed, eyes going heavylidded, chin dropping to fix Eli with a look matching the honeyed promise in his voice. "If you're good."

*Oh, Christ.* Eli sucked in a breath as his cock surged. *That voice, God, I think he could make me shoot just by using that fucking voice.* 

Grant, in the meantime, was still, arms resting on the tabletop, lazy, hot look in his eyes. "You hard right now?" he asked, casually, as though commenting on the weather.

Eli was hard enough to cut glass, and a little startled by how easily Grant had adapted to this new aspect of their relationship. "Uh, yeah. Pretty much have been since I—" *first saw you* "—first got here."

Grant leaned back with a satisfied expression. "Good.

Let's go." He slid out of the booth and stood expectantly beside the table.

Eli followed suit, subtly adjusting himself so he could walk. His problem wasn't helped by Grant watching every move he made. "What are we doing?"

"Getting started." Grant put a proprietary arm around Eli's shoulders, then paused when Eli didn't move. "What? No time like the present, right?"

Eli blinked at him, trying to process that this wasn't just a hazy future thing. Grant was talking about doing stuff *now*. "Uh, right now?"

"Sure. You didn't have plans for the weekend, did you?"

"Well, no, but—" Eli swallowed. "Here?"

Grant lifted his brows. "I was thinking my place. We could go to yours, I s'pose, but you've got that roommate."

"Yours is fine." True, Eli's roommate spent more time at his boyfriend's house than theirs, but there was always the potential of him coming by. Eli sure as hell didn't want him walking in on anything. "So, uh, we're going now?"

Grant's wicked grin flowed over Eli like melted butter. "If you're up for it."

Eli grinned back despite the butterflies dancing in his stomach. "Trust me, I'm definitely up."

"So I see." Grant's eyes dropped for a leisurely perusal of Eli's steel-hard prick bulging obscenely against the tight denim. For a moment Eli thought Grant might touch him, but in the end the tattoo artist just nodded and jerked his head toward the door. "Come on." \* \* \*

"Problem?" Grant asked as he went into his apartment while Eli hesitated at the threshold.

"It's just...everything looks normal."

A pair of dark brown leather recliners bracketed the overstuffed hunter-green couch facing Grant's big-screen T.V. Shelves on the far wall spilled over with expensive art books and Grant's collection of tattered paperback mysteries. It all looked exactly the same as every other time Eli had been over.

Grant laughed and tugged Eli inside, closing the door behind them. "You've been here before. Didn't look like a wonderland of kink then, did it?"

Eli grinned sheepishly. "I thought maybe you cleaned the place up before I came over." And that maybe Grant had stuff out and ready for whoever he'd been planning to bring home tonight. Eli hadn't missed that Grant had the extra helmet on his Harley for Eli to use once they left the club. He wondered briefly if Grant was disappointed that he'd ended up bringing Eli home instead of one of the submissive boys from the Eagles. He pushed the thought out of his mind. This had been Grant's idea, Grant's suggestion, so at some level Eli must be who he wanted.

If he kept that in mind, he'd be fine.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I generally keep the place pretty vanilla." Grant casually tossed his motorcycle keys on the gray and tan granite-topped island separating the large kitchen from the rest of the living space. He crossed to the couch. "Most of my gear is in the bedroom." Eli swallowed and glanced at the closed door in the far corner of the living room. "That where we're headed?" he asked, trying to act like his cock wasn't practically tearing through his pants at the thought.

"Eventually," Grant responded, clearly not fooled by Eli's casual tone. "Thought we'd stay out here for starters." He settled himself in a comfortable sprawl on the couch, studying Eli in a way that made Eli's breath catch in his throat. "You ready?"

"Jump right in, huh?" God, he was lightheaded all of a sudden. Must be all the blood rushing to his dick—uh, brain.

"If that's all right."

"Sure." This is Grant, he reminded himself. *You've had fantasies about this.* "Umm, what should I...?"

"Could start by losing the shoes and the shirt," Grant said easily. "I liked the way you looked tonight."

"Yeah, okay." He'd stripped off in front of a club full of horny leathermen earlier, so this should be no big deal. Still, he couldn't keep his hands from trembling, his eyes from dropping as he pulled off the polo shirt and toed off his boots. Just making sure I don't trip over my own damn feet, he told himself.

Right.

He raised his eyes, gulped when he realized Grant had removed both his motorcycle jacket and the x-shaped harness, leaving the tattoo artist in nothing but those tight leather pants. The tanned, ink-patterned skin of his torso gleamed dull gold against the emerald couch. His sheer beauty, loose hair shining like fire, was enough to take Eli's breath away.

"Like what you see?" Grant asked, husky voice amused.

Eli lifted his chin a fraction. "Yeah."

"Good." Grant draped an arm across the back of the couch and gave Eli a sexy, come-hither look. "Wanna come sit on my lap, little boy?"

Eli tried to hide his grimace, but Grant was watching him too carefully to miss it.

"What's wrong?"

Eli's jaw tightened. "That asshole Ted called me 'boy.""

Grant shrugged. "Some submissives like it. They pretend they're helpless, at the mercy of their dominants. Not uncommon for a top to call his bottom 'boy,' or for a bottom to call his top 'daddy."

"That's...kinda perverted."

Another shrug. Grant apparently wasn't offended. "Everybody's got a kink."

"That's what this is? A kink?"

"No, this is lesson one," Grant said, with a slight grin at Eli's confusion. "Know your sub. Discover what turns him on, and what doesn't. From your reaction, I'd say feeling young and helpless doesn't crank your engine."

Eli laughed shortly. "Gigantic no on that one. Leave fathers and sons out of my sex life, please." He could have bitten his tongue at the sympathetic look Grant gave him.

Damn, I forgot he knows about the disaster that was me coming out to my family. C'mon, Grant, just pretend I didn't say that and get back to the kinky lessons, okay? Something on his face must have clued Grant in, because the other man relaxed. "Can do." His gaze raked Eli's body, lingering on the bulge at Eli's crotch until Eli's toes curled against the pale Berber carpet.

Grant's eyes flicked up, met Eli's. He smiled, slow and sure. "So why don't you come over here and sit on my lap anyway?"

Eli rolled his eyes. "Because...?"

Grant's throaty voice was pure sex. "Because I want to know how your tight ass feels nestled up against my cock, that's why."

"Oh." *God.* Before he knew it, he was across the room, sitting right where Grant wanted him, and Jesus, Grant was...

"Hard. You're hard." He was so turned on by that fact, he almost forgot about his own arousal. Almost.

Grant tugged, draping Eli over his body like a blanket. Eli let himself be arranged, a little dizzy from the feel of Grant's bare chest against his back, the rigid length pressed into his denim-covered ass. *God, he's...it's... Oh man, I want that*.

Grant's chuckle rumbled through him. "'Course I'm hard. I wouldn't have offered to do this if I didn't think I'd enjoy it." Strong, warm hands stroked over Eli's bare arms, up and down, massaging the tension out. Grant's voice was low, soft in his ear. "Kinda get off on the thought of teaching you things, showing you how good it can be." He exhaled, breath ghosting over Eli's temple, skin tingling in its wake. "So, yeah, I'm hard. I like this. Like you."

Blindly Eli turned his head, following his instincts toward

the source of those oh-so-seductive whispers. He found himself a hair's-breadth from Grant's mouth, and licked his lips in anticipation of the kiss to come.

It'll be good, so good to finally kiss him.

Eli leaned in, but was startled when Grant drew away, a look of consternation on his hirsute features.

Eli frowned and sat up in Grant's arms so he could better see the other man's face. "What's wrong?"

His friend's furrowed brow smoothed. "Not a thing, kid. Just a rule I've got." Grant's tone was odd, both wary and apologetic. "I don't kiss unless I'm in love."

Eli froze, unable to stop the hurt that flashed across his face. He tried to pull away but Grant held tight, wrapping long, strong arms around Eli's tense body.

"It's not like that," Grant whispered against Eli's temple. "It's not that I don't want you. It's just the way this works for me. It's the only thing we won't share. One thing, when there's hundreds of others I'm gonna show you. C'mon, Eli, relax." His warm breath stroked Eli's neck. "Let me touch you, show you, make you feel good."

Eli shuddered, took a deep breath. Warily, he let Grant draw him back into his embrace.

You're a man, for God's sake, not some high-school kid with a crush.

So Grant didn't love him. Big fucking deal. Wasn't this better than nothing?

Grant shifted, steel-hard erection digging into the fabriccovered cleft of Eli's ass. Eli groaned as those big hands swept over his collarbones.

Hell, yes, this was better.

Grant pressed his lips against Eli's throat, tongue blazing across Eli's sensitive skin, sending chills down his spine.

Wasn't it as good as a kiss?

Wouldn't this do?

It would have to.

Eli relaxed fully for the first time since he'd entered the apartment. He knew Grant approved when the big man's tongue traced the shape of Eli's ear, murmuring, "Mmmm. You taste good, kid."

Eli just moaned. He arched against Grant, and grinned at other man's answering groan. Then he wiggled against the bulge under his rear. "So we gonna get on with the lessons? I'm waiting here, Teach."

Grant laughed. "Lesson number two...topping from the bottom." Reprimanding fingers went straight to Eli's nipples and pinched, hard. "And how to stop *your* bottom from doing it."

Eli gasped as the pain radiated from his chest and went straight to his dick. "Oh, God, I'll be good, promise. Just do that again."

Grant chuckled richly, rolling and plucking Eli's pebbled nipples. Eli's fists clenched and released, looking for something to hold.

"Here, lift your arms up. Lace your hands behind my neck," Grant instructed. Blindly Eli did as he was told. "Yeah, that's it." Grant's voice was like whiskey, smooth at first, then

scorching Eli's body like lava, igniting every nerve ending. "Love how you look like this, so open, so accessible. You've got a beautiful body, kid. I've always thought so. I want to tattoo it, someday. You'd take the ink so well, be the perfect canvas for me. I'd put my mark low on your stomach, right here." His hand brushed at the base of Eli's abdomen, making the skin jerk and twitch. "I want to feel your hard cock brush against my hand as I work the needles."

"Jesus, Grant," Eli gasped, aroused beyond belief by the picture the artist painted. He'd seen Grant at work in his studio, knew how focused and intense Grant got when he was working his designs into some lucky client's skin. Just the thought of being the recipient of that concentration, that passion, had Eli on the verge of exploding. "You keep talking like that and I'm gonna come."

"Maybe I want you to," Grant murmured, hands sweeping over Eli's denim-clad thighs, palms burning Eli through the jeans but never quite touching him where he needed it most. "That's all part of it, you know? Figuring out exactly what scenarios turn you on. Which things make you interested, which ones make you hard, and which ones make you so fucking desperate for my touch that you'll shoot your load at the mere thought. So what would that be, do you think?" Grant said thoughtfully.

Every muscle in Eli's body drew taut, his biceps straining to keep his hands where Grant had told him, thighs flexed and heels digging into the carpet. He was already desperate, dammit. Hell, he was fighting not to blow in his pants like a teenager.

"Maybe me fucking you?" Grant suggested. "You on your back, hands bound to the headboard so you don't dare touch yourself, as I slick my cock up and slide into that tight, hot ass that's wriggling against me right now?"

*Shit, shit, shit.* Eli's balls filled, tight against his body as he struggled for control.

Grant's voice changed, went from honey to dark chocolate, thick and heavy. "Or maybe you should be on your knees for me. Right here, right now. Imagine it. Your cock throbbing, desperate for relief, but all you can do is suck me. Wrap those pretty lips around my dick and let me fuck your mouth while your hands are tied behind you so you can't touch me with anything but your tongue, your lips. Me driving deep in your throat, and nothing you can do but swallow as I fuck you harder and harder until I shoot in your mouth—"

Eli cried out, arching skyward as Grant gripped his hips and thrust hard against his ass. The orgasm ripped through him like a tsunami, washing his doubts and insecurities away in a tidal wave of surrender.

And Grant hadn't touched his cock once.

## CHAPTER 3

Eli expected to get Grant off, was in fact hoping for it. So he was surprised and disappointed when Grant simply stripped Eli out of his ruined jeans and led him into the bedroom. There the other man casually peeled off his leather pants and crawled, naked and hard, between the sheets.

Eli waited by the bed, feeling more exposed than just being naked could account for. He looked away from the king-size bed uncomfortably, surveying the gleaming antique oak armoire against the far wall, the partially open door to the bathroom. He wondered if he should get dressed and go. "Grant, I..."

Grant propped himself on an elbow in a nest of sky-blue

sheets and growled, "C'mere, kid."

Eli heaved a silent sigh of relief and slipped into bed, where Grant gathered him close as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Grant dropped a soft kiss on Eli's hair. "Just sleep, Eli. We'll hash things out in the morning."

"But you're still hard. I could—"

"Sleep," Grant repeated, voice mock-stern. "We'll take care of it tomorrow." And though Eli would have sworn he'd be up all night replaying what had happened, all it took was Grant's firm voice and the lub-dub of his heart to lull Eli into doing exactly as he'd been ordered.

He woke the next morning to that same steady beat, his cheek pressed against the muscular swell of Grant's chest, ginger curls tickling his nose. One of Grant's arms was wrapped around Eli's shoulders, the other casually gripping the thigh Eli had insinuated between Grant's knees during the night.

Eli could have spent the rest of his life in the heady warmth of Grant's embrace, but his bladder had other ideas. He shifted, then sucked in a breath as Grant's heavy cock twitched against him. The hand on his leg slid up and began tracing delicate patterns on his hip.

Eli tilted his head and found sleepy golden eyes regarding him with lazy satisfaction.

"Morning, kid."

So what do you say when faced with your best friend who got you off by voice alone the night before but didn't let you

return the favor?

Good morning?

Want a blow job?

Either of those sounded pretty good, but Eli settled on, "Morning. Could you let me up? Bathroom's calling."

Grant obligingly lifted his arm so Eli could slip out of the bed. "Go ahead. Take a shower, too, if you want. I think I've got a new toothbrush in the top drawer to the right of the sink."

"Thanks." See, no biggie. You'd think I sleep naked with my friends all the time. "I didn't bring any extra clothes though, obviously."

"Not a problem." And there was that voice again, vibrant and heavy as molasses in winter. "I want you naked for me today."

When Eli turned a surprised look on him, Grant lifted a brow.

"What, you think that little grope on the couch last night was it? That was only the beginning, kid. I've got plans for you."

Eli tried to suppress a giddy smile from breaking out on his face.

Grant wants me!

"Uh, don't you have to work?" Eli gestured lamely toward the door. "Open the studio, or something?"

"Nah. I'll reschedule my appointments for later, and I've been too booked to take walk-ins for a while now." He paused. "Course, if I don't open up the main entrance Ian's customers

can't get in to go upstairs, and knowing Ian it'll be sometime this afternoon before he even notices the Bookshoppe isn't doing any business. Guess I better give him a call, let him know I'm taking the day off." Grant wickedly waggled his russet brows. "Hell, I might suggest he do the same. His workroom's right under us, you know. And that bastard's got ears like a bat's."

Eli swallowed past a thick lump in his throat that felt nearly as large as the erection he was sporting. "Just what is he gonna hear?"

"Depends," Grant said lazily, flicking the sheet off and revealing his own swollen hard-on. "How loud you gonna make me scream?"

Eli swallowed again, turned with all the dignity a man could have with his dick bobbing like a dowsing rod, and retreated into the bathroom.

Grant's chortles drifted after him.

He spent a little too much time thinking in the shower and by the time he finished he was less horny and more nervous. His soul felt like a kaleidoscope of conflicting emotions, one moment ecstatically happy that Grant wanted him, the next fighting despair when he remembered Grant refusing to kiss him, proof that Grant wasn't in love with him.

Jesus, Eli, get a grip. Show him how you feel, remember? Make it so good Grant won't want this to end.

Right.

Determined, he emerged into the bedroom with a thin towel clutched around his hips. He found the bed

disappointingly empty, the midnight blue spread drawn neatly over the lighter sheets. Despite Grant's claims, the room didn't look all that kinky, if a guy didn't look too closely at the wrought-iron rail headboard that seemed expressly designed for having...stuff fastened to it.

Eli wondered if being tied up was on the agenda for this weekend. If there were any truth to the scenarios Grant had been spouting last night, then the answer was a resounding yes.

A crystal drop of pre-cum appeared at the slit of his cock at the thought.

"Kid?" Grant called from beyond the closed bedroom door. "You done in there?"

"Yeah," Eli called back, opening the door and sticking his head out to find Grant, attired in his customary cutoffs and tiedyed T-shirt, lounging against the kitchen island.

"Well, come on out, then."

Grant watched Eli appear, an expression Eli had never seen on his face as he took note of the towel still clutched around Eli's hips. It was a sort of half-smile, sexual, heated, and not particularly friendly.

"Thought I said I wanted you naked, Eli." The casual command in Grant's voice had Eli fighting a stammer.

"Y-yeah, was just wondering what you wanted me to do with the towel," he improvised, taking a deep breath and tugging the terrycloth from his waist when Grant just raised an eyebrow at him. Somehow it was difficult to be naked like this, with California springtime sun pouring in the windows

and Grant fully clothed, looking at him. At least Grant lived on the third floor, Eli thought as Grant walked over and took the towel from his unresisting hand. *Be giving the whole of Telegraph Avenue a show, otherwise.* 

"Thanks, kid," Grant said dryly. He opened the louvered doors of the closet next to the kitchen, revealing a full-size washer and dryer, and tucked the towel away. "Now then," Grant continued, closing the door to the laundry area and turning to look at Eli, who shifted from one bare foot to the other on the living room carpet. "How're you feeling this morning?"

"Good, I guess," Eli offered. When Grant seemed to expect more, he added, "and naked. Feeling pretty naked."

"Uh-huh." Grant nodded as if that was to be expected. "And how exactly does that make you feel?" He grinned at Eli's confused look. "This is part of it, figuring out what does it for a sub. Communication. So spill, Eli. Tell me what's going through that head of yours."

Okay, I can do this.

"Well, naked, like I said. Um, uncomfortable about it. I don't usually walk around like this at home. A little embarrassed." He glanced down ruefully. "And apparently pretty damn turned-on, from the looks of things."

"Yeah, noticed that. Very nice, your cock." Grant said it as if he was complimenting Eli's shoes or brand of cologne. "You look damn good like this." Grant returned to the island counter, arms folded across his broad chest, the picture of relaxation, as though he and Eli did this every morning.

"You're so responsive, kid. I really like that about you. The way you were for me last night, all flushed and wild. Watching you come, how you just gave yourself over to it...got my motor revving, let me tell you."

Dammit, he keeps that up and I'm gonna go off without a touch again.

Eli's hand started toward his cock, to squeeze at the base or maybe just start jacking off, he wasn't sure. But then Grant was crossing over to him to grasp Eli's wrists.

"Oh, no you don't," Grant said, sliding Eli's wrists behind him, closing Eli's own hand around his other wrist so he held his hands at the base of his spine. Grant stepped back, smiled another one of those commanding, not-quite smiles. "Just hold on to your hands like that until I tell you, okay? Stand up straight, lift your chin. You've got an incredible body. Don't be afraid to display it for me."

Eli gritted his teeth as his cock jumped. He was on display for Grant. Yep, that evidently was a hot button because the burning, tingling at the base of his balls was turning into a white-hot conflagration.

Eli didn't say anything as Grant went back to his casual lean against the counter and just...looked at him. He didn't know what he could say, because at that point the only thing that wanted to come out of his mouth was a plea for Grant to bend him over the couch and fuck him.

"Now," Grant said, unbuttoning the top button of his cutoffs, carefully easing down the zipper as though he had all the time in the world. What was left of Eli's brain dribbled out

his dick when he saw Grant wasn't wearing underwear. Grant's cock was thick and long, so hard the foreskin had slid back to reveal the slick head. "Last night was about you, learning what got you going. From your reaction I think I hit on something with that last little fantasy. Not to mention, I got the feeling you were disappointed I didn't let you get me off, so we'll take care of that while we're at it, too."

Grant's erection protruded fully from his open shorts. He wrapped his long fingers around the shaft and stroked once as he widened his stance and looked at Eli.

"Keep those hands where they are, kid, and come over here. You know what I want you to do."

And Eli did know. His mouth was already watering at the thought. His own cock throbbed with every step he took, as he went over to Grant and knelt at his feet. Eli spread his knees apart to keep his balance, clutched his wrist behind his back hard enough to leave little half-moons from his fingernails in the flesh. Then he gazed up at Grant. Waiting.

"Good boy," Grant crooned. Eli had to bite his lip to keep from moaning. "How are you at giving head, Eli? Any good?"

"Yeah." Hell, it was the truth. He'd never had complaints, anyway.

But Grant was shaking his head now, evidently disappointed. "Now, now, good submissives mind their manners. I ask you a question, what are you going to say?"

Oh, right. "Yes, I give good head."

There went the eyebrow. "Yes, I give good head, what?" *Oh, God.* The Master thing really didn't do it for him, but

if it was what Grant wanted... "Yes, I give good head, *Master*."

Jesus, don't laugh, Grant will kill you.

But Grant was frowning again, looking down at Eli with that little line running between his russet brows. "Nah, say Grant. I like the way you say my name."

*Thank God.* That, he could do. Was happy to do, in fact. "Yes, Grant, I give good head."

"Very nice," Grant said, fingers sifting through Eli's tousled, shower-damp hair. Eli groaned at the touch, leaning into it. "Now show me," Grant said, fingers tightening to hold him in place as Grant's cock nudged at his lips.

The reality of Grant's cock in his mouth was even better than his fantasies. Fiery as a brand, filling him so he had to breathe through his nose to get the oxygen he needed, the flesh hot and heavy on his tongue. He took as much as he could, rolling the novelty of Grant's foreskin in his mouth, sucking, glorying in the slightly salty, musky taste that was uniquely Grant.

If he couldn't kiss him, this was the next best thing, drinking down Grant's moans as he licked the fluid leaking from the tip, lightly scraping his teeth along the sensitive head. He barely managed not to laugh in delight when Grant cursed and clutched fistfuls of Eli's hair.

Gonna make you scream, Grant. He supposed that wasn't very submissive, but who cared when he had Grant's perfect, iron-hard dick in his mouth? He was a little hampered, not being able to use his hands, but he had a few tricks up his

sleeve that he thought Grant would like.

Let's see, how does this go again? Oh, yeah, deep breath through the nose, inch the lips a little farther down... Heh heh, Grant liked that, if the sudden thrusting, loud cursing, and bursts of pre-cum were any indication.

Okay, relax the jaw, one more breath, and...swallow.

"Oh, God, you gorgeous, fucking *beautiful* boy," Grant gasped, hands clutching Eli's hair in a death-grip as he arched his hips against Eli's face.

Eli swirled his tongue around Grant's rigid flesh, sucking hard, then he inhaled and swallowed again, this time rewarded by the tickle of the ginger curls at Grant's crotch on his nose.

"Christ, Eli, gonna come, gonna...oh, fuck..."

*Yeah, baby, do that.* Eli pulled back so he could taste every drop of Grant's release as the other man gave a loud cry and came. Eli swallowed the salty fluid, quickly ran his tongue over the still-spasming length until Grant tugged his hair to make him stop.

Eli lifted his head and found Grant staring down at him, golden eyes wide and astonished, full of some emotion that made Eli's heart squeeze in his chest despite the agonizing erection threatening to cripple him.

God, had he ever had a lover look at him like this, open and adoring like the sun rose and set on Eli's head?

Christ, had *anyone* ever looked at him like this?

He felt the words coming, rising up in his throat in their mad dash to escape. He bit his lip to keep them where they belonged. *Can't tell him, can only show him. He thinks we're* 

## just friends, dammit.

"Jesus, kid," Grant said at last, fingers threading through Eli's hair, voice husky. "You weren't kidding. You're *good*."

Eli guilelessly peered at him from under his lashes. "Yes, Grant, I am."

Grant chuckled and tucked himself back into his shorts, then raised the zipper carefully. He leaned down, helped Eli to his feet, and looked thoughtfully at Eli's flushed, desperate cock dribbling clear fluid onto the carpet. "Such a good boy not to touch yourself. Better control today, too. I think you deserve a reward," Grant murmured.

Eli locked his knees to keep from collapsing as Grant's hot hand suddenly closed around Eli's dick. With firm strokes Grant began to jerk him off like they'd been doing this all their lives.

"Come for me," Grant whispered.

That was all it took to make Eli rise to his tiptoes, a harsh yell escaping him as milky white fluid burst from his cock in jetting streams.

Grant supported him as he gasped and trembled through the aftershocks, then just held him, tugging Eli's arms up around his neck as his own wrapped around Eli's waist. Grant's chin nestled perfectly in the hollow between Eli's neck and shoulder.

*God, I could get used to this*. He hoped to hell Grant would let him.

"Ready to play, kid?" Grant whispered in his ear.

## CHAPTER 4

### I knew this headboard was evil.

Eli lay on his back in Grant's bed, arms spread and elbows bent so the soft but sturdy leather cuffs around his wrists easily reached the thick wrought-iron rails. Eli tugged experimentally, but there was no give in the slim white rope or expert knots that Grant had used to secure him. Matching cuffs were on his ankles, longer ropes running from the headboard to the cuffs so his legs were hoisted high and wide, lifting his ass partly off the bed and leaving him perfectly exposed, perfectly helpless. Eli wouldn't have minded, really—as long as he kept his legs apart the strain on his knees and ankles was minimal. Grant had thoughtfully slipped a pillow beneath his

hips to support him, and the position was absolutely perfect for fucking.

Except that Grant was across the room, rummaging in the big armoire next to the window, and he retrieved not only condoms and lube but a thin, flat piece of polished hardwood with one side covered in black leather.

Grant wanted to spank him, and Eli was nervous. No reason to be, really. Grant had told him all he had to do was say his safe word and Grant would ease off. Say it again and Grant would stop everything, untie Eli, and make sure he was fine.

Grant shut the armoire with a solid thunk, startlingly loud in the otherwise quiet room, and crossed over to the bed. He'd discarded the tie-dye and was dressed only in his cutoffs. With the brightly colored tattoos and loose hair he looked wild, exotic. Dangerous.

"Uh, Wolfgang?"

Grant halted a foot from the bed, an expression of surprise on his face. "What, kid, you stopping things already?"

Eli didn't laugh...he'd promised himself he wouldn't...but he couldn't halt the slightly anxious grin that spread across his face. "Nah. Just wanted to test my safe word." The grin broadened at the exasperation on Grant's features. "I still can't believe Wolf is short for *Wolfgang*."

Grant shrugged, but the corners of his mouth turned up the tiniest bit. "Yeah, well, Mom had a fine grasp of the absurd."

Eli sucked in a breath as Grant dropped the paddle next to Eli's raised bare ass. The bed dipped as Grant sat down. "Why don't you go by Wolf?" Eli babbled, anxious to delay the inevitable. That thing looked like it was going to hurt. "It's sexy."

"I do at the club." Grant's voice was matter-of-fact as he began rubbing his hands over Eli's ass, which would have felt amazing except Eli knew what was coming after. "My scene name's Master Wolf. Most of the subs call me that."

Eli frowned. "I call you Grant," he pointed out.

"Yeah, you do." Nothing more than that, but it seemed an affirmation of sorts, made Eli feel important. Special. Until Grant reached for the paddle, anyway.

"Kissing's not *that* big a deal, is it?" Eli blurted out.

He could have kicked himself at the quick flash of dismay that crossed Grant's face. But at least it had distracted him from the paddle.

Grant, kneeling beside Eli on the bed, looked away. "Didn't used to be, no," he admitted, running his long artist's fingers through his wild red-gold mane. "Kissed every Tom, Dick, and Harry I could, back in the day."

Eli wasn't trying to distract him now, not when Grant's voice held that undercurrent of pain. "What changed?"

Grant turned to face him, his rueful smile open. Vulnerable. "I fell in love. He had a rough time saying it something in his past, parents, whatever. So he told me that when he kissed me, it meant he loved me. You can tell, you know," he added, eyes soft and lost in memory. "It's when a man kisses you like there's nothing in the world but you and him. With every slide of your tongue and press of your lips you're saying it, passing it back and forth. *Love*." He shook his head, re-focusing to find Eli staring at him, and gave Eli another one of those sweet, sad smiles.

Eli swallowed, jealousy and sympathy both welling inside him. "What happened?"

"It didn't work out. I wanted it to, bad, but it just...didn't. Sometimes things don't."

"He broke your heart," Eli realized. His jealousy faded as sympathy won.

Grant shrugged. "It was a long time ago." Then those golden eyes narrowed, the smile changing to what Eli thought of as Grant's "top" smile. "I know what you're doing."

Funny how that throaty combination of sex and threat made his cock jump and drool with excitement. "Who, me?"

"Yeah." Grant lifted the paddle and pressed it lightly against the raised, round flesh of Eli's ass. "I've been taking it easy on you, kid, can tell you're having fun. But it's all sensation to you so far. I haven't pushed you, taken you out of yourself, looked for that place inside where you give yourself to your top. Sometimes pleasure can take a bottom there, but more often it's pain that does."

At the mention of pain Eli's muscles tensed and blood raced through his veins. Could he let Grant do this to him? Would this show Grant how much Eli wanted him?

Grant felt the quivering in Eli's muscles and pulled the paddle away, his other hand gently stroking Eli's thigh. He smiled, typical Grant expression this time, relaxed and reassuring. "You're gonna be fine, kid. Anytime it gets to be

too much, just use your safe word. I won't be offended. But trust me, okay? This is the best way to find out if you're a top who gets off on bottoming, or if, deep down, you're a submissive." He brought the paddle back, caressing the planes of Eli's ass, the leather soft against his skin. "You do trust me, don't you?"

"Yeah." Eli was scared, but also more turned-on than he'd been in his life. "I trust you."

"Good. Just relax, I'll take it slow."

It wasn't what Eli had expected. Grant started with gentle flicks of the paddle against the backs of his thighs, the crease where his legs met his ass.

It felt...good. Not too hard, not too soft.

Grant evidently remembered what Eli had told him last night, because Grant didn't say anything to kill the mood, like Eli was being a bad boy and had to be punished. He just spanked him, the swats gradually getting stronger, focusing more on the globes of his ass, right over his puckered opening.

At one point Grant slid his free hand around Eli's leg and under the wrinkled skin of his balls. For a moment Eli thought Grant was going to pull him off while they did this, and thank God, too, but he didn't. Instead he rested his hand there, palm angled so Eli's balls were lifted out of the way. Grant was protecting him, Eli realized, in case any of the swats missed their mark.

That was considerate—appreciated, too. Getting hit on the balls would have taken the fun out of this experience. Though he hadn't expected to, Eli was getting off on the spanking, moaning uncontrollably while a ribbon of pre-cum trailed down his shaft like melted wax on a candle.

Then it changed, the swats coming faster, harder. His ass started to tingle, then to burn.

Grant began talking, low-voiced and sure.

"God, you're beautiful like this, kid. Spread open for me, your pretty ass all pink and hot. Yeah, that's it, arch up, give in to me. You need this, don't you?" Grant's voice deepened to a lust-ridden growl. "You need me."

Eli whimpered as Grant's voice coupled with the fire in his ass flooded him with ecstasy, a deep rush of pleasure-pain that burned his diamond-hard nipples, heated his balls, licked flames down his untouched cock.

The meaning of Grant's words faded and all that was left was his voice. Eli's head was so full of white noise he couldn't think, couldn't do anything but gasp and arch and wait for the blows now falling like rain, quick and hard and good. His cock jerked, his balls ached, and his ass blazed like a bonfire until he could no longer differentiate the sensations. It was all one unending conflagration of cock and balls and ass and Grant's voice.

Eli was dimly aware he was saying stuff, gasping things like, "Please" and "God" and "Grant, yours, I'm yours, take me, God, fuck me, please, yours, yours, yours..."

Everything stopped.

Eli opened his eyes, unsure of when he'd closed them, and found Grant's gaze boring into his, his eyes flaring with raw emotion. Grant's fingers trembled as they stroked down Eli's face and came away wet.

Eli didn't even know he'd been crying.

"Mine?" Grant asked, stunned wonder in his voice.

God, yes. Always.

"Yours," Eli promised, fervent, desperate, sure. "I'm yours, Grant." He took a deep breath, and dared to say it. "Make me yours."

Grant swallowed hard, the sound loud in the suddenly silent room. "Mine," he said again, as though he couldn't believe it. Then his molten gaze turned tender. "I'll take care of you, kid." The nickname had never sounded more like an endearment.

Then Grant moved away, body and hand.

Eli gasped, bereft. "Grant, please-"

A moment later he cried out as something warm and wet stroked over the fiery cheeks of his ass.

It was Grant's tongue, softly laving Eli's abused flesh. Moist caresses alternated with puffs of cool air, soothing the burn perfectly. Then strong hands were on his buttocks, the touch so gentle Eli sobbed, and that talented tongue was in the cleft of his ass, surrounding his entrance, flicking over the puckered skin, making it quiver.

Grant's soft tongue stiffened. He stabbed it inside Eli, over and over in an endless parody of fucking, slicking him, making him open and wet and so desperate for Grant's cock inside him that he couldn't help but beg.

"Please, Grant, fuck me, take me, claim me. I'm yours, yours, please I can't fucking wait any longer...!"

Grant raised his head and met Eli's frantic gaze, his own determined, sure. "I'll take care of you," Grant said again, and to Eli it sounded like a vow.

"Yes," Eli whispered, hope blossoming in his chest at the naked passion in Grant's eyes.

He has to feel something, if he's gonna do this. He has to. He has to know that this makes us so much more than just friends.

Eli had never heard a more welcome sound than the snick of a cap, the tear of a wrapper. Never felt anything more perfect than Grant's cool, lube-slick fingers probing him, opening him, sliding deep inside. First one, then two, the stretch and burn lost in the flaring waves of heat.

Then Grant crooked a finger. Eli cried out in ecstasy, stars exploding behind his eyes, muscles clenching around Grant's busy fingers as they stroked and rubbed over his prostate.

Then the fingers were gone.

No, so empty, come back, come back...

The blunt, slick head of Grant's cock replaced his fingers. *Oh*, yeah.

Eli canted his hips, frantic to have Grant inside him. "Please, Grant, baby, do it, take me, can't hold out much longer..."

"Christ, yes," Grant moaned, and with short, sharp thrusts eased his way inside.

Eli gasped, open-mouthed and panting. Grant was big, the burn as Eli's body tried to accommodate him walking the fine line between pleasure and pain as a final thrust buried Grant deep within him.

Grant propped Eli's raised legs on his shoulders and held still, balls tight against Eli's ass as Grant gave him time to adjust.

Eli couldn't take his eyes off the expression of pure amazement on Grant's face.

"Jesus, Eli," Grant whispered, shifting and cupping Eli's hips in his large hands. "You're so tight, kid, so fucking *hot*. You're taking it so good..." Grant shuddered. "God, it's perfect."

Coherent speech was beyond Eli. All he could get out was, "Yours, Grant. All yours."

"Mine," Grant muttered. His eyes never left Eli's as he began to thrust, quick, stabbing jabs that left Eli breathless and dizzy and so close to coming he thought he was going to die.

Then Grant shifted, bending Eli almost in half as he changed the angle. Eli threw his head back, mouth open in a soundless howl as the new position rubbed Grant's cockhead over his prostate with each thrust, over and over again.

Grant was breathing like a bellows, chest heaving. "Come for me, Eli," he pleaded. His thrusts grew stronger, deeper. "Gonna come, can't hold back, want you with me, c'mon kid, you perfect sub, you beautiful boy, do it, come with me…!"

"*Yours*," Eli gasped brokenly as Grant finally wrapped one hot hand firmly around his cock. He thrust up into the tight circle of Grant's fingers just as Grant nailed his prostate *hard*.

Eli exploded.

All the love and desire and want and ache and submission

poured out of his cock in thick, milky surges, painting stripes on Grant's chest.

Grant followed him over the abyss, cock pulsing in Eli's clenching passage with each burst of semen.

Their eyes met in the aftermath, Eli's cum sticky between them as their gasping breaths brought their chests into contact. For a long moment they stared at each other, riding the aftershocks, expressions made raw by their cataclysmic release.

"Grant," Eli whispered, entranced by the emotion shining in his best friend's eyes. "I—"

A fleeting look of panic danced across Grant's face. "Jesus," he said, cutting Eli off, voice shaking and strange. "That was...God, un-fucking-believable. Here, let's get you out of these restraints."

Eli took a deep breath, tried to clear his head. He couldn't repress a whimper when Grant withdrew from his body. Dazed, uncomprehending, he watched Grant discard the condom, then make short work of the ropes binding Eli.

It was the sudden, sharp ache in his legs as Grant lowered them that finally got Eli's mind working again. "Ow, damn," he muttered, extending his left leg as a vicious cramp shot through his calf.

Grant unfastened Eli's cuffs, massaging each of Eli's calves before gathering him close. Settled between Grant's legs, his back to Grant's chest, Eli finally registered that the trembling he felt wasn't coming from him.

"Grant?" Eli asked softly, twisting in Grant's arms.

Grant's grasp tightened, holding him in place. "You okay?"

"Yeah." The word was so soft Eli had to strain to hear it. "What about you? I took you pretty hard at the end there."

"Gonna be careful sitting for a day or two," Eli joked. Grant didn't laugh, only held him tighter. "I'm fine, really. That was amazing. I've never felt like that before, with anyone."

"You submitted to me." Grant's voice was still soft, quiet. "You were...perfect in your submission, Eli. You gave yourself over to me completely. Most incredible thing I've ever seen. Never gonna forget that, kid. Never."

There was an undertone of something in Grant's voice, but Eli couldn't figure out what it was. "Neither will I," he promised. "Grant? Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine." Grant gave him another tight squeeze, leaving Eli breathless. Then Grant pressed his lips to Eli's hair and slid down, rolling them until Grant was spooning Eli, cuddling him on the bed. "You're gonna crash hard in a minute. Try to sleep."

Eli blinked, aware his eyes were suddenly much heavier than they'd been a moment ago. His body felt boneless, lax. "Yeah, okay, just for a while," he murmured. "You gonna stay?"

"For a bit. Gotta a few things to do." Grant kissed Eli's neck a final time. "It'll be okay, kid. I'm gonna make it right. Promise."

Make what right? Eli wanted to ask, but his mind was drifting and he lost what he was going to say. No

matter...he'd figure it out later. For now, everything was perfect.

Safe in Grant's warm embrace, Eli let sleep overtake him.

## CHAPTER 5

Eli knew something was wrong when he woke in the afternoon to a note on Grant's pillow and an otherwise empty apartment. Frowning at the unaccustomed silence, Eli scrubbed a hand through his untidy hair and picked up the scrap of paper. His hand fell limply to his side and a cold knot formed in his stomach as he read.

Kid— I think we've gone as far as we can go on the submissive stuff. Time to try topping. I don't bottom, but there's a guy at the Eagles, hot blond named Chad, that I think you'd like. I called him

while you were asleep, set us up for tonight at the club. Don't worry, I'll be there with you every step of the way. He gets off on spanking and giving head—sound like fun? Figured you'd like that. Have to run some errands this afternoon, then I've got appointments, so go ahead and let yourself out. Grab something to eat, then meet me at the club at nine. Grant.

Eli swallowed around the lump in his throat. Just hours ago Grant had been inside him, eyes burning into his just as hot as his cock had burned in Eli's body. The emotion was unmistakable, so bright Eli couldn't help responding to it.

*Submission*. Eli had moaned it, gasped it, finally wept it as the harsh smacks on his ass, followed by Grant fucking him took him somewhere he'd never gone during sex, a place that broke him and made him new.

On his back, their gazes locked, Eli hadn't been able to hide what he felt. Every ounce of his need for Grant had been revealed in his eyes and his gasping sobs, though he'd managed somehow to keep from saying the words.

And every moment of surrender, every desperate plea, every perfect thrust and swell of emotion filling his heart, Grant had accepted. Eli had seen it shining in Grant's eyes, felt it when Grant came, thrusting so deep it was as though Grant was trying to claim Eli's soul with his cock.

It had been, without measure, the most exhilarating, mind-

blowing, perfect sex Eli had ever had. And while the kink had been incredible, what had made it perfect was that he'd had that sex with Grant.

Grant was treating what they shared like it was nothing, just a lesson for Eli to learn. And now it was time to go on to something else.

Just friends. God.

Eli clenched his fist so fiercely his knuckles went white. He stood up, tossed the crumpled paper in the middle of the spread, and left it there for Grant to find.

He hoped Grant choked on it.

Dressed, Eli slammed Grant's apartment door behind him hard enough to make plaster dust rain down from the ceiling of the old brick building. He took the stairs of the metal spiral staircase leading to the second floor two at a time, fury and hurt vying for dominance in him.

The hurt was clear, easy to understand.

How could he do that? I know what I saw, dammit. He wanted me. How could he get so far inside me and then push me away, throw me at someone else, for God's sake?

As for the fury, well, he saved most of that bitter pill for himself.

You knew the score. Grant made sure of that. Just friends, and he never once said anything different, did he?

*He only kisses when he's in love, and you didn't get that. He does this all the time.* 

If you confront him like this, all pissed off and betrayed, he won't even get why you're upset.

## Just friends. That was the deal.

God. How the hell was he supposed to do this? How was he supposed to go back to the way things were, after what he and Grant had done?

He stepped off the final tread onto the waxed wood floor of the Bookshoppe, Ian Forsyth's specialty bookstore. It occupied the whole second floor, filled with golden light cast by old-fashioned lamps and awash in the smells of leather, old paper, and the lemon oil Ian used on the bookshelves.

The scents brought up memories of all the times Eli had cut through the bookstore on his way to Grant's apartment, to watch sports, to grab a pizza, to share a beer on his way home from a commission. In the past Eli had lingered here, snarking at the Bookshoppe's uptight owner and enjoying the ambience that reminded him of the small-town library he'd gone to as a kid.

Now just being here made him want to throw up.

He took a deep breath and forced his roiling emotions to some semblance of normalcy as he left the alcove housing the staircase. Three in the afternoon on a Saturday and the place was deserted, so Ian must have taken Grant's suggestion and closed for the day. But the lamps were glowing, so Ian was likely lurking somewhere in the stacks.

Eli wasn't ready to talk. To anyone, but especially not to the man who'd known Grant for a decade and probably saw guys with their hopes crushed leave Grant's place all the time.

"So you slept over, did you?" The dry, cultured voice brought Eli to a halt as he weaved his way through bookshelves and displays.

Shit.

Ian Forsyth, lanky, dark-haired, roughly Grant's age, though his pallor and preference for baggy cardigans made him seem older, stood ramrod straight behind the gleaming oak counter paralleling the far side of the shop.

"Unusual, that," Ian added. He laid a slim fountain pen precisely beside an open ledger and pierced Eli with fathomless, nearly-black eyes set in a sharp, aristocratic face. "He usually sends his boys packing well before dawn." His lips curved in a slightly mocking smile. "You must be something special."

"Not really," Eli forced himself to say nonchalantly, even as he clenched his hands to keep them from shaking. Bitterness crept into his tone. "Ordinary guy, that's me. If you see Grant..." His voice cracked. Eli fought for control. "Tell him I guess I'll see him around."

He didn't know if he could do it, go to the club tonight and pretend everything was normal, everything was fine. It wasn't, dammit. It wasn't.

"I shall," Ian said, watching like a hawk as Eli made his way to the counter and turned to go down the old, creaky staircase leading to the first floor. "Before you leave, Mr. Walsh...might I ask you a question?"

Ian was nearly always this formal; Eli suspected the guy was descended from a long line of British butlers, the ones who bossed the other servants around and chided the Master for putting his feet on the coffee table. "Yeah, what?" Eli snapped. He couldn't help it. He just wanted to get out of there.

The bookstore owner's voice was cool. "Do you love him?"

Eli gave the other man a disbelieving look. "That's none of your goddamned business."

Ian ignored the outburst and simply looked down at his ledger. "Because he's very worthy of love, you see." Pale, aristocratic fingers carefully turned the pages, almost caressing them. "He's been alone for quite some time. You're the first one he's let get close in, oh, at least a decade. For as long as I've known him, anyway."

Ian raised his gaze, dark eyes shuttered. "He was a bitter shell of a man when we met. The relationship with the man he loved had ended just a few months before. Grant couldn't cope with the pain. I tried to assist—gave him the studio downstairs to practice his craft, provided him someone to argue with." Ian's lips curved, not a hint of mockery this time. "Nothing fuels the will to live like the determination to prove someone else wrong. It was enough, for awhile. And when it wasn't, he found the clubs and those needy boys. Made their pleasure and their adoration his reason for going on."

Eli stood frozen next to the stairs, hand gripping the banister nearly hard enough to crack the antique wood.

*Love.* Was that what this was? This pain, this feeling of betrayal, this hurt and rage and despair that Grant didn't want him the way Eli did. Was it because he was in love with Grant?

Eli moistened his lips, his voice hoarse. "Why'd they break up? Grant and his...lover."

Ian shrugged fastidiously. "I don't know the details. What does it matter when one's heart is broken? What I do know, is that in the months since you came into his life, he's been...different. Warmer, quicker to smile, less likely to brood. His work has improved, as has his business. And by default, so has mine." The smile faded. "You're important, Mr. Walsh. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Especially not him."

Eli swallowed, remembering the cold, impersonal note. Were Grant's earlier raw emotions true, and the note the lie?

"He's pushing me away. What the hell am I supposed to do?" He hadn't realized he'd said it out loud until Ian shrugged.

"Believe in him. Believe in yourself. You seem an intelligent sort. Use your heart and your head, and determine what will reach him. He deserves it."

Eli frowned. "Are you in love with him?"

That brought Ian's head up out of his book. "Dear Lord, no. What an idea. Love is a risky business to begin with. Grant and I are far too alike to try it with each other." He arched an ink-black brow the same way Grant did. "Besides, while I'm not immune to Grant's...appeal, I do prefer women for my romantic encounters." The dry smile reappeared. "And Grant is a bit too exuberant for my taste."

Eli swallowed, meeting Ian's opaque gaze with his own. "That's what I...love about him."

Ian nodded. "Then I suggest you find a way to convince him of it." Sharp features softened as Eli nodded and turned to go. "Eli."

Eli paused, one foot on the stairs. "Yeah?" Ian's dark gaze met his. "Good luck."

## CHAPTER 6

Eli made it out of the shop without running into Grant and spent the rest of the afternoon at home, thinking about what Ian had said.

He loved Grant. Eli knew that much. Now he had to figure out how to convince Grant it was safe to love him back.

He returned to Grant's building an hour before they were supposed to meet at the Eagles. *Wolf Ink* blazed blue neon from the front window, turning Eli's ivory button-down indigo as he opened the glass door to the tattoo shop. He passed the stairs leading to the Bookshoppe and kept going, his boots whispering across the light gray vinyl floor. His heart ached at the sight of the psychedelic purple couch in the waiting area, the vintage concert posters papering the ceiling, Grant's stock tattoo designs covering the walls.

*Exuberant*, Ian had called Grant, and the tattoo studio reflected it. *Wolf Ink* was Grant, and every time Eli walked through the door he felt surrounded by Grant's soul, his spirit.

If this didn't work Eli didn't think he'd ever be able to come here again.

A sound came from the far side of the shop and there was Grant in his tie-dyed glory. His back to Eli, he shut the door to the autoclave room beside the tattoo stations, then turned. Saw Eli standing next to the couch.

Froze.

"Hey," Eli said. His pulse racing, nerves tightening his stomach muscles, he crossed the studio to where Grant stood by the glass counter bisecting the shop.

I can do this, dammit. I have to.

"Uh, hey, kid. Thought we were meeting at the club?" Grant was a trifle too hearty, too casual. The customary warmth that had been there when they'd just been friends, before sex had entered into it, was barely detectable under the brittle tension filling Grant's voice.

Eli shrugged. "I came here instead."

Go ahead and hide it, babe. Hide it all you want. Because I think I've finally figured you out.

"Oh, I get it. Needed something to wear, right?" Grant continued, obviously uncomfortable with the silence of the otherwise empty studio. "Hey, no problem. I've got a harness upstairs like the one I wore last night. Adjustable, so it'll fit." A shadow shimmered in Grant's eyes, there and gone like a quicksilver fish in a murky lake. "Chad won't be able to resist you."

Eli took a deep breath and lifted his gaze to meet Grant's head-on. "I don't want him."

Grant looked taken aback, then made an effort to regroup. "Okay, no problem. Chad's a good guy, but there are other subs out there. I know one who—"

"No." He willed Grant to get it. "I don't want him."

Grant's brow furrowed. ""Then who—" His expression abruptly cleared, gaze darting away. "Like I said in the note, kid, I don't bottom."

"Then I won't top," Eli said firmly. "I want *you*. If being with you means I'm all submissive all the time, on my knees or my back for the rest of my days, then that's what I want, I promise."

Grant's eyes, which had widened at Eli's vow, turned dull, shuttered. "Look," he said carefully, as though Eli would shatter into a thousand pieces with the first wrong word. "What you're feeling is common, okay? It's called 'subbie love.' Submissives fall for the top who showed them this whole new world, taught them submission for the first time. It feels like love, but it isn't. You're infatuated with the person who did those things to you, but what you really love is what was done. I know it doesn't seem that way now, but you'll feel the same with the next good top who comes along, honest."

"You're wrong. Wanna know why?" For once Eli felt calm, in control. No matter how this turned out, it felt good,

damn good, to finally admit what he felt. "Because I was in love with you before this got started." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Jesus, Grant. I've been in love with you for months."

Grant's face paled.

Eli laughed without humor. He propped a hip against the glass counter and folded his arms over his chest. "Not what you wanted to hear? Too bad, you're going to hear it." Suddenly unable to stand still, Eli rounded the counter in two long strides and backed Grant up against the wall of the autoclave room, pinning him with his body and determination.

"I didn't know it was love at first," Eli admitted painfully, unable to stop from reaching out and running his knuckles down Grant's bare forearm.

So warm. God, Grant, you're always so warm.

"I thought it was just attraction. But when we first met, and you were oh-so-careful not to respond to any of my flirting, I got the message. You weren't interested. But you wanted to be friends, and I told myself I'd be satisfied with that. It wasn't easy, Grant. You're damn near irresistible, you know?" He held that amber gaze with his own by the sheer force of his will. "But once I acted like I wasn't interested in you romantically, you opened up to me. You didn't hold anything back. You laughed at my jokes, encouraged my art, confided in me when you were down, and shared your joy when things went your way."

Grant was wide-eyed, his jaw tight. The expression on his face was pure panic.

I scared Grant speechless. Way to go, Eli.

He wasn't going to stop before he'd said what he came to say, though.

"There was just that one part of you that you held back sex. And really, what did it matter? I didn't want anyone but you, and I was perfectly happy to pretend that you didn't want anyone else, either. You never checked out another guy when we were together, never cancelled plans on me because you had a date with someone else. And I never questioned it," Eli finished with a bitter laugh. He ran his fingers through his hair again, forcing himself to stay calm, to push aside the hurt. "I told myself that what we had was better because it was pure, that you liked me for myself, not what I could do for you in bed."

"I do like you for yourself," Grant said quietly. His eyes were haunted, shadowed. "What we've done together...it hasn't changed that, Eli. If you never let me touch you again, I'll still like you, admire you, want to spend time with you."

They were getting close now, close to the heart of everything. "I know. And that's what you'd like best, isn't it? For things to go back the way they were? Because it was uncomplicated, and safe. It's safe as long as we're just friends. Close friends, true, but just friends."

"We *are* just friends." Grant said it with so much force Eli wondered just who he was trying to convince, Eli or himself.

Eli brushed his hand against Grant's abdomen, slipping under the thin cotton hem of Grant's colorful T-shirt. The tattoo artist shuddered. Oh, yeah, Grant wasn't nearly as unmoved as he pretended.

"We're not just friends," Eli insisted. "No matter how much you'd like to think otherwise, what we've done together has changed things. You let it change."

Grant shook his head in mute denial.

Eli lifted his hands, cupped Grant's face between them. "You let your guard down, Grant. I saw it in your eyes. I submitted to you, and for that single moment you let yourself believe that what I felt was real, that I loved you. And you let yourself love me back."

"No, I—"

Eli didn't let him finish. "And when you realized what you did, you freaked. Got so desperate to push me away, to try and put some distance between us, that you set me up with another guy rather than admit you're afraid."

Grant stared at him, barely breathing. "Afraid of what?" he whispered hoarsely.

Gotcha, big guy.

Putting his hand behind Grant's neck, Eli drew Grant to him so their foreheads touched. "You were afraid of the same thing you've been afraid of all along. Loving someone, then losing them." His voice was soft. "Ian told me all about it."

Eli ignored Grant's frown, the sudden string of curses. "You've been playing it safe for years, right? You take a new boy home, teach him about himself, bask in the subbie love you're so determined I have. Make sure he understands the deal beforehand, just like you did with me. That way you can pretend what he feels for you is real, and for a moment you can let yourself feel the same. When it's over it doesn't hurt, because you both know the score."

"Ian knows shit," Grant growled. "If that's what I've been doing all these years, then there's no reason to freak out on you, is there?" he challenged. "What makes last night different?"

"Because it was me," Eli said gently, fingers massaging the tense muscles of Grant's neck. "Because no matter how much it scares you, you know on some level that what I feel for you is real."

Eli hesitated. Risked it all. "And because you feel the same."

Grant pushed Eli away. His face was beet-red, his gaze wild, furious. "That's bullshit," he snarled, stalking forward, forcing Eli to retreat until he was nearly bent backwards over the glass counter. Grant got right in his face, big hands gripping Eli's upper arms hard enough to bruise. "That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard!"

But Eli could hear the fear underlying Grant's anger, the faint, desperate thread of hope. It gave him the strength to smile.

"You big dummy," Eli said affectionately. "What we did was the most amazing thing I've ever experienced. Hell, the memory alone will be enough to get me hard when I'm ninety. But even if we never do it again I'll still feel exactly the same way. *I love you*. Try and get it through that thick skull of yours, okay?" The fury drained from Grant's face, leaving him defenseless. His jaw trembled. "I'm not sure I can," he murmured, his normal deep growl nearly inaudible.

Eli forced himself not to wilt in relief. *I'm getting to him. Thank fucking God.* 

Eli braced his hands against the counter and straightened. Grant stepped back, dropping his gaze to the floor.

*Now for the hard part. Do it fast.* "You're gonna have to," he said, reaching out and forcing Grant's chin up so their eyes met. "Because we can't go back to the way things were, Grant. *I* can't go back. Just being friends isn't going to cut it for me, not any more."

Grant swallowed. "Just what are you getting at, kid?" His voice was rough.

Eli took a deep breath. "You're the strongest, bravest guy I know. Looked in the mirror lately? You're a warrior, Grant, for all that your armor is leather and tie-dye and your sword is a tattoo machine. It's time to act like one. Take a chance on us, or you're gonna lose me."

Grant stepped back, stunned.

Eli moved away from the counter, from Grant. "It's gotta be your choice, babe. I can't do it for you. You want me, want *us*, then you have to prove it."

It took Grant two attempts to speak. That alone was enough to break Eli's heart. The next plaintive word just made the ache worse. "How?"

Eli smiled. It was either that or cry. "A date, for starters. No whips, no leather, no chains, just you and me, out in

public, *together*. Easiest thing in the world. People in love do it all the time."

Grant took a shuddering inhalation that said he was holding himself together by his fingernails. "And if I can't?"

Not gonna cry. Dammit, not gonna cry. At least not until I get out of here. "Then I'll tell you how much your friendship has meant to me and how much I'll always love you. Then I'll tell you goodbye." Eli took a deep breath and knew he had to finish this before he lost it entirely. He looked away, afraid his resolve would crumble if he got even a glimpse of Grant's face. "Meet me tomorrow night at Ninth and Telegraph. Sixthirty. Don't come if you're not serious." Eli spun on his heel and headed for the door.

"Eli, wait!"

Eli ignored Grant's call and hurried out into the night. He'd done what he had to, laid it all on the line.

What happened next was up to Grant.

# CHAPTER 7

He isn't gonna show.

Eli paced in front of the movie theatre and resisted looking at his watch for the twentieth time. He ran his fingers roughly through his hair, then groaned and tried to repair the damage without benefit of comb or mirror. He was going for tousledbut-sexy, not the just-got-out-of-bed-and-couldn't-find-abrush look.

God, what had he been thinking?

He'd all but called Grant a coward, challenged him to take a chance, to see how the rest of the world lived...and loved.

As friends they'd gone out together countless times, but if Grant showed this would be their first real date. So what did Eli pick?

Something unique, memorable, something that would show Grant everything he was missing by restricting his relationships to nothing more than kinky sex?

Nope. He picked a movie, the fall-back of dating, the lamest and most non-memorable time imaginable. The thing you did when you weren't sure if the date was gonna be any good and wanted to kill time by sitting in the dark not talking to each other.

Nice going, kid.

"So what are we watching?" Grant's voice was soft, a little tentative.

Eli's heart stuttered.

He showed.

Eli took a deep breath, turned around to say something witty...and just stood there with his mouth open while every drop of blood in his body headed straight for his dick.

Tattoo-shop Grant, in tie-dye and cutoffs, was cute as hell. Fetish-club Grant, with bare chest and skin-tight leather pants, was so hot just the memory practically sent Eli's brain into meltdown. And naked Grant...well, better not go there if he wanted to get through this without publicly mauling his date.

But date Grant, wearing faded jeans over soft brown leather boots, and a tight black T-shirt that clung to rippling pectorals and showcased tanned, muscular arms, was *amazing*. Add the reddish-gold ponytail tied back with a leather thong, the carefully trimmed beard, the tiny gold stud flashing in his right earlobe, and Grant was—

"Gorgeous," Eli blurted out, knowing it was corny but utterly unable to say anything else. "You're gorgeous."

Who knew Grant could smile like that, amazed and pleased and almost shy? Total opposite of his usual teasing grin, or that hot, commanding not-quite-smile he wore when he was being the dominant.

This smile was sweet, endearing, and made Eli fall in love with him all over again.

"Thanks," Grant said, voice still soft. The shy look changed to appreciation as he ran his eyes over Eli's black jeans and sapphire blue silk shirt. "You're looking pretty edible yourself, kid."

Eli took a deep breath and told his unruly body in no uncertain terms to calm the fuck down.

"Okay. First rule of traditional dating etiquette?" His eyes narrowed at Grant in warning. "It's not polite to give your date a hard-on in public."

Grant tried to look abashed, but Eli caught the hint of pleasure in his eyes at Eli's admission. To Grant's credit, he kept his eyes on Eli's face when he said, "Sorry. Still a little new to all of this."

Eli gave up resisting the urge and reached out, running his palm over the swell of Grant's bicep. "Not a problem. I'm glad you came."

Grant's lips curved. "Me, too."

Eli let his touch linger before he reluctantly drew away. Feeling Grant up really wasn't doing much to help with Eli's not-so-little problem. He cleared his throat. "So, movie. Our choices are angstridden chick-flick, not-quite-a-blockbuster with lots of explosions and crap acting, or the always-popular buddy-cop comedy." Eli tilted his head and thought about it. "I'd vote against the first, since angst is kinda heavy for a first date."

Grant took a step closer, enough that his chest brushed Eli's with each breath he took. "Wouldn't think you'd be worried about getting too heavy, considering how deep I was inside you yesterday," he murmured, open palm dancing over Eli's denim-clad hip.

Eli deliberately stepped away, smiling to ease the dismayed expression that flickered across the older man's face. "You're really not getting that first rule, are you?" he asked, his voice gentle, teasing.

Grant rewarded him with a rueful grin.

Eli shook his head and continued, "So, chick-flick is out. I'm not really in the mood for explosions. Which leaves the buddy-cop movie. We can point out the scenes where all the arguing between the two leads would, in the real world, have definitely led to sex."

Grant snorted and fell into step beside Eli as they headed over to the ticket window. "This a gay buddy-cop movie?"

"Nah. Hollywood barely survived giving us gay cowboys, it'll be awhile before we get gay cops. But buddy movies are filled with homoerotic sub-text." Eli winked at Grant. "You just have to know where to look."

They paid for their tickets, got popcorn and sodas, and took their seats. Ten minutes into the movie Grant casually

laid his hand on Eli's thigh in the dark. Eli just as casually slid his own hand under Grant's, palm up, and held on.

Grant sighed. After a moment Grant's thumb began tracing invisible circles on Eli's palm and it was...nice, just holding hands, and watching two good-looking actors who, in a perfect world, would have been fucking each other silly between takes.

"So what now?" Grant asked as they emerged from the theatre, the crowd spilling around them and onto the sidewalk.

Eli made his way to a relatively clear stretch of theatre wall and leaned against it, tilting his head up to meet Grant's gaze. "If the date sucked, this would be the part where we shake hands politely and say 'it was fun' and 'I'll call you.' Then we go our separate ways and never see each other again."

Grant's gaze searched Eli's. Then the too-serious expression on the big man's bearded face warmed. "Date didn't suck."

"Far from it," Eli agreed, and let out a mental sigh of relief. "If the date was pretty good, then we say goodnight and go our separate ways with the understanding that we'll definitely do this again."

"What if the date was fantastic?" Grant asked huskily, one hand coming up to tentatively stroke Eli's smooth cheek.

Eli couldn't look away from the compelling combination of lust and vulnerability in Grant's gaze. "If the date was that good, then I'd ask you if you wanted to walk me home."

"I'd like that."

The walk back was comfortable, reminiscent of the evenings they'd spent together when Eli had thought all he could hope to get from Grant was his friendship.

Amazing how just one weekend could change everything.

They talked about the movie, entertained each other by making up cheesy dialog filled with innuendo that they both agreed would have made the thing much better.

Grant was relaxed, fun, the same person Eli had first gotten to know as a friend. But every once in a while Grant would fall silent and *look* at him, telling Eli without words that he was remembering the way Eli had shuddered in his arms and couldn't wait to make him do it again.

This was the man he'd fallen in love with.

The easy, charged camaraderie lasted all the way to Eli's house, but then it suddenly changed. As they climbed the front porch of the tiny two-bedroom rental, Grant turned, a hesitant expression on his face. "So, this is where we say good night, huh?" he joked, but the humor didn't mask his trepidation.

"Traditionally, there's one more part to the date," Eli said, taking a shaky breath. This was it, this was the test. "A good-night kiss."

Grant's immediate deer-in-the-headlights look wasn't reassuring. "But, kid, I don't...I can't..."

"Shhh," Eli whispered, approaching Grant, not discouraged when Grant backed up until he was trapped against the wall beside the door.

"I love you, Grant." Eli had never felt so sure of anything in his life, and hoped Grant could see that on his face.

#### JUST FRIENDS

Then Eli gathered his courage, cupped Grant's face in the palms of his hands, and brought Grant's mouth to his.

#### JUST FRIENDS

# CHAPTER 8

For a long, terrifying moment Grant stood frozen beneath him, unresponsive, lips still as Eli's moved gently, coaxingly, over his.

The briefest movement of Grant's mouth was like nectar to a starving man. Eli drank it down. It was followed by a tentative brush of hands at Eli's hips, the slightest sway of Grant's body toward his. Eli mentally crossed his fingers and risked deepening the kiss. He moved those final few inches until he was pressed up against Grant's hot, hard body.

The dam broke.

Grant groaned a desperate, pleading sound into Eli's mouth. His fingers tightened on Eli's hips, jerking him closer.

A warm tongue and silky soft lips danced over his, parrying each thrust of Eli's tongue with an answering plunge.

Grant was kissing him.

They had to come up for oxygen eventually. For one long, tense moment they stared at each other. The look in Grant's eyes was wanting and desperate and utterly terrified. "Eli," he whispered, "God, I—"

Eli quelled the broken words with the gentle press of a fingertip against Grant's mouth. He knew how much Grant had risked with that kiss.

I only kiss when I'm in love.

"Shhh," Eli said. "I'll take care of you, okay?"

A sound suspiciously like a sob escaped Grant.

Eli had to kiss him at that, mouth desperate, hungry, wanting to draw the raw emotion from Grant's mouth and into his soul.

"Let me take care of you, baby. Please."

"Yeah," Grant muttered against his mouth, in between gasping breaths and needy kisses. "God, yeah."

They somehow managed to get inside the house, Eli thanking heaven that his roommate was gone for the night.

"Just us, Grant. Just you and me," Eli whispered, kissing Grant as they moved through the sparsely furnished living room, past the tiny bachelor kitchen, down the narrow hall and into Eli's bedroom.

Grant.

In his bedroom.

God, he could barely wrap his mind around that.

"Glad you're here," Eli muttered against the slick, wet tongue twining with his.

"Good," was all Grant said, followed shortly by a gasping sigh as he came up for air. "God, I want you."

"Want you, too," Eli answered, taking advantage of the break to place Grant's hand firmly over his own aching dick. "See how much?"

"Yeah," Grant groaned huskily. He stroked Eli's cock once, then shuddered. "Want you in me, Eli."

His heart swelled at the request. Though Eli would have sworn it wasn't possible, his cock swelled even more, rubbing against his underwear, soaking it through.

"You mean it?" he asked, strangled, not sure if he was going to cry or come at the thought.

Having Grant.

Fucking Grant.

Jesus.

Grant's smile was sweet, though his eyes were fiery with desire. "Yeah, I mean it. Show me."

Show me you love me. Eli heard Grant's unspoken plea.

"I'll take care of you," Eli murmured.

His hands twisted in Grant's T-shirt, pulling it up and off, then he quickly removed his own. Shoes toed off, pants and briefs discarded, Eli bore Grant back on the bed.

The redhead sprawled gloriously naked on Eli's plain bedspread, upper body propped on his elbows. Eli hungrily stared at Grant's nude, hard body.

"Take your ponytail out," He whispered, crawling onto the

bed between Grant's spread legs. "I like your hair loose."

Grant chuckled and complied, shaking his red-gold mane out around his face and neck. "Kinda girly, don't you think?" he asked, an underlying quiver of lust in his voice.

Eli bent his head and licked a long, moist trail up the inside of Grant's thigh. He was rewarded by Grant's gasp and sudden tension in his legs. "Believe me, babe," Eli murmured wickedly, interspersing his words with long swipes of his tongue, circling but never quite touching the weeping cock just under his nose. "I know you're not a girl."

"Quit teasing," Grant growled, arching his hips.

Eli almost made a comment about topping from the bottom but discarded it in favor of kissing his way up Grant's body.

With long strokes he licked Grant's cut abs, laved the slopes of his pectorals, bit and nipped the hard pink nipples until Grant jerked and writhed beneath him like a raft on a storm-tossed ocean.

Eli finally reached Grant's mouth. His tongue danced between Grant's silky lips, and he gloried in the rasp of beard against his own smooth skin. He kissed Grant until the man was moaning continuously, then he pulled back and stared deep into Grant's eyes.

"Gonna fuck me, kid?" It was both a challenge and a desperate plea.

"Nope," Eli said easily, ignoring Grant's pained groan. Eli leaned in, until he could see nothing but golden eyes filled with lust and fear and, yes, the love that Grant had been so terrified of showing. "I'm gonna make love to you." When the last of the fear in Grant's eyes disappeared Eli knew he'd said the right thing.

"Please," Grant begged.

Eli kissed him hard and fast, then slipped his hand under the pillow to retrieve the lube he'd secreted there that morning, hoping. There was a condom there, too, which Eli withdrew and held up for Grant's perusal, silently questioning.

Grant shook his head, taking the small foil package and tossing it aside. "Want to feel you in me, nothing separating us." The muscles in his throat tightened as he swallowed. "I trust you."

Oh, God.

Eli's heart and cock throbbed in concert. "You gotta stop saying stuff like that or this is gonna be over before it starts."

The corners of Grant's mouth curved upward. "Want me to talk dirty instead?"

"God, no, just...quiet for a minute, okay?"

Grant laughed. He leaned back and mimed zipping his lips, though the delight in his eyes spoke volumes.

Eli knelt between Grant's legs and stared at his lover. Ginger curls dusted Grant's powerful chest. A thin line of hair—*Road to Glory*—trailed down to the thick length of Grant's cock, hard and tight against his belly. Strong, ropy thighs spread wide, heavy balls on display just above the shadowed cleft of his body that Eli was suddenly desperate to touch, to possess.

He stroked a light fingertip over Grant's scrotum, grinning as Grant gasped and arched into the touch.

Eli drizzled lube on his fingers, rubbing them together to warm the gel, then slid his fingers over Grant's perineum and down to his opening. Grant groaned deep and low as Eli slipped a finger just inside.

"You're so tight," Eli whispered, as fascinated by the expressions playing across Grant's face as the feel of the taut muscles surrounding his slick finger. "You have done this before, right?"

"Hey, me and my...prostate...have a very...healthy relationship, I'll have you know." Grant's hips jerked wildly, cock bobbing, arms thrown wide and grabbing handfuls of Eli's sheets. "Just...go easy. Been awhile...oh, fuck, yeah," he moaned as Eli slipped a second finger after the first.

Eli scissored his fingers, concentrating on preparing Grant, while he fought to restrain his own nearly uncontrollable lust.

Then Grant's gaze found his. "Love you," he whispered, desire making his voice thick.

Eli lost control.

"Sorry, gotta fuck you *now*," Eli chanted, gritting his teeth as he slicked himself because even that light touch was enough to make him almost explode.

He pressed the head of his cock at Grant's entrance, bit his lip as Grant's arms wrapped around his own knees, pulling his legs up and out of the way.

"You're so fucking hot like this," Eli muttered, torn between staring at Grant's lust-riddled face and watching as the head of his dick disappeared into Grant's grasping flesh.

"More," Grant hissed.

Eli obliged, doing his best to be careful, but too close to the edge to wait as he slowly drove his cock in to the hilt.

They groaned in unison. Grant lowered his legs and wrapped them around Eli's hips, arching the small of his back. "Eli, please," he begged.

Eli pulled out and sank in, gasping at the incredible heat and tightness of Grant's passage. It was like dipping his dick in a furnace. He thrust again, then again, watching Grant's face, searching, until his cock stroked over that spot inside.

Grant arched, cried out and reached a frantic hand toward his own erection.

"Yeah, do that," Eli muttered, hips twisting and working, palms clutching Grant's ass. His eyes stayed glued to Grant's big hand as it slid over steel-hard flesh, swiping across the weeping head so the copious amounts of pre-cum eased his way. Eli's balls drew tight against his body. "Grant, gonna come, come with me, baby, let me see you, Christ, yes, yes, yes...!"

Then he was driving into Grant as hard as he could.

Grant's hand was a blur on his cock, but his gaze stayed locked on Eli's. The emotion there pulled the bursts of fluid from Eli as much as Grant's clenching ass did.

Muscular cords stood out in Grant's neck. He gave a deep cry that was nearly a howl as jet after jet of hot white semen spurted from his cock, spraying his belly, both their chests.

Eli collapsed on top of him.

They lay there for a minute, Grant's drumming heart slowing against Eli's chest, then the steady beat changed to a

rumble as Grant chuckled. Eli roused himself enough to stare down at his laughing lover. "What?"

Grant grinned and stretched, large hands rubbing circles on Eli's bare back. "You," he said, shaking his head. "I was so sure you only loved me because you were in the whole subbie's-first-top glow, and it turns out you're a natural dominant. You know just what to say, what to do to make me scream."

Eli searched Grant's face, saw the light in his eyes, and shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know what I am. Top, bottom, switch, vanilla—Okay, probably not vanilla," he admitted at Grant's raised eyebrow. "Considering how much I got off on all the stuff we did this weekend. I do know one thing, though," he said, sliding out of Grant's body to curl at his lover's side, hiding a grin at Grant's whimper.

"Feel empty. Don't like it," Grant muttered, shifting his arm until Eli was nestled in his embrace.

"Been there, done that," Eli answered. "And if this is you suddenly embracing the bottom's lifestyle, I'm gonna stomp and throw things. I want you in me next time. With all the kinky accoutrements."

Grant chuckled. "No problem with that." His warm hands rubbed Eli's back, then paused. "So what do you know?"

"Hmmm? Oh." Eli tilted his chin up. "Kiss me and I'll tell you."

As long as he lived Eli would never tire of that sweet, wondering expression on Grant's face. Their lips met, silk and spice, languid and wet. *I love you* was in the slow tangling of

their tongues.

The kiss finally ended. Grant's eyes were soft as they met Eli's. "What do you know?"

Eli smiled and snuggled down in Grant's embrace, everything finally right in his world. "That you're mine."

Grant's arms tightened around him. "Yeah, I am. For what it's worth, you've got me, kid. In all my neurotic, screwed up, kinky glory. Sorry yet?"

Eli leaned over and nipped the sensitive flesh just under Grant's nipple, then grinned smugly when his lover yelped. "No, I'm not sorry."

"Well, good. No more biting, though, or I'll spank you." A warm hand drifted down and fondly squeezed his ass.

"Promises, promises. Know what else I know?" "What?"

Eli tilted his head up and saw the love shining brightly in Grant's eyes. "I'm yours," he said simply.

"Yeah," Grant breathed. That said it all for both of them.

### **ANNE THOMAS**

Anne Thomas has been in love with writing romance since she pounded out her first attempt at a historical on a 1955 Royal Manual typewriter bought at a farm auction. After moving to sunny Arizona and joining Romance Writers of America, Anne finally got a handle on that most elusive of goals, how to actually finish a book. She has since written three full-length novels and several erotic novellas, most of them with an urban fantasy theme.

Anne's favorite thing about writing (and reading!) romance is the journey the characters make to find their soul mates. Anne believes that the search for love is what makes us human, and that search transcends gender or lifestyle choices. Her favorite type of story is filled with exciting, edgy, sometimes exotic encounters between people who are in love.

To learn more about Anne and her writing, please visit her website at:

http://annethomasromance.com

## AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC HOME OF AMBER HEAT!

## QUALITY EROTIC FICTION IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SCIENCE FICTION

ALTERNATIVE

ROMANCE

DARK FANTASY

CONTEMPORARY

AND MORE...

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE http://www.amberheat.com

SUSPENSE/THRILLER PARANORMAL MYSTERY HORROR FANTASY HISTORICAL