

# HEARTS & BONES



M. L. RHODES

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

**Amber Quill Press**

[www.amberquill.com](http://www.amberquill.com)

Copyright ©2007 by M. L. Rhodes

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

HEARTS & BONES

By

M. L. RHODES

\* \* \* \*

ISBN 978-1-60272-110-4

Amber Quill Press, LLC

[www.amberquill.com](http://www.amberquill.com)

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

Also By M. L. Rhodes

After Hours

Always

The Bodyguard

The Bounty Hunter

Couplings

Falling

Heat

Lords of Kellesborne

Magic

Masks

Never Let Go

Night Shadows

Out of My Mind

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

The Professor's Secret Passion

Souls Deep

Take It On Faith

True Of Heart

Well Hung

## CHAPTER 1

Will McLaren paused at the top of the loft stairs, holding the cardboard box he'd brought up from the living room of the log cabin house. But the words he'd been about to say died on the tip of his tongue as he took in the sight of his best friend since high school who, for the past four weeks, had also been his lover and so much more.

For a moment, Will's heart hitched in his chest.

After all the years of keeping his true feelings and desires bottled up inside, being the best friend, but always wanting more, he suspected he might not ever fully get over his wonder at walking into a room, seeing Ethan, and knowing that, in spite of the fact it had taken them sixteen years of friendship before they sorted it out, they were really together now in every way.

As Will watched, Ethan placed books on one of the tall pine bookshelves against the wall, and with his back turned to Will, Will had a perfect view. And a hell of a view it was, too.

Ethan's jeans rode low on his lean hips and the faded blue denim clung lovingly to his ass. When he reached down to grab another stack of books from a box, then straightened and began setting them one-by-one on an upper shelf, his muscles stretched taut, along with the navy blue T-shirt he wore, which hugged his body, accentuating the breadth of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist. Afternoon May sunlight filtered through the ponderosa pines outside and into the floor-to-ceiling window that dominated the log wall,

flanked by the massive bookshelves on either side. The golden rays glinted off Ethan's dark-blond hair, recently trimmed, but still longer than he used to wear it. It fell against his neck and over his ears in a shaggy yet stylish and ruggedly sexy way that left Will with the urgent desire to slide his hands through the soft, thick strands—like he had last night.

*Oh, yeah.*

Yesterday evening, before the sun had set, he'd been out on the deck in back of the house fixing a section of the railing that had come loose. Ethan had found him there, mumbled something about Will being hot as hell with tools in his hands, dropped to his knees, and despite the fact they were out in the open, pulled down Will's jeans, and had given him a mind-bending blowjob. All Will had been capable of doing was burying his hands in Ethan's hair, tugging him closer, and groaning out his considerable release as he tried to keep his legs from buckling beneath him.

*Damn.* The memory alone was enough to get him hard all over again.

"How long are you planning to stand there and gawk at my ass?" Ethan asked without turning around. Humor laced his voice, along with a warm, suggestive undercurrent.

A smile curved Will's lips. He should have known. Of course Ethan had heard him coming up the stairs, and had no doubt sensed him standing there drinking in the sight of him. One of the things Will had quickly learned when Ethan moved in with him was that it was impossible to sneak up on the

man. Ethan's years as a spy had honed his senses to almost scary proportions. He didn't miss much.

"You could have grunted or something to let me know you knew I was here."

Ethan glanced over his shoulder and flashed a grin. His Caribbean blue eyes sparkled. "Why? I was enjoying it. And you were thinking about last night out on the deck, weren't you?"

Will felt his mouth fall open. "How could you *possibly* know that?"

Ethan shelved another book and chuckled. "Because just a few seconds ago, when you thought you were being quiet, you let out a soft, little groan that was pretty much a mirror of the louder one you did last night when you came."

"Shit. I did not. I never made a sound just now."

Ethan turned and offered him a raised eyebrow that said otherwise. The jagged scar over his brow—a remnant of a teenage injury—which on anyone else might have detracted from good looks, only made Ethan appear even sexier. "You totally got off on it, and it wasn't just the blowjob in the great outdoors. You loved the added thrill of knowing someone might see—a neighbor or maybe someone hiking."

Will strolled across the loft and slid the box he'd been holding onto the desk. "Who was going to see? We're in the middle of the mountains. We live on twenty acres. So do most of the neighbors. And the possibility of someone hiking in the Pecos across the creek at that exact moment was slim to none."



"Sure. But that doesn't stop old man Sutherland from scoping out everything with his binoculars every chance he gets. He keeps them right on top of his TV, in hopes he'll see us doing something shocking, or he'll catch sight of Jade Vasquez and her boyfriend nude in their hot tub."

Will had to laugh at that. Felix Sutherland was a retiree who lived in front of his TV watching soap operas, and the rest of the time creating his own made-up soaps by watching his nearest neighbors on either side of him. He could barely see Will and Ethan's place to the north, or Jade Vasquez's to the south through the trees, and only then if he stood out on the little extended, raised platform he'd built on his deck for the sole purpose of getting a better view. He was like a stooped old raven standing out on his perch. But you had to give the old guy credit ... he worked hard for his view.

"Do you suppose we gave him an eyeful?" Will asked.

Ethan turned and lounged a shoulder against the bookshelf, casually crossing his arms over his chest. "If he happened to be looking at that moment ... oh, yeah. He told me he's been wondering how we 'queers' make the parts fit."

"When the hell did he tell you that?"

"He comes over and talks to me every few days. I don't get the impression he's critical of us at all, just ... curious. It's like he purposely waits until he sees me outside, then he shows up, trying to make it look like it was coincidental. That particular day, he was out walking his old hound, and I was clearing a spot in the garage for my stuff because we were leaving in a couple of days to go to Virginia to get it."

"I've lived here for over two years and have talked to him maybe three or four times ever. Now the guy's always around?"

"Well, you're usually gone during the day and I'm here. And besides, before, you were just a guy living alone. Now we're two guys openly living together, making no effort to hide the fact we're a little more than just friends. So, in his eyes, things probably didn't get interesting enough to involve himself until recently." Ethan grinned. "Now we give him that juicy gossip he lives for."

"Oh, that's just great." Will rolled his eyes and sat on the corner of the desk. "I live to be juicy gossip for an old peeping tom pervert."

"No..." Ethan stepped closer and leaned down to plant an unexpected, teasing kiss against Will's lips. His gaze smoldered, causing the familiar fluttering in Will's stomach that occurred whenever things were about to get hot between the two of them. His breath was warm against Will's mouth when he spoke. "What you live for is to have me suck your cock. Among other things."

All the blood in Will's body suddenly pooled in his groin.

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" he managed to get out without sounding totally like he'd been sucker-punched by lust.

"About this? Always. And you know I'm right." One of Ethan's hands snaked down to caress Will through his khaki shorts.

Will let him get in a couple of strokes, but then caught his wrist, reminded of what he'd intended to talk to Ethan about

when he first came up here. "Wait, wait, wait. Hold on a second. First you have some explaining to do."

"Explaining?"

"Yeah. I thought you weren't going to keep any more secrets from me."

Will meant it as a tease, but for just a split second he saw Ethan tense and saw a flicker of something—pain? guilt?—in his eyes, then it vanished. Still, it was enough to send a twinge of regret through Will. He knew that, in spite of their newfound intimacy, Ethan still had closets full of secrets he couldn't tell because of the nature of his former job. But he suspected there were also things Ethan was simply choosing not to tell him for whatever reason. Maybe because Ethan had lived his entire life playing his cards close to his vest for self protective reasons and old habits died hard. Or maybe because he wanted to keep Will and this life completely separate from the one he'd lived before.

In either case, Will hated it, wished that Ethan would open up and share more with him, but he tried not to push. Ethan had been through a hell of a lot the past few years, had suffered enough, without constant prodding from him to tell all.

Without waiting for Ethan to question him, and feeling bad for leaving such a loaded comment hanging in the air in the first place, he reached around Ethan and pulled a spiral-bound sketchbook out of the box he'd brought up a few minutes before.

"This." He waved it in the air. "The box was open and this was on top."

Ethan's body relaxed and a slow, devilish smile slid across his face. "And let me guess ... you just couldn't resist looking, could you?"

"Of course not. I had to check out the first few pages anyway. And what I found was more than a little fascinating." He flipped open the book and held up the first double-page of drawings for Ethan to see. "Take these for example ... the attention to detail is ... well ... detailed. And I happened to notice the signature at the bottom of each of them. *E. Gallagher*." This time it was his turn to raise his eyebrows in playful question. "Is there something you'd care to tell me, Mr. Gallagher? Some little something that over the sixteen years we've known each other you've conveniently never mentioned before?" He waved the book again.

Ethan chuckled. "Give me that." He snatched it away, then turned to sit next to Will on the desk, their thighs touching intimately. "I hadn't thought of this in a long time." He and Will gazed down at the first two pages, then several others as Ethan flipped his way through the book. "Remember when I took that art class in college?"

"Vaguely. I remember you telling me you were drawing live models. You didn't mention they looked like this, though."

"'Cause they didn't. In class we drew mostly women, although we had a man a couple of times. But the drawing bug kind of bit me in that class. I'd never really drawn anything until then and I liked it. So on my own time, and for several years after that, I found my own models. There were a few clubs I went to sometimes, and I drew people there."

He paused on a particularly detailed black-and-white drawing of a young man chained hand and foot, spread eagle, between two poles. An elaborate, several-ringed cock and ball harness held his swollen dick and testicles in a tight vise, and his faced was screwed up into an expression of pain and pleasure, obviously from the whip lashing his back. The wielder of the whip wasn't in the picture, but Will's imagination decided it was a leather-clad muscle man.

The picture next to it showed a different man, bent over a stool, his hands cuffed behind his back, his mouth around the dick of a man standing in front of him, and someone else walloping his ass with a paddle.

"Christ," Will breathed, unable to stop the surge of heat that roused his own eager cock at the scenarios depicted. He hadn't gotten this far into the sketchbook when he'd look on his own, and hadn't seen any of these scenes. "I didn't know you were ever into this kind of stuff."

Ethan shrugged. "It was just a thing that was moderately interesting for a while. To go there and draw these guys."

"Did you ever participate?"

Ethan turned to the next page in the book, which was a tamer scene, of a man chained with his arms over his head, but this guy was looking right at Ethan when Ethan drew him, the expression on his lean, handsome face part raw sexuality, part open adoration. It was as if his eyes were devouring Ethan as Ethan drew him. Will had a strong sense the man was someone Ethan knew more than just a little. When Ethan quickly turned the page like it made him uncomfortable, Will

was certain of it. Certain enough a twinge of jealousy crept through him, and it wasn't a feeling he liked much.

"So...?" he prodded.

"Sometimes."

"What about the guy in the picture you just passed so fast?"

"What about him?"

"You knew him."

Another shrug.

"Come on ... talk to me."

"I don't suppose there's a chance you're going to let this go, are you?" he asked ruefully.

"I try not to pressure you, Ethan, but you don't talk much about your life after you moved to the east coast. So you have to know these drawings have got me curious."

Ethan nodded, looking resigned. "Fair enough. Yeah, I did the BDSM scene for a while when I was younger. Not regularly, but after I went to work for the government I played around with it for a few months in my off time, going to fetish clubs and stuff. Mostly out of curiosity rather than a burning desire to live the lifestyle."

"And the guy in the drawing?"

"I slept with him a few times."

"Was it serious?"

"No. Definitely no."

Will flipped back to the page with the man in question. "He looks pretty serious about you."

Ethan grimaced as if it were an unpleasant memory. "He wanted us to be. I didn't. I'd made that clear from the

beginning, but he chose not to hear me. Plus ... it turned out he was very much into S&M in hardcore ways I wasn't."

"So what happened?"

"I ended it. But it got messy because we had to see each other every day."

"You worked together?"

"We trained together."

Will could tell from Ethan's short, less-than-detailed responses the conversation was making Ethan uncomfortable in more ways than one. "I'm sorry. It's really none of my business who you slept with in the past."

Ethan looked up, his gaze troubled but understanding. Then he sighed and gave Will a half-smile. "It's okay. I know it's hard for you, Will ... the not knowing. And you're right. I kept a lot hidden from you for a long time. So ... if you want to know things, ask. If I can't tell you, I'll say so. Otherwise, I'll try to be as open as I can."

Will swallowed past the knot that had formed in his throat and nodded. There were lots of things he *did* want to know, but he didn't like having to put Ethan on the spot to get answers. He wished Ethan would volunteer more information. In this particular case, the logical part of him knew sometimes less was better when it came to old affairs of the heart, or just old affairs period. But he was painfully curious about Ethan's past relationships, and it was a topic Ethan, up to this point, had stayed noticeably mute about. Now, looking through the pictures in the sketchbook and discovering a side of his friend and lover he'd never known existed only made

Will's urge to know more acute. What else had Ethan not told him?

"So about these clubs and your activities in them, and, I'm assuming, outside of them ... what was it like?"

"Hmm ... intense, I guess is how I'd describe it. At least from my perspective. I only ever experienced it as a top. I was never the one..."

"Tied up?" Will supplied.

"Yeah. I was the one who did the tying up and the other things that went along with it."

Will had a brief vision of Ethan in the role of leather-clad top, bringing some lucky sub to the heights of pleasure, and it sent a new wave of heat through him. But what really lit his fire was thinking of the opposite ... of Ethan in restraints, spread open, and at Will's mercy.

*Holy crap.*

Will knew, though, that he would never strike Ethan in any way, not even in play. And he'd never truly restrain him either. It would be all about driving him mad with pleasure alone, never pain. Because although Ethan might once have enjoyed bondage and S&M play, Will knew they were not activities he'd ever be able to deal with from the receiving end. Eth had grown up with an abusive, alcoholic father who regularly beat the hell out of him, so Will suspected there'd never be any excitement or joy for Ethan in being struck. He was a bit surprised Ethan had even played in the kink scene at all, even as a top. But maybe there was some deep-seated psychological reason he'd needed to try it—maybe something about needing to explore his own power and ability to control



himself and skate that fine line between giving someone else pleasure and pain.

Will was certain, though, that the hardcore bondage and S&M would hold no appeal for Ethan now, from any perspective. The scenes shown in this sketchbook had taken place in a time before Ethan had spent nearly three years held captive and tortured in some third-world prison cell. Will didn't know the details of his imprisonment—Ethan had assured him it was better if he didn't know, which in and of itself told Will scary plenty. But he did know that on his last assignment, Ethan's cover had somehow been blown and he'd been held by a militant group who'd done their damndest to break him—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

As Ethan continued turning pages next to him—the pictures now mostly single male nudes without the BDSM accouterments—Will worried that perhaps the sketchbook had stirred up too much discomfort for him.

It had been almost three months since Ethan's release from captivity, and though outwardly he was adjusting to real life and gave the appearance all was good, Will knew him intimately, lived with him. The Ethan who'd returned after those three years was a different man from the one who'd left. He could no longer tolerate small, dark spaces or anything that gave him a sense of being confined. He tried to play down the anxiety attacks that plagued him, but it tore Will up to watch the man he loved struggle to fight them off.

They were growing fewer, and the nightmares seemed to be also, but Will had awakened more than once at night to the sound of Ethan's distress, or to find him gone from bed

and out on the deck, breathing in the crisp mountain night air or, on cold nights, in the living room with its huge windows and skylights that made him feel less constricted.

A sudden protective surge welled up in him. He took the sketchbook out of Ethan's hands, set it aside, and, cupping his face, kissed him. Slowly and deeply.

"What was that for?" Ethan asked, his gaze soft.

"Because I love you."

Ethan's smile was pure and unclouded with the darkness that could so easily have affected it. "I know. And you know what else I know?"

"What's that?"

"Looking at those pictures made you horny."

"No, looking at you when I first came up here did—hell, looking at you right now makes me horny. You seem to always have that effect on me."

"Do you think it's any different for me? Jesus ... who whipped out whose dick last night on the deck?"

Will chuckled. "You didn't see me stopping you, did you? Shit, I couldn't even talk."

"I noticed." Ethan's hand slid back down to Will's groin, and his smile made Will's knees go weak. Good damn thing he was sitting down.

"I'm thinking once you get your business up and running, if you start having clients come here to the house," Will said, "I'd probably better stay out of here while you work."

"You afraid you'll be unable to resist the urge to charge up here, throw me down on the desk, and have your way with me while they watch?"

Will let his gaze slide around the loft that overlooked the living room below. He'd lived in the house almost two-and-a-half years, but had never used the loft. It had been empty space, almost as if it had been waiting for Ethan to move in and fill it with his things in preparation for using it as his office from which he'd run his consulting business. It was open and airy, and the perfect place for Ethan's oak desk and credenza, the book shelves, and a leather recliner. And suddenly all Will could think about was what nefarious sexual uses they could put the furniture to.

"Yeah, and wouldn't that just give new meaning to international business consulting?" he said.

"Not to mention what it'd do for your reputation as the quiet, mild-mannered, intellectual wildlife biologist otherwise known as Dr. William McClaren."

Will snorted, but couldn't stop the grin that slid across his face.

Ethan leaned close and kissed Will's neck, sending a shiver of need through him.

"There's just one thing, my hot and hunky science geek," he whispered next to Will's ear.

"What's that?"

His fingers began freeing the buttons on Will's shirt. "There aren't any clients here now," he said, just before his mouth closed over Will's.

## CHAPTER 2

The kiss quickly escalated to open mouths, tongues, soft grunts, and fondling hands.

When they were forced to come up for oxygen, Ethan traced a path with his hot lips along Will's jawline to his ear. "And I don't care what you say, those drawings did turn you on. In a big damn way. You liked them."

"You draw naked man-flesh very well," Will admitted.

Ethan leaned back to look him in the eye. His sparked with white-hot passion and a twinkle of mischief. "Was it the naked men or the kink that did it for you? Did you like seeing all those guys at the complete mercy of their lovers?"

He wanted to deny it for Ethan's sake, so Ethan wouldn't think he could get off on something that made Ethan uncomfortable, but waves of need throbbed through Will, so powerful and hot it made it hard to breathe.

"Oh, yeah ... you did," Ethan murmured, nodding. He didn't seem to be disappointed by that fact. "It got you seriously hot." His hand slid down to press Will's cock through the fabric. "Look how fucking hard you are." He slipped free the button on Will's shorts and grated down the zipper, and Will almost gasped in relief as his rock-hard erection was freed from the tight confines. Ethan found the opening in his boxer briefs and nudged Will's stiff shaft through it, then began to flutter his fingers against the head as Will groaned.

"Damn," Ethan murmured, his voice thick with desire. "Every time I see your cock I want it in my mouth ... or in other parts of me."

"You're an instigator of trouble, you know that?" Will rasped.

"And you love it. So what are you going to do about it?"

It was a challenge—and an obvious invitation—Will couldn't resist. Another shudder of need wracked through him.

"Take your clothes off," he directed. "Everything."

Without hesitation, Ethan rose. He was already barefoot, so he stripped off his shirt and, never taking his eyes off Will, with a teasing smile, unbuttoned and slowly pushed down his jeans ... exposing nothing but skin.

*Oh, hell.* "Commando?"

"I thought you might like that."

"I do. Shit. I *really* do." The thought that Ethan had been wandering around the house all day with nothing but himself under his Levi's made Will's balls tighten.

He let his gaze roam, this time without the interference of clothing—although he had to admit that Ethan always looked good enough to eat, even dressed. Will's own fashion sense ran mostly toward comfort without much thought to looks—he could happily live in jeans or shorts, tees or sweatshirts, and did most of the time. Whereas Ethan, even when he wore jeans and tees, looked like he'd stepped off the page of *GQ* or some high-end men's catalogue.

But without clothes ... damn. His cock, almost fully erect, stood out from a nest of dark-blond curls in invitation. As Will gave it his full attention, it leapt in apparent eagerness.

The man was damned sexy, with his hair falling over his blue eyes and that suggestive half-smile on his face. Like a

bad boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar and not the least bit sorry about it.

"You want me," he said, giving Will a heated look.

"Has that ever been in doubt?"

Ethan's answer was another smile. As Will watched, he slid a hand down his own chest and abs, then wrapped his palm around his cock, giving it a slow, wanton stroke. The sight of the engorged head sliding in and out of Ethan's fist, the slit glistening with droplets of pre-cum, almost made Will swallow his tongue it was so fricking erotic. He felt Ethan watching him, but for the moment, he couldn't look up to meet his gaze. He was too spellbound by what was going on at his lover's groin.

Ethan lowered his free hand to his sac, pulling it up and cradling it so Will had a better view of his balls. He began massaging them.

"See this?" Ethan murmured, his voice low and oozing pure sex. He continued to stroke his shaft, tugging at the skin, sliding his hand down to the root, then easing it up until, yet again, his swollen crown protruded from his fist. The cum was more prolific now, a thin stream of it seeping from the eye and dribbling over his hand. "This is all yours. It's hard for you. It's weeping for you."

Will could barely breathe. Barely think. His own cock was a tower of granite standing up through his briefs.

"Every time I look at you," Ethan continued, "the way your eyes glaze over when you're turned on, the way you smile that damned sweet smile of yours, the way you walk and move ... I want to come. The way you look first thing in the

morning when you're still half-asleep and your morning wood's thick and hard against me ... I want to come. Every time I hear you talk to me in that deep, gentle voice that's one part boy next door and two parts pure sex ... I fucking want to come. And the way you kiss ... When you kiss me, all I want is to have you fill me so hard and deep with your prick and your seed that I won't be able to move ever again ... I'll be impaled on you, through and through, for all time."

"Shit." Will was dizzy with a deep, animalistic hunger that was near to consuming him. He looked up at Ethan, and their gazes caught and erupted in a white-hot fire that Will thought might incinerate him from the inside out.

"You want me," Ethan murmured again.

"Hell, yes, I do." He rose from the desk, and in one long stride was in front of Ethan, pulling him into a hard, hungry kiss, one hand behind his head, the other gripping his ass, grinding his shaft against Ethan's, feeling the combined slickness of their cum blending together, lubricating their encounter.

And then he was pulling his mouth free, turning Ethan, moving him toward the big floor-to-ceiling window, pressing him against it.

With a heated look at Will over his shoulder, Ethan faced the glass, spread his arms up and out, and curled his fingers around the window frame, which he could just barely reach on each side.

At the sight of him stretched out like that, offering himself up, in front of the window where anyone who drove into the driveway or walked by on the mountain road would be able to

see him, Will's throat went dry. Someone could be watching right now.

He slid his arms around Ethan's waist. "You are so fucking beautiful." His voice was hoarse with desire.

"And so fucking yours." Ethan tilted his head to the side to accept the kiss Will was pressing against his neck. "Always yours, Will."

Will licked a trail from Ethan's neck all the way down his spine to the crack of his ass, then dropped to his knees and continued lower.

Ethan trembled above and around him as he spread the muscular globes of his ass apart for easier access and continued to let his tongue roam, flicking lightly around his tightly puckered opening, then up again, down, laving the base of Ethan's cock and his balls.

"Spread your legs farther."

When Ethan complied, Will slid a hand up between them to claim the sleek, velvety hot flesh of the prick that had so ensorcelled him minutes before. Ethan let out a soft moan and, probably without even realizing he was doing it, made several slow thrusts against Will's palm.

But then Will unhanded him—causing Ethan to groan out his protest—and curled the fingers of both hands around Ethan's hips, holding him in place. He began the teasing game with his tongue again, tracing the curve of Ethan's ass, licking inside his thighs, before finally moving back up to his crease and this time lingering around Ethan's tight opening. He flicked the tip of his tongue against it, then brushed firmly over it in several slow, wet licks, then the tip again. Back and



forth, alternating, until Ethan was panting, his hips straining against Will's hold, trying to thrust his ass back against Will's mouth. But Will wouldn't let him, forcing him to accept his agenda, his pace.

"God ... please!" Ethan begged.

Will grazed his ass with his teeth, placing gentle bites over both cheeks, licking the offended areas, then nipping harder, until Ethan writhed at his touch, and his pale skin was mottled by a dozen or so red marks.

Will's own desire crept even higher at the sight. *His* marks on *his* man.

"You're mine," he rasped.

"*Only* yours. Will ... I need..."

Will circled his tongue around Ethan's pucker, giving a prolonged lick, then spearing it just inside.

Ethan's hips jerked and he cried out. "More ... deeper."

"Is this what you want, babe?" He probed his tongue inside again, in several firm thrusts, leaving Ethan shaking.

"Yes! God, touch my dick, please. I need to come. Need..."

Will gripped the base of Ethan's shaft and squeezed. "No. No coming yet. I want you to wait."

"Fuck. *Fuck!*"

Ethan's head had tilted back, and Will could imagine the expression on his face ... the one of intense concentration as he fought his body's profound desires. He'd seen it many times, but never got tired of it. Wanted to see it now and couldn't from this position. But he wasn't ready to end what he was doing. He loved bringing Ethan to the edge like this,

loved the sound of his breathless moans, his desperate curses. Loved the way his body responded to Will's attention.

He tongue-fucked Ethan over and over, then alternated with a finger and finally two, until the man seemed to be barely hanging on the edge.

"Shit, please, fuck me, Will. Fuck me. I'll do anything you want. Please ... I just need you inside me!"

There was a raw desperation in his voice that Will sometimes heard when they were hot and heavy like this. Almost as if Ethan needed Will to pound into him hard and thoroughly and drive away the demons that haunted him.

He'd often wondered why Ethan, so strong and confident in every way, was willing—no, not even just willing; adamant much of the time—to submit to Will during their lovemaking. Will suspected it was because of his demons—because Ethan had spent his life having to be strong, confident, in control in order to hide the secrets that tormented him. But with Will, one of the few people—maybe the only person—he really trusted, he didn't have to keep up his walls. With Will he could give up his control, maybe even needed to give it up, and let someone else take care of him. Let someone else be his strength.

It wasn't a trust Will took lightly. He loved Ethan, would do anything for him, and if Eth needed him in this way, he'd be here for him.

Will stood, shoved down his shorts and briefs, and stepped in close. The hard ache that was his cock brushed against Ethan's ass, and Ethan ground back against it.

"Do it. Please! Now."

They'd made the decision a couple of weeks ago not to worry about condoms since they were both clean, and Will had never appreciated that more than at this moment. His dick throbbed, needing to be inside that tight, hot passage as badly as Ethan wanted it there. He guided the tip to press against his friend's slick, wet hole, easing in inch by inch, pulling out partway, then going deeper.

"Jesus Christ, I fucking need you so much, Will."

"I need you, too." He gave one last push and slid home.

Ethan reached behind him with one arm, curved it around Will's neck, then turned and pulled him in close for a kiss filled with heat and intense emotion. "Love you," he breathed against Will's lips. "Do me hard."

Will didn't have to be told twice. His palms slid down Ethan's back to once again settle on his hips and anchor him. He began a series of quick, deep thrusts. His balls burned, and at this intensity he knew he wasn't going to last long. From the sound of it, Ethan wasn't either. But sometimes fast and hard was what worked, and they were both so aroused at this point it was almost like their bodies had taken over and neither one of them had conscious control any longer. Will's strokes became almost savage, going deeper still, and Ethan's returning thrusts against him were just as frenzied.

"Need ... to come. Please..."

Will found the pulsing, hot length of Ethan's cock with his hand and gave him what he wanted.

"Fuck ... fuck ... *fuck!*" Ethan tensed and shuddered, and slippery bursts of cum hit Will's palm, dripping between his fingers.

Seconds later he found his own release with an intense groan that emerged from the depths of his core. He shot his load inside Ethan, pressing hard against him, needing to be buried to the balls, as deep and close as possible, merging them into one ... hearts and bones.

Ethan's arms shook from holding himself away from the window for so long. Will pulled him back against his chest, letting him lean on him, and Ethan's head fell back to rest on Will's shoulder. The sun shot his hair full of burnished gold highlights. Will brushed a hand through the long, soft strands and kissed Ethan's temple.

At six-two he was a few inches taller than Ethan, but Ethan would never be considered small. He was lean, yet hard muscle in all the right places, with well-defined arms and shoulders, flat abs, strong thighs. He'd put on a little weight these past few weeks—weight he'd lost during his captivity, and unlike four weeks ago, when he'd first returned to New Mexico and had been pale, thin, and obviously distressed, now anyone else looking at him would never guess what he'd been through.

Will, on the other hand, saw things most people didn't—the assorted scars on Ethan's body that hadn't been there three years ago, the way the ring finger on his right hand bent at an odd angle from being broken but not set before it healed, the indentation on the back of his head that Will was certain came from him being battered with a hard object. And then, of course, the internal, emotional scars as well.

And yet, in spite of all those things, Ethan still managed to smile, laugh, make love, and enjoy life. He was a survivor.

Always had been. It was one of the things Will had always loved about him. But by the same token, all the pain Ethan had been through over the years had also served to cement in Will a determination that he would never take Ethan or their relationship for granted. He'd learned his lesson the hard way and it wasn't one he'd ever forget.

For years they'd hidden their deepest desires from one another, each thinking the other was straight, both of them too afraid of destroying their friendship if they told the truth. Then, one fateful night three years ago, Will had had too much to drink at his sister Jessie's wedding and he'd kissed Ethan. It had shocked the hell out of them both. When, instead of bolting away, Ethan had kissed back, and then they'd ended up in bed together, trying to make up for years of lost intimacy, everything had changed. Will had dreamed of instant happily ever after, being with the man he'd always loved.

Except that's not what had happened. Instead, the next morning, Ethan had had to leave to go back to Washington D.C. to his job. A job Will knew nothing about and Ethan couldn't tell him about. He'd left in a rush with promises he'd call and return to New Mexico soon.

He'd done neither. Days had stretched into weeks, then into months, then years.

Feeling hurt and betrayed, Will had tried to move on with his life. He'd moved from Albuquerque to here in the mountains north of Santa Fe, he'd changed jobs, tried to meet someone new, and the whole time he'd outwardly

blamed Ethan, while inside, he'd been certain he himself was at fault for running Ethan off.

And then, four weeks ago, Ethan had returned after three long years. Will had been angry and hurt and had taken out his frustrations on Ethan without giving him a chance to explain, which had led to a night of mind-blowing passion where he'd forced Ethan to submit to him. The next day he was sure Ethan would leave again because of how Will had treated him. But he hadn't. They'd finally talked, and he'd discovered the horrific truth about Ethan's three-year-absence, and the fact that all those years Ethan had traveled and been out of the country weren't because of some made-up job Will had thought he'd been doing ... it was because Ethan had been a spy.

Now here they were. And a day didn't go by that Will didn't thank the powers of the universe for bringing Ethan back safe and sound and giving them a second chance.

Ethan closed his eyes and smiled in what appeared to be utter contentment. "Damn. Screw my business and clients. I just want you, here, like this, every day."

"Me, too. After having the past week and a half off, it's going to be hell to go back to work on Monday and leave you. And I actually have to go into the office in Santa Fe, too, which sucks."

"If it makes you feel any better, I have three conference calls scheduled on Monday with potential clients, one of them between that scientific software company based in Albuquerque and the Germans." He shook his head. "I speak five languages ... but of course I have to pick a client who

needs me to use the one I'm weakest at. My German's rusty as hell. I'll be lucky if I don't end up pissing them all off or siccing them on each other."

Will laughed. "Somehow I think you'll come through for them both." He slid a hand up Ethan's abdomen and chest in a slow stroke, loving the feel of skin hot from lovemaking and the sun.

"This is Saturday. Aren't we supposed to go to your parents for dinner tonight?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, but we've got time. We don't have to be there until six and it's probably only a little after three."

"Should we move away from the window, you think?"

"And disappoint Mr. Sutherland? Not on your life."

Ethan snickered. "Okay ... but if pictures of my full frontal nudity start showing up on the internet, you'll know why."

"You'd be the hottest ticket in town."

"Yeah. And you'll be right there beside me. It'll be *The New Mexico Full Monty*. Maybe we can get Ruben to join us. And your dad."

"Oh, God!" Will groaned out a laugh. "Please, no more. I'm going to have to scrub my eyes out with a Brillo pad just thinking about my dad that way. And although I've no doubt Jessie would love to see her husband dancing in the all-together, Ruben'd probably sue us just for talking about it."

"Why'd your sister have to go and marry a lawyer and mess up our fun?"

"You can ask her yourself tonight. She and Ruben'll be at my folks."

Ethan turned in his arms, a grin on his face. "So you think the full monty thing with the family McClaren is a no-go, huh?"

"If you so much as breathe a word of it to anyone tonight, I will so punish you!"

Ethan raised his eyebrow and the look on his face caused a new pulse of heat to shoot through Will's veins. Damn, how did the man manage to do this to him with nothing more than a look?

"I seem to recall that the last time you punished me I begged for more." He dragged a hand across the flat plane of Will's abdomen, just low enough it brushed gently against Will's soft cock, causing him to hiss in a breath at the contact. "I'm thinking we should discuss this further while we're in the shower, and we should get started now. It might take a while."

"The discussion or the shower?"

"Both. I suspect you're going to need some visual aids to figure it all out."

He stepped away from Will, giving him a hell of a visual aid right there on the spot. Then with a grin, Ethan crooked his finger, and headed down the steps.



### CHAPTER 3

"Wanna take the truck or the Corvette?" Will asked as they went out the front door a while later.

"The Vette. And here"—Ethan threw him his keys—"you can drive."

Will caught them and grinned. "You trust me to drive your Vette all the way to Albuquerque?"

Ethan shot him a challenging look. "Just don't go over sixty."

"Yeah. Right."

"Top up or down?" Ethan asked when they got in the car.

"Down. It's a beautiful evening."

Ethan put the top down and breathed in the cool, pine-scented mountain air. After just a few weeks, this smell was already synonymous with Will and home and peace. It was comforting and, in a strange way, gave him a sense of security. Once, a long time ago, he'd associated the scent of roses with those things, back during high school when he'd spent so many hours at Will's house to escape the hell of being around his dad. The McClarens had rose bushes all around their house, still did, and in the spring the sweet scent of rose filled every room. Funny how the sense of smell could have such a profound effect on one.

Once they were out on I-25 heading south, Will let the new black sports car slide up to ninety-five for a couple of minutes before leveling off at eighty.

Ethan leaned over and peered at the speedometer, his tongue in his cheek. "Where's the conservative, play-it-safe,

never-do-anything-naughty Will McClaren I used to know?" he asked.

"I didn't hear you complaining earlier."

"You don't hear me complaining now either." Ethan's hand slid over to rub long strokes up and down Will's solid thigh now covered in blue denim. "Every time I think you can't possibly get any fucking hotter, you do. You look damned sexy behind the wheel of this car, Dr. McClaren."

And he did. Will was a helluva gorgeous man with his broad shoulders, buff build, long legs, his dark brown hair still slightly damp from their shower and curling against his collar, and his eyes as green as summer grass. Every time Ethan looked at him his breath caught.

"Yeah, well, so do you," Will said with a hint of that sweet, sexy smile of his. "And if you don't stop doing that to my leg, we're not going to get to Albuquerque because we're going to have to pull off the road and christen your car properly. And then you can explain to my parents why we were late to dinner."

"Promises, promises."

An exit ramp conveniently loomed ahead and Will started to swing the car to the right and into it, but Ethan pulled his hand back.

"Okay, okay," he said, laughing. "If it weren't for the part about having to explain to your parents, I wouldn't care how late we were."

Will's smile bloomed completely now, and he let the car glide back out into the regular lane. "Since when do my parents intimidate you?"

"Since I ceased being just their son's best friend and became his lover and they don't know it yet."

This time it was Will who settled a hand on Ethan's thigh, and Ethan knew without words that it was meant as reassurance. "They're not going to be upset about it. You know that, right?"

"I know your parents are open, easy-going people, and I know they love you."

"And you."

"Yeah. I know that, too. But they only found out a couple of years ago you were gay. And now, surprise, they're going to find out you're not the only one."

Will chuckled at that. "I have this vision of them losing sleep as they wonder just what you and I were really doing all those nights you slept over during high school."

"Or on the camping trips we took. If only they knew how perfectly behaved we were all those years."

"Even though we were both secretly lusty for each other and wishing we were doing every single dirty thing a parent might worry about."

"Remember that time we got the wild hair to go rock climbing in the Sandias?"

"Sure. Very stupidly ... without harnesses or belaying. And it ended up being way higher and more torturous than we thought."

"Mm-hmm. Well, remember how you were climbing first and I was behind you?"

"Yeah."

"It was pure dumb luck I didn't fall and break my neck that day because the whole time all I could do was stare up at your ass."

Will glanced over at him, his eyes sparkling. "Yeah?"

"Hell, yes. You were wearing a pair of tight black Spandex shorts that were practically painted on."

"My God, how can you remember what I was wearing?"

"Uh, didn't I just say I spent three hours staring up at them? Of course I remember, because I wanted the damned things off so I could do all those dirty things to you that parents worry about."

Will shook his head. "I know I've said this several times over, but how did we ever make it as long as we did without realizing how we felt about each other? I mean, how could we have been so damned blind all that time?"

"It boggles the mind, doesn't it? But the thing is ... oftentimes people see what they expect to see rather than what's really there. In our case, neither of us ever expected to have the other return the interest, so we never looked for it."

"Yeah, not to mention we were both working overtime to hide our interest from each other and everyone else. I always thought I'd done a damn good job of it, too. I thought I was going to fall over when Jess, at her wedding, asked me outright when I was ever going to tell you I was in love with you."

"That sounds like our Jessie ... blunt to a fault."

"Yeah, imagine my shock to discover that my sister had known for years about what I thought was my well-kept secret—secrets—the fact I was gay and how I felt about you."

"But your parents didn't know either apparently. Of course, that probably goes back to people seeing what they expect."

A comfortable silence stretched between them for a few minutes, but then Ethan asked, "I know you swore Jess to secrecy because you wanted to tell your parents about us yourself when they got back from their month in Europe this week. Do you think she really kept her mouth shut or do you think she let it slip?"

"I don't think she'd tell them when I specifically asked her not to."

"No, I don't think she would either. That was just wishful thinking on my part that maybe they'd already know when we get there."

Will gave him a sympathetic look. "You're really kind of freaked about this, aren't you?"

Ten years working for the government amidst some of the most dangerous and awful conditions in the world, and he was having a case of nerves over telling Will's parents they were a couple. *Jesus*.

Ethan sighed, trying to sort out his feelings on the matter and ignore the tight knot that had formed in his gut. "Yes and no. I guess it's weird for me because your parents have always been more like parents to me than my own. I never really knew my mom, and my dad was a first-class bastard. I respect your folks and so, in a way, it probably feels a little like it felt when you finally came out to them. You told me

you knew they'd be supportive, but the lead-up to actually telling them was stressful."

"Yeah, it was, so I do understand." He laced his fingers through Ethan's and squeezed. His hand was warm and, as always with Will, comforting. "But we're in this together and it'll be fine."

Ethan knew it probably would be, but he couldn't seem to get rid of the ache in his gut anyway. Will's family had been the only family he'd ever had. The only people growing up who'd ever accepted him unconditionally, who'd welcomed him into their home and their lives and treated him kindly, despite the fact he was nothing more than a cocky, messed-up kid from California when he'd arrived in Albuquerque as a teenager. So, in spite of the fact he was a grown man in his thirties, a part of him deep down inside still felt like he was that little boy trying to win the love of a father who would always hate him. The old rejections, though he'd buried them away in the deepest recesses of his heart, still lingered at times. Even though his head knew Will was right, knew Will's parents well enough to know they'd be happy for them both, he couldn't completely get past that irrational fear of losing their love and respect. Of losing them.

\* \* \* \*

When they pulled up in front of the McClarens' rambling stucco home in the North Valley of Albuquerque, they'd barely gotten out of the car before Jessie came out the front door to meet them. Without giving them a chance to even speak, she

pulled them both into a hug and planted kisses on their cheeks.

"You two," she said, her eyes growing distinctly damp in spite of her smile, "look so damn good as a couple. It's about time you finally figured out you were meant to be together!"

"Uh, Jess ... Mom and Dad?"

She waved a hand in the air. "They're out back with Ruben. They don't even know you're here yet. I was inside and saw you from the window."

She hugged Will again, then Ethan.

"Hey, princess," Ethan said.

Jessie McClaren Garcia was beautiful, intelligent, outgoing, and never hesitated to speak her mind. She was three years younger than he and Will, and when they'd been teenagers, she'd wanted to tag along with them whenever they or her parents would let her. He and Will would probably never have admitted it at the time, but they'd never minded too much. She'd been a tomboy back in those days, willing to try most anything once. She and Will had always been close, but Ethan had always felt a bond with her, too. She was both friend and the sister he'd never had.

She cupped his cheek and gave him a probing once over, looking every inch the doctor she was. Her eyes were as green and vibrant as Will's. "You look considerably better than you did the last time I saw you."

Which had been four weeks ago, when he'd come back to New Mexico to discover Will was no longer in Albuquerque. He'd gone to Jessie and she'd sent him up to Pecos with her

blessing and a directive that he and Will needed to sort things out once and for all.

"Yeah, well, someone's been taking good care of me." He looked over her shoulder at Will, who gave him a bone-melting smile, his eyes shimmering with love. Ethan smiled back, letting his own gaze convey his emotions, hoping Will realized just how damned much he loved and appreciated him.

"Oh, my God," Jessie said, stepping back so she could take them both in at once. "Do you boys know how long I've waited to see you look at each other like that?"

Will rolled his eyes, but gave her a fond grin. "Boys?"

"Yes, boys. And I demand to know why I've had to wait a month to see you two. Ethan shows up on my doorstep looking miserable. Will calls me the next day, sounding even more miserable. I dispense my advice to you both, but then *I* have to call up *there* two days later to discover everything's hunky dory. Since then, I've had exactly two brief calls from my dear brother and seen nothing of either of you until now!" She stood with her hands on her hips, giving them a scolding look. But a smiled quirked at her full lips.

"We've been a bit busy," Will said, shooting Ethan a heated gaze.

Ethan grinned, pretty damn sure he knew what kind of *busy* Will was thinking about.

"You know we went to Virginia this past week to get Eth's stuff," Will continued, "and we only got home a couple of days ago."



"Yeah, yeah. And the rest of the time you've been in bed together having crazy wild sex, making up for lost time."

"Jesus Christ, Jess!"

Ethan almost laughed at the sight of Jessie's mischievous grin and the red creeping up Will's cheeks. In spite of Will's amazing inner and outer strength, and his incredible confidence and power during their lovemaking, he was and always had been a big, gentle geek at heart. And Jessie had always known how to push his buttons.

Some things never changed. And suddenly, Ethan's fears and worries faded away at that realization. He was back with family where he belonged. Damn he'd missed this, missed them all during the years he'd lived away. He'd left Albuquerque right after high school because he'd wanted to put as much distance as he could between himself and his father. He'd gone to college in New York, then been recruited by the government his senior year and headed straight to the D.C. area after he got his degree. He'd made a point to travel back here a couple of times a year, squeezing trips in around his job, even if he could only stay a few days, because he'd missed Will and needed to reconnect with the place and the people that had always been home. He'd needed the trips to keep himself grounded. Here. With the people he loved, who loved him back.

"Just be happy she's not asking for details," he told Will.

"Who says I'm not going to," Jessie shot back in a sassy tone. "Don't you know how much straight women love hot, hunky man-love?"

Will groaned. "I'm your brother, for crying out loud! And Ethan's close enough to being one. You're not supposed to even *want* to think about things like that. Christ, between you and this and the full monty thing earlier, I don't even know what to do with you two?"

"Full monty?" Jessie asked, her grin widening. "Do tell."

Ethan shrugged at Will and chuckled. "You said it, not I. So does that mean I get to pu—"

"Oh, for God's sake, let's go see Mom and Dad already," Will grumbled, cutting him off, and looking completely adorable and sexy in his exasperation. He turned Jessie around and gave her a gentle push toward the door, even as he sent Ethan a look that promised sweet retribution.

Jessie led them through the house and out onto the large back patio that surrounded the ceramic tiled swimming pool. Ethan smiled as the scent of roses filled his senses. Pinks, reds, oranges, yellows, and numerous variations in between grew in beds up next to the house and in a border around the pool.

Will's parents and Jessie's husband sat in Adirondack chairs, drinking margaritas.

One of the things Ethan had always loved about the McClarens was the fact they never stood on ceremony. They lived in a beautiful home that sat on a tree-covered acre and was worth a fortune—probably had been even when they'd bought it twenty years ago. Carolyn McClaren taught drama at the University of New Mexico and Howard McClaren was a bigwig with one of the aerospace companies in Albuquerque

and no doubt made a healthy six-figure salary. Yet they were as down to earth and real as anyone Ethan had ever known.

Howard, as tall and broad-shouldered as Will, with graying temples and a distinguished streak of gray in his neatly trimmed beard, was dressed in jeans, a polo shirt, and worn sneakers. Carolyn wore shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail that had a few more strands of gray in it than the last time Ethan had seen her at Jessie's wedding, but her face was as animated as ever. Her reading glasses sat perched on top of her head as always.

She spotted them first, grinned broadly, and slid from her chair to cross over to them. "My boys!"

Jessie gave them a smug smile over the top of her mother's head, before going over to the built-in patio bar.

Carolyn hugged and kissed them both, then patted Ethan on the cheek. "I'm so glad you're here, Ethan! Jessie said you were up at Will's."

Ethan saw Will fire a look at Jess, and saw her shaking her head in response and giving him an annoyed glare that said she hadn't told anything critical.

Howard approached and gave them each a brief, masculine, pat-on-the-back hug. "Will, how are you, son?"

"Good, Dad. Thanks."

"Ethan, nice to see you. Been a while. We've missed you."

"I've missed you guys, too. How was Europe?"

"Fabulous!" Carolyn gushed.

"Don't get her started," Howard said with a grin. "You'd think she'd never traveled anywhere interesting before."

Carolyn swatted him on the arm. "You hush. You enjoyed it as much as I did."

"Did she drag you into every art gallery?" Will teased, taking the margarita Jessie handed him.

Jess put one in Ethan's hand as well. He smiled his thanks and took a sip.

Howard looked skyward. "Good God, do you have any idea how many art galleries there are across Europe? I quit trying to keep track of them because, believe me, a month is a long time."

"But if you've got an hour or five, she'll give you a list of them," Ruben said, a smile on his tanned face as he approached.

Carolyn shook her head in mock dismay. "I'm surrounded by unappreciative heathens."

"Hey, Ruben, how's it going?" Will asked, shaking the man's hand.

"Good. And, Ethan, it's good to see you again."

"You, too."

"So, sit, sit," Carolyn directed. "How long are you going to be visiting, Ethan?"

Jessie cleared her throat loudly. "Um, Rube, could you come help me with something in the kitchen?"

With a lift of his dark eyebrows at Ethan and Will and a flash of white teeth in a barely concealed smile, he rose without question and disappeared with her.

Clearly the exit had been planned, and, again, Ethan almost had the urge to laugh ... except for the fact his heart rate had suddenly sped up.

The elder McClarens didn't seem to notice anything amiss as Ethan sank onto a chair and Will sat in the one next to him. He and Will shared a quick glance, and Ethan tried to let his friend's confidence reground him.

"Actually, I'm not visiting this time. I've come back to New Mexico to stay."

Carolyn, sitting just a few feet away, across from Ethan, looked pleased by the news, which caused a warm pulse in his heart. "I always knew the east coast wasn't your place," she said, shaking a finger at him. "You're a southwesterner at heart."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"And I suspect the traveling with your job all those years was hell," Howard added. "I did it for a couple of years after Caro and I were first married and it got old living out of a suitcase and sleeping in strange beds. I don't know how you've done it as long as you have."

"It was hard. It seemed like I was out of the country most of the time."

They had no idea just *how* much of the time. The McClarens thought he was an international buyer for an IT company. That's what Will had thought, too, until Ethan had told him otherwise last month. But no one except Will could know what he'd really been doing all those years.

"So what are your plans for a job?" Howard asked. "Are you going to be able to put all that experience you have to use somewhere here? Or are you going to start fresh doing something else."

"Kind of both. I'm setting up my own company as an international business consultant—helping U.S. companies form mutually beneficial relationships with companies in other countries."

"He's already got clients lined up," Will said.

"*Potential* clients." But he gave Will an appreciative smile for his support. "I'll probably still have to travel some, but nothing like before."

"And you get to make your own hours and decide when you want to come and go," Howard said nodding. "It's nice to be the boss."

"Yeah, for sure."

Although, in truth, even though he hadn't expressed it to Will, Ethan had concerns about it. He'd worked for the government for so long, with them dictating almost everything in his life, he worried that maybe he'd flounder on his own. His dad had always told him he was a nobody going nowhere. He knew that was the drunk talking, knew his old man was just lashing out, trying to hurt him. But sometimes, when he was lying in the dark, with Will sleeping peacefully next to him, his mind began to spin with the enormity of what he'd done ... walking away from his career after ten years and starting over from scratch. He knew he had the skills to pull it off, and most of the time, when he stayed busy, he believed he could and would. But down deep inside, his dad's words haunted him.

"So where are you going to live, honey?" Carolyn asked between sips of her margarita, pulling him from his reverie. "Are you coming back to Albuquerque or somewhere else? If

you need help finding a place, I have a friend who's a Realtor. She helped Will find his house when he moved up north."

Ethan felt Will lean forward in his chair and, with a sudden stutter of his pulse, he knew the time had come. In spite of his earlier calm that this was family and it would be okay, the re-forming knot in his stomach had other ideas. He looked over at Will, but Will gave him a reassuring nod.

"Actually ... he's living with me, Mom. We're living together."

Carolyn set down her glass. She and Howard shared a brief, knowing look that only made Ethan's stomach churn more. *Damn. Why does it have to be so hard?*

"Living together as in roommates," Carolyn said slowly, "or living together as in *together*."

Will, God love him, didn't miss a beat. "As in together." He didn't volunteer more information, seeming to feel the "together" statement said everything his parents needed to know.

There was a brief moment of silence so heavy Ethan thought he could hear Will's heartbeat next to him.

Then Carolyn looked at Howard and her look this time was distinctly *"I told you so."*

When her gaze fell back on Will and Ethan, she was smiling. "We thought it might come to that."

Ethan felt his mouth open, but nothing came out. He glanced at Will, whose eyebrows had disappeared up under the wavy lock of dark hair that had fallen over his forehead.

"Wha-at?" Will asked, his voice sounding hoarse.

Carolyn's laughter rippled in the evening air. "Did you think you weren't transparent? Either one of you? All those years?"

"But..." Will seemed to be at a complete loss. And quite frankly, Ethan was, too.

Howard sat forward in his chair and placed a hand on Will's shoulder. "Son, once you came out to us, a whole lot of puzzle pieces fell into place for us. You may not have realized it, but you used to look at Ethan pretty much the same way you've been looking at him since you've been here tonight—like the sun rises and sets on him. And you"—he smiled at Ethan—"were the same looking at him."

"Several times over the years we talked about it and wondered if something might be going on between you, but you never gave any indication it was," Carolyn said. "You spent hours and hours together, shared a room here at the house whenever Ethan slept over, but in all that time, we never saw any evidence you were anything but best friends. We never saw any evidence either of you were interested in other young men either. So we never could figure out what was up with the way you secretly looked at each other."

"Not knowing what else to think, we ended up writing it off as mutual hero-worship."

Carolyn nodded. "But then after you moved, you finally told us you were gay, sweetheart. And that move came just a few months after Jessie's wedding where you two were seen leaving together, and after which you were a mess, Will."



Her eyes flickered to Ethan, and it might have been his imagination, but he thought he saw a moment of admonishment directed at him.

Ethan winced because it had been his fault Will had been hurt.

Will seemed to sense Ethan's upset and gave him a look that said, *"Don't even think about blaming yourself. It wasn't your fault."*

"We put two and two together," Howard said. "Or at least suspected something had happened between you and that's why you parted ways for the first time since you've known each other."

"We hoped," Carolyn said, "for both your sakes, that you'd be able to reconnect at some point and at least reforge your friendship. It's always been so important to both of you. But, again, after watching you two together for so many years"—her smile was genuine as she spoke—"let's just say we aren't surprised that now that you're back in touch, you've decided to explore the other aspects of your relationship."

"Jesus." Will's voice was still more than a little breathless. He looked at Ethan, his handsome face pale with astonishment. "Did everyone know but us?"

"Apparently so," Ethan said, as he tried to gather his own spinning thoughts and emotions.

"So ... you guys are okay with this?" Will asked.

"Would it matter to you if we weren't?" Howard asked.

"No." Will's response was matter-of-fact and confident. And in that moment, Ethan had never been prouder of him.

Will had come a long way from the shy, quiet bookworm he'd been as a teenager.

"That's exactly the right answer," Howard said, a pleased grin on his face. "When it's right, it's right, and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. But for the record, I know I speak for both of us when I say we think it's right, too."

"We love you both," Carolyn said with a smile, hugging first Will, then Ethan. "We want you to be happy. And it's clear you two make each other happy."

Will's gaze caught his, and there was so much love in it it made Ethan's heart ache. "Yeah, we do."

Carolyn gave each of their knees a motherly pat. But in spite of the smile on her face, to Ethan, her eyes betrayed a hint of worry. "Just promise me you'll always remember to be honest with one another, and you'll always stand by each other, even during the tough times," she said. "*Especiall*y during the tough times. Love isn't always easy. But it is always worth it if you stick it out."

## CHAPTER 4

The inky darkness of midnight had settled over the mountains by the time they pulled into the cabin's long gravel driveway. Ethan had driven home and he parked next to Will's Dodge truck near the front door. The detached two-car garage was still filled with boxes and furniture they'd brought from Virginia, but with summer almost upon them, Ethan didn't mind leaving the Vette parked outside.

When they got out of the car, an odd prickling sensation crept up the back of his neck. He glanced around, but in the dark, with only the yellow flood from the porch light they'd left on, he couldn't see anything beyond the porch. Still, as they climbed the steps to the door, he couldn't quite shake it. He wasn't sure if he'd heard a sound or smelled something different or if it was just his sixth sense kicking in.

Or maybe it was nothing except the fact it was midnight and dark as hell out. Where was the moon anyway? Maybe it hadn't risen yet. Or it could be the new moon, so there was nothing to give off light.

A sudden pressure in his chest made him wince. *Fuck. Not now.* But he knew the signs. What felt like a vise tightened around his lungs, squeezing, squeezing until it was hard to draw in a breath.

Even though it had been several months now since he'd been free from the confines of the tiny, black cell he'd occupied for so long, he still struggled with the suffocating sensation that closed over him sometimes in the dark, or when he was in a small space, or sometimes just when he

was overly tired or stressed. He fought it off and forced himself to suck in oxygen. After a couple of difficult breaths it began to ease.

It didn't usually hit him while he was outside like this ... in fact, being outside usually helped it pass.

"You okay?" Will asked, concern written on his face. He'd paused, his key out to unlock the door, but not moving to do it as he watched Ethan.

Ethan took another slow, deep breath and the sensation finally faded. "Yeah. I'm all right."

Concern still lingered in Will's eyes, though. "Want to sit out on the deck for a while? Get some fresh air before bed?"

"Sure. Yeah, that'd be good."

When they entered the house, the prickling on the back of his neck happened again ... not the anxiety this time so much as a sense something was ... what? Different?

His gaze scanned the living room in the dark and saw nothing amiss. He did the same in the kitchen as they passed through it, and paused to pick up a black stoneware mug from the counter. A mug he didn't remember seeing there when they'd left. "Did you leave this here?" he asked Will.

Will had the refrigerator door open. He looked over his shoulder at the mug, then shrugged. "I drank my coffee out of it this morning, or one of the ones like it, but I don't remember where I left it. Why?"

Ethan shook his head and set the mug in the sink. "No reason." Will had probably left it there and Ethan just hadn't noticed.

But it bugged him because he usually did notice such things. It had become natural habit over the years to take in every detail of a place and log it in his memory.

*You're not a damn spy anymore. You don't have to rely on those old tricks now. You're a civilian.*

A civilian. Okay. Right. He dragged in another deep breath and, as he released it, did his damndest to release some of his quirky old habits with it. It was just a stupid coffee mug.

He went out the sliding glass door and sank onto the hammock tied between two pine trees that jutted up through the deck. It was one of the best features of the big deck in his opinion, the way it had been built around the trees.

Will joined him, unscrewed the caps on a couple of bottles of beer, and handed him one. They both reclined back on the hammock, propped up by the big outdoor pillows at one end.

"Damn, look at the stars." Will's voice was low. It sent an unexpected pulse of heat through Ethan.

Ethan looked up and for a moment felt as if he'd been swallowed by the onyx sky. The air was crisp and clear, showing off the thousands or maybe it was millions of stars in all sizes, twinkling in the vast blackness of space. They seemed so close it felt like he could reach out and touch them with his fingertips.

For several long minutes they drank their beer and stargazed.

"So the visit to my parents' didn't go exactly the way I'd thought it would. I knew they'd be happy for us, but I never in a million years expected them to already know how we felt."

"They are happy for us," Ethan acknowledged. "But they're worried I'm going leave and hurt you again. Your mom is anyway."

Will looked at him askance. "What gave you that idea?"

"I could tell. It was in the way she looked at me at one point, and her advice about sticking it out even during the tough times."

"That's generic advice probably every parent offers their kids."

"Yeah, but she's still worried."

The halo from the light burning over the kitchen sink carried through the sliding glass door, giving off just enough light for Ethan to see Will's face, which was filled with understanding. "Ethan, it wasn't your fault you were gone those three years."

"You and I know that, but your parents don't. And they can't ever know because we can't ever tell them where I really was." He rubbed his eyes between his thumb and forefinger. "Damn, sometimes I fucking hate what a mess my life was for so long. I fucking hate the secrets that I still have to keep, that I'll always have to keep."

Will set his beer down on the deck and turned to face Ethan, his head propped on his hand, his expression, his entire demeanor radiating sympathy and a need to comfort.

"Tell me what I can do to make it easier. To help."

"Just ... don't ever give up on me," Ethan said, hating how vulnerable it made him sound, but unable to stop the words. He'd said the same thing to Will once before, three years ago,

and for a while Will had given up. He'd had every reason to do so. But once again Ethan found himself needing assurance.

Will's smile was warm and rich with honest emotion. "I won't. Ever. And before you say it, I'm not ever going to leave either, Ethan. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"I know you do." He stroked a hand over Ethan's cheek. "You know what you need?"

"What?"

Will sat up. "A reminder."

"Reminder?"

"Remember last month when I told you I was going to make a point of showing you every single day how much I loved you and how important you are to me?"

Ethan smiled. "I remember."

"Well, it's after midnight, which means it's a new day. And lest you forget..."

He began unbuttoning Ethan's jeans—the same Levi's he'd worn earlier, except this time he'd pulled on a pair of black briefs before he put them on. Will lost no time divesting him of both, pausing only to tug off his cowboy boots to get them out of the way. They fell onto the deck with soft thunks, followed by the whispered plop of his jeans and underwear.

The cool air hit Ethan's groin, causing him to suck in a deep breath, even as his cock stiffened from the combination of the cool and Will's heated gaze.

"Are you starting to remember?"

Ethan's heart squeezed. "Yeah."

"Good."

He unbuttoned Ethan's white shirt and spread it open, then pushed Ethan's legs apart and moved to lay between them.

With one leg dangling over the edge of the gently swinging hammock, the other stretched wide to accommodate Will's broad shoulders and muscular body, and the warmth of Will's breath caressing his inner thighs, ripples of eager sexual hunger almost stole Ethan's breath. The beer bottle hung loosely from the fingertips of his right hand off the side of the hammock. With his left hand, he caressed the thick waves of Will's hair and closed his eyes, giving himself up to his lover's care.

"Do you know how damned perfect your dick is?"

Ethan hoped it was a rhetorical question because he was so relaxed and felt so good right now, he couldn't make his mouth open to speak.

He felt Will take the bottle of beer out of his hand, then, moments later, his eyes shot open and he jumped as something cold and wet fell onto the head of his cock.

"Shit! Cold!" But at the sight of Will leaning down to lick the droplets off, and at the feel of his hot, hot tongue in contrast to the chill, he shuddered and collapsed back into the hammock again, his bones and muscles melting. He didn't close his eyes again, though, because watching Will's mouth on his erection was far too compelling.

Will, still holding the beer, tilted his head back and tipped up the bottle to take a drink. When he returned to Ethan's cock, Ethan was once again shocked to feel a damp rush on his cockhead. But this time it was warm from Will's mouth.  
*Oh, God.*



"Better?" Will asked, his voice deep and a little raspy.

"Yes," Ethan whispered, far too turned on to manage more than that.

"You taste incredible. Sweet and salty and alcoholic enough to get drunk on all at the same time."

The flat of Will's tongue brushed over his crown again, then around the sensitive ridge surrounding it. Over and over, in slow, wet strokes, circling and circling until Ethan thought he might go mad. Will paused, drank again from the bottle, and this time sucked Ethan's cock into his mouth along with the beer and swished it around.

"Holy God!" Ethan gasped, the feeling so incredible it was all he could do not to fly off the hammock. His fingers dug into Will's hair, dug into his scalp, and his hips rose of their own accord, whether trying to press deeper and experience more or just because he was so overwhelmed with sensation he'd lost all control he didn't know.

When Will finally swallowed the liquid, the motion sucked Ethan's shaft deeper until his sensitive head pressed the back of Will's throat.

But then Will released him, and he groaned, feeling the cool air tingle against his buzzing, overheated, suddenly neglected flesh.

"That feel good, babe?"

"God, yes."

Will only made him wait and suffer long enough for him to take another mouthful of beer and then he repeated the same action he'd done before, swishing until Ethan was moaning in pleasurable agony, then swallowing, bringing him just to the

pinnacle of an orgasm, but not quite letting him go over the crest.

He didn't know how many times Will repeated the glorious torture, didn't know how many times he gasped and moaned and begged for more. The sound of crickets chirping and the gentle breeze blowing in the pines merged with the breathless sounds of "yes" and "please" and "now, now, now."

But at some point, after Will had swallowed, instead of releasing him, he inched his mouth farther onto Ethan's cock until it was buried so deeply he felt Will's throat convulsing around the length of his shaft. The motion, the depth, the heat finally put him over the edge. A desperate cry escaped him. His balls tightened and pulled up in his scrotum. His ass lifted off the hammock. And with a hoarse sob that was Will's name, he tipped his head back on the pillows and, as he stared up and floated among the stars, he flooded Will's mouth and throat with his semen.

Will took it all, swallowing and swallowing until Ethan had expelled the last drop. Then he held him in the heat of his mouth until Ethan began to soften. Finally, with infinite gentleness, he released him.

He crawled up next to Ethan and pulled him into his arms, holding him close. He was still fully clothed, and the denim of his jeans rasped against Ethan's over-sensitized skin, while at the same time, the well-washed softness of his T-shirt was comforting against Ethan's bare chest. Will's arms were hard, yet gentle. His body the same.

"That was un-fucking-believable," Ethan murmured.  
"Where the hell'd you learn that trick?"

"I made it up just now. You liked?"

"Like is an understatement. I'll never be able to drink beer again without thinking about this moment."

"Good. My goal is to fill you with memories like this one, so no matter where you are or what you're doing, you won't be able to stop thinking about me."

Ethan cupped Will's stubbled cheek in his palm. "Will, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you for the past sixteen years. I don't think that's going to change for probably the next hundred and sixteen. You're all I want. All I need. I'd be lost without you."

Will lips met his in a thorough, tender kiss. "You don't ever have to worry about losing me. I'm yours, you know? Now and always."

"I know." Ethan choked on the words, his throat was so tight.

Will's callused hand slid down his back and affectionately squeezed his ass. "Let's go inside to bed before you freeze."

"If you keep doing anything like you just did, I don't think that's a real concern."

"Yeah, but it's not summer yet and we're in the mountains. Eventually we're going to fall asleep and then it's going to get cold out here."

"I could just get dressed."

"Hell, no. I like you like this."

"Well, if that's the case, you're going to have to get me out of this hammock soon then, or I'm going to have permanent rope imprints in my ass."

Will's warm, deep chuckle brought a smile to Ethan's face ... and kept it there long after they were in bed.

But as he was dozing off, Ethan remembered the weird, hair-raising feeling he'd experienced earlier. He mulled it over for a few seconds, trying to put his finger on it, but Will's hot, hard body pressed up behind him, giving off heat like a furnace, was melting his brain.

He finally realized it was probably old man Sutherland. The old guy had probably been peering through his binoculars when they got home, caught sight of them, then watched them get it on out in the hammock. He'd had a strange, fleeting sensation yesterday evening the old man was watching them then, too. Damn it, if he kept it up, they were going to have to have a polite chat with him about minding his own business.

\* \* \* \*

They slept late the next morning, not finding their way out of bed until after ten. And they were already well on their way through their second pot of coffee before either of them felt motivated enough to get anything done.

Will knew what his problem was ... after ten days of vacation time, as much as he loved his job, he was fighting serious doldrums about having to go back to work. The past week and a half, spent twenty-four/seven with Ethan, had been almost too good to be true. It had been the first time they'd had a completely uninterrupted stretch with one another since high school ... but, oh, how things had changed. Memories of time spent with Ethan as teenagers

would always be special. But memories of the last several days ... he wasn't even sure he could put into words how incredible it had been.

Tomorrow morning, though, they'd have to return to finding a balance between being together and nurturing their relationship, and jobs that would keep them busy and apart a good chunk of the time. Yeah, he knew it was healthy and good and they couldn't spend every second in each other's company ... but sometimes it felt like they'd already paid their dues when it came to separation. They'd been apart most of their adult lives, finding a few days here and there each year to be together, then the past three years not seeing each other at all.

So knowing he was going to be losing precious hours away from Ethan depressed him. And he knew Ethan was feeling it, too.

Will decided the best way to keep from dwelling on it was to stay busy.

They spent the day finding places in the house for some of Ethan's furniture they hadn't yet brought in from the garage and unpacking boxes. In spite of their very different personalities and tastes, their belongings merged together as easily as they did. At the end of the day, the cabin looked like it had always belonged to both of them. Will's widescreen TV held the place of honor in the living room; Ethan's in the bedroom. They pieced together the components of their sound systems, keeping the best of both and putting the rest in the garage to sell later. The same thing with their DVDs, CDs, kitchenware and appliances. And, of course, Ethan's

desk, recliner, and books were now in the loft for his office, while Will's home office was in the spare bedroom.

After dinner, Will went to work in the garage to clear enough space to get Ethan's Vette in it. He wouldn't be able to pull his truck in until they got rid of some of the things they'd taken out of the house, but he didn't mind. Because of his job and how much time he spent in the field, his truck had been up, down, and all over the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the snow, the heat, and over roads that were hell on the suspension. But the Vette was new and too damned pretty to let sit out in the sun and weather any longer than they had to.

Ethan had gone up to the loft to finishing unpacking a couple of last boxes of books and to make some notes in preparation for his business calls tomorrow.

As Will worked, he hummed a stupid song he'd heard on the radio that wouldn't get out of his head.

He had his back turned to the garage door when he heard a rustling sound behind him. He turned, expecting to find Ethan ... but the doorway was empty.

He went outside and saw nothing.

"Huh."

Sometimes old man Sutherland's hound wandered from home. That's probably what he'd heard. If it had been deer, they wouldn't have taken off that fast.

He'd just finished stacking some boxes against the wall when he thought he heard something again, and again found nothing when he looked out.

Needless to say he nearly jumped through his skin when he turned a few minutes later and saw a figure darkening the doorway.

"Jesus Christ! You scared the hell out of me."

Ethan entered the garage, a frown furrowing his forehead. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. It's not like you to be so jumpy. You okay?"

Will dragged a hand through his hair and gave him a sheepish grin. "Yeah, fine. Sorry. I thought I heard something earlier, but there was nothing there. So you startled me. That's all. I don't have your super-heightened spy senses."

Ethan smiled. "Yeah, well I don't know how super-heightened they are anymore."

"What's up? Did you finish your stuff?"

"Yep, as much as I'm going to finish tonight. But I have a weird question for you. And don't you dare laugh."

"Okay ... I'll try not to."

"First, I'm missing my watch. Have you seen it by any chance?"

"No, I don't think so. I remember seeing it on you last night when we were at my parents', but I'm not sure after that. Did you check the bathroom and the kitchen counter?"

"Yeah, both, but it's not there."

"Why would I laugh at that?"

"No, that's not what I thought you'd laugh at. It's the other part."

Will raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"I'm missing something else. My underwear. From last night. I left everything out on the deck when we went to bed."

But when I went out to get it today, my jeans and boots were there, but no underwear."

Will tried not to let the guffaw escape, but it was no use.

Ethan grinned. "I don't suppose you have a kinky underwear fetish I don't know about and you've stashed them in some secret hiding place, have you?"

"Underwear fetish?" Will laughed harder.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up." Ethan was laughing now, too, though. "So what the hell happened to 'em?"

"I don't know. Maybe a squirrel carried them off."

"A squ—Oh, for fuck sake! We have a psychotic, underwear snatching squirrel in the neighborhood?"

Will was almost doubled over now. He sank onto a sturdy maple kitchen chair of Ethan's and wiped his eyes.

"Quit laughing right now," Ethan said, not even trying to keep a straight face. "You're supposed to be the damn wildlife biologist. Do something!"

"What exactly would you like me to do? Hell, I can't help it if a squirrel or some other critter gets a thrill from your underwear. I can't blame them!"

He reached out and hooked a finger through one of the belt loops on Ethan's stone-colored jeans, pulling him close until he stood between Will's legs. "Maybe you should start going commando all the time, then you won't have to worry about it."

The raised eyebrow look Ethan gave him shot a jolt of high voltage straight to Will's groin.

"Oh, Christ. You didn't ... You aren't..."



He unfastened Ethan's pants and his heart began to pound double time.

"Surprise," Ethan said softly.

When Will looked up at him, Ethan's smile tied his dick in knots.

"Do you think I'd ever forget, for even a moment, the expression on your face yesterday when you realized I was *au naturel*? Not damn likely."

He dropped his jeans, toed off his shoes, then in a swift movement that left Will gasping for air at his speed and efficiency, freed Will from his own pants. Ethan pushed him until he was once again sitting on the chair, then straddled his legs and sank onto his lap.

"Fuck," Will whispered, as his cock nestled against Ethan's hot skin.

"That's the idea. Need you in me. Now."

Will's fingers were already spreading Ethan's ass cheeks apart. But then he hesitated. "No lube. I don't want to hurt you."

Ethan gave him a smug smile, reached down to his jeans and pulled a small bottle of lubrication from his pocket.

"You came out here with seduction on your mind."

"Damn straight. Tomorrow we have to go back to work. But tonight, it's just us, and I plan to make it count."

Ethan opened the bottle, squeezed a generous amount onto his palms, then rose up enough he could get to Will's cock. He slicked it thoroughly, his touch burning like a brand through the sensitive skin. When he'd finished, he tossed

down the bottle, cupped Will's face in his hands, and kissed him.

Will returned it with fervor.

And then Ethan was rising up, centering himself on Will's stiff, throbbing rod.

Will grasped Ethan's hips and, swallowing his friend's strangled cry with his mouth, pulled him down until inch by inch his dick was buried in Ethan's tight, grasping flesh.

"You're so fucking hot. It's like pushing my dick into an inferno. Christ, Eth."

"I'm gonna ride you hard, Will. So hard that when you explode I want to feel it all the way up in my mouth. I want to be able to taste you."

"Shit!"

Ethan wasn't kidding and didn't hold back.

Will was beyond clear thought, beyond thought period. All he knew was that every nerve ending in his body felt like it had been charged with pure, super-heated electricity, and a storm was building in his balls.

Ethan's cock bobbed between them, brushing against Will's stomach. Will grasped it and jerked it with the same ferocity as Ethan was pounding down onto him.

The sound of sweat-slicked flesh slapping against sweat-slicked flesh, guttural groans, and heavy breathing filled the warm evening air. The musky scent of male arousal teased at Will's nostrils. The garage, the forest, everything ceased to exist but the two of them, locked together, in a desperate conflagration that was burning them alive.

And then Will was coming, shouting his release as his seed scalded up the length of his dick and poured into the depths of Ethan's willing body. Ethan's cock jerked at almost the same time, shooting milky streams of cum against their stomachs and chests, coating them both, and dripping down to where their bodies merged.

Purged and thoroughly sated, they slumped and clung together. The only sounds in the aftermath were their heavy breathing and the pounding of their hearts.

Finally Ethan lifted his head and kissed Will. His eyes, as blue as a tropical sea, overflowed with emotion. "I love you, Will McClaren."

"I love you, too." Will could barely speak around the lump in his throat.

"So now we have another memory for when we're both working hard tomorrow."

"And a hell of a memory it is, too. We're just damn lucky this chair held us both. We might have ended up on our asses on the concrete."

"I'll have you know this chair is solid hardwood, made back in the days when furniture was meant to last forever. I never had any doubt."

"Hmmm ... maybe we need to take this chair in the house. I'm thinking it's a keeper."

"It has a mate."

"That's it. We're not getting rid of 'em. We're keeping 'em forever."

Ethan's laugh had a hint of the devil in it. A sexy-as-sin devil.

A thought occurred to Will and he gave him a mock frown. "Did you make up the part about your underwear being missing just to get me to unfasten your pants?"

"You think I'm that devious and clever?"

"Let's just say I wouldn't put it past you."

"Okay, well, I suppose I could have. But in one of those cases where reality is even more bizarre than fantasy ... my damn underwear really did disappear."

Will buried his face in Ethan's neck, taking in the scents of well-loved, sweaty male and the faint hint of Ethan's aftershave. "Lucky damn squirrel."

## CHAPTER 5

Ethan looked at the clock on his laptop for probably the fifth time in ten minutes—he never had found his watch. It had been a long damned day already and it was just a little after noon.

He'd already completed two of his three calls, and was expecting the third at one o'clock. He really needed to make a few more notes beforehand, but couldn't concentrate.

What the hell was wrong with him?

*You fucking miss Will, that's what's wrong.*

Yeah, he really did. His mind kept wandering, thinking about their hot and heavy tryst in the garage yesterday evening. Of the shower afterwards. And of how damn good it had felt to go to bed and fall asleep tangled together with the man he loved.

After having Will all to himself for a week and half, he wasn't ashamed to admit he was more than a little addicted to him. And now he resented the fact their jobs were keeping them apart.

Although, he had to be realistic here. Will usually only had to go into his office in Santa Fe a couple of times a week. The rest of the time he did field work, which, conveniently, was right outside their door ... if you considered the 200,000 or so acres of the Pecos Wilderness "right outside" the door. On those days he tended to either go out very early in the morning and be done early in the afternoon, or he made a point of coming home for lunch if he could. And with Ethan working from home for the time being, they'd probably see

considerably more of each other with this arrangement than they would if they both had nine-to-fives somewhere.

Still, the house was just too damned quiet today. He was lonely and hated it.

And no matter how he'd tried, he still hadn't been able to completely shake the weird feeling he'd had since Saturday night. The little niggle at the base of his brain that said something was off. Or different. Or ... watching.

He leaned back in his leather desk chair and stared out the big window. Maybe he ought to go over and have a talk with Felix Sutherland. Explain to him as nicely as possible that, while the man certainly had the right to stare through his binoculars all day, sometimes people just really needed and wanted some privacy.

But then he sighed and glanced at the clock again. He didn't have time to go now. He needed to stick close to the phone in case his call came early.

Though he had some money in the bank to live on for a while longer, he needed to get his business off the ground as soon as possible. It took time to build a clientele and he wanted to be sure he could hold his own. He didn't want Will to have to support him financially, even for a short while.

When he'd worked for the government, he'd had a guaranteed paycheck, job security—well, as secure as it could be doing what he did—and his life mapped out for him. One thing about the feds ... they expected you to work hard and do your job, and they did the career planning for you. And although he didn't miss the traveling, the stress, the fear for his life that he'd faced for ten years, there were moments

now where he felt like he was lost in the vast ocean of the civilian world. Before, he'd been a big fish—albeit one who'd quietly swum the deep waters, out of sight and out of mind for the most part, doing his job to protect and serve, but a big fish nonetheless. Out here, he was just another one of the minnows. Sure, he had all kinds of skills. But unless he wanted to go into law enforcement—which he had no interest in—no one needed to know about his talent with weapons, or his ability to blend into almost any situation, or convince people he was whomever he chose to be that particular day.

Out here, he felt like he was adrift, with Will as his only anchor.

A part of him worried that maybe it wasn't fair to lean so heavily on Will. As a teenager, Will had been his rock. Hell, who was he kidding? Even after he moved away from New Mexico, all through his twenties, Will had still been the one steady and dependable factor in his life. So it had felt natural to come home a month ago and lean on him again.

After the honeymoon glow wore off, though, and their newfound sexual ardor cooled—because even though he'd be thrilled if it never did, it probably would eventually, wouldn't it?—and real life settled in with a vengeance, what if Will found Ethan's emotional dependence on him stifling? What if there came a time when Will didn't find him nearly as fascinating?

That was also part of the reason he was reluctant to share too much of his past with Will. He didn't want Will to know about the people he'd slept with because most of the encounters had been mistakes or had happened for the wrong

reasons. Sex had been purely physical for him; he'd never allowed anyone into his head or his heart because those spots already belonged to someone else—someone he'd thought, at that time, was unattainable, but they'd belonged to him nonetheless. So he'd been selfish, taking what made him feel good, and discarding the rest. And it hadn't just been the sex. He didn't want Will to know about any of his weaknesses and faults from back then. He'd done things he wasn't proud of, things, if he had his life to do over, he'd be so much wiser about now.

Ethan was secretly terrified that if Will ever knew the real Ethan from those days, Will would be so disillusioned with him he'd not just leave, he'd run.

Maybe that's why he felt so driven to show Will on every possible occasion just how much he meant to him. A part of him felt like he had to convince Will now, while he had his full attention and before he learned too much of the ugly stuff, that Ethan was the one for him

*You're not being fair. He loves you. None of that stuff will matter to him. He'll still love you when you're both a hundred, so don't sell him short.*

Ethan closed his eyes and rubbed his temples against the dull headache forming behind his eyes.

*I love him, too. I really would be lost without him.*

And that's what scared him the most.

With a sigh, Ethan pushed back away from his desk and ran his hands through his hair.

*You're a fucking mess, Gallagher.*



Yeah, he was. And he hated it. He needed to get his shit together so he could be the man Will deserved.

He stood and went down to the kitchen, where he poured himself the last of the coffee in the pot and contemplated making a sandwich, then decided he'd wait until after his call.

When he returned to his office, he got to thinking of his old sketchbook and smiled at Will's reaction to it on Saturday. He really hadn't thought about the book in a long time, and although some of the pictures he'd drawn in the fetish clubs had stirred up unpleasant memories for him, seeing Will's reaction to them had more than made up for it.

He glanced around, looking for the book, but didn't see it anywhere obvious. He really needed to put it away. He wasn't expecting to have any potential clients here to the house anytime in the near future, but if he ever did, the sketchbook wasn't something that needed to be lying around.

They'd left it on the desk on Saturday, but now his desk was mostly cleaned off, with only his laptop, printer, desk lamp, assorted odds and ends of office supplies, and the folders containing the information he'd needed for work today.

He'd emptied all the book boxes yesterday and put the books on the shelves. He hadn't seen it in anything he'd handled.

Rising, he searched the office, thinking maybe Will had picked it up and put it on a shelf. But a few minutes later, he was convinced it wasn't here. He'd looked through every book, through his desk drawers, and under everything.

Maybe one of them had taken it downstairs.

He trekked down and hunted through the living room, their bedroom, the kitchen, and even Will's home office. But came up with nothing.

After twenty minutes, a small, hard knot of worry had formed in his gut. What the hell had happened to it? It wasn't the kind of thing a person wanted to turn up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Then he snapped his fingers. *The garage.*

That's probably where it was. It had probably accidentally gotten put into one of the boxes of stuff they were going to get rid of.

Ethan glanced at his wrist, then grumbled when he remembered his watch wasn't there. He peered into the kitchen to look at the clock on the stove. 12:50. He didn't have time to go out and look right now. He'd have to do it later.

As if on cue, the phone upstairs rang.

"Shit!" He sprinted up the loft stairs and picked up.

"Ethan Gallagher."

A pleasant woman on the other end line introduced herself as Shannon Hayworth. "I'm the concierge at the Hotel Saint Francis in Santa Fe. I have a message here from one of our guests, Mr. Daniels of Jarvis & Phipps, saying he and his associate are in town and would like you to meet with them this afternoon if it's convenient."

Jarvis & Phipps was the U.S. company he'd been expecting a call from. They were based out of L.A. He'd just spoken to Matt Daniels briefly last Thursday after he and Will had returned from Virginia. He was the one who'd set up the time

for today's call and there'd been no mention of traveling to New Mexico in person. But Ethan couldn't argue. If they wanted to meet in person, so be it. Although he thought it odd Daniels hadn't contacted him himself.

"Did they leave details about the place and time?"

"Four o'clock at La Mariposa."

Ethan jotted the information on a notepad. "Thanks so much. Did Mr. Daniels by any chance give you a phone number where he could be reached today?"

"No, I'm sorry, sir, he didn't."

"Okay, thanks."

"Have a nice afternoon."

As he hung up the phone, Ethan swore softly. Making a trip to Santa Fe hadn't been on his agenda for the day. But if it meant snagging Jarvis & Phipps as a client, he'd be there.

He called Will's cell number, wanting to let him know what had come up and that he wasn't sure how long the meeting would last. But he got no answer. He dug around on his desk and unearthed the paper Will had written his land line work number on. He tried that, but Will didn't pick up there either.

*Damn it.*

Somehow, not being able to talk to Will unsettled him more than the sudden change in his day's plans. He'd been looking forward to hearing Will's voice.

With a sigh, he went to make himself a sandwich and then he'd have to find something business appropriate to wear.

*Welcome back to the real fucking world.*

\* \* \* \*

As Will drove through the town of Pecos, he couldn't wait to get home. It had turned into a longer day than he'd planned. He'd hoped he might be able to sneak out of the office early, but New Mexico Game and Fish had decided it had other plans for him. Instead of staying in the office catching up on reports that had piled up during the ten days he'd been off, he'd ended up having to go up to Spirit Lake with one of the conservation officers to investigate a series of mountain lion sightings.

He'd tried several times throughout the day to call Ethan and touch base, let him know where he was, and see how his day was going, but something was wrong with his damn cell phone. He had power, but couldn't get any calls to go through. And his friend Maria, the officer he'd worked with today, seldom carried hers. She claimed that, as much time as she spent in the mountains, she usually didn't have a signal anyway, so what was the point?

Will had stayed busy, which had helped, but a low-grade emptiness had plagued him all day, and he knew it was a result of the first day in a while that he'd been away from Ethan for more than an hour or two. And it had been exacerbated by the fact he hadn't been able to talk to him.

He pulled his phone out of the case on his belt and, on the off chance it might cooperate, he dialed their home number, then Ethan's cell number, and just as it had been all day, all he got for his trouble was static. *Damn phone*. He threw it on the dash.

It was a little after five when he pulled into the driveway and parked in front of the house. He didn't think anything

about not seeing Ethan's Vette because they'd put it in the garage last night.

When he got to the front door, he was surprised to discover it locked. He pulled out his keys, and when he entered the house, all was silent.

"Eth?"

No answer.

He tossed his keys on the bookshelf in the living room and glanced up at the loft, which was empty.

It didn't take long to find the notepad propped up on the kitchen counter telling him Ethan had had to go to Santa Fe for a meeting with a client at four o'clock. He said he'd tried to call Will several times but hadn't been able to get through.

"Well, hell." Will tried to swallow his disappointment. But the one thing that made it more palatable was the fact that Ethan had finished the note with:

*This really sucks. I've missed you today. Missed seeing you and hearing your voice. I'll be home as soon as I can. Love you. E.*

From the tone of the note, he could tell Ethan had been as lonely as he'd been.

Someone knocking at the front door forced Will to set down the note and respond.

He opened it to find a good-looking man standing on the porch. Not quite as tall as Will, but probably around six feet, he had a body-builder's physique showcased in jeans and a tight, white T-shirt from which his tanned biceps bulged. With his close-cropped brown hair, small silver earrings in each ear, five o'clock scruff, and piercing but friendly brown eyes,

he was certainly not hard on the eyes. And he looked kind of familiar to Will, though he couldn't place him.

"Hey," the man said, his full lips stretching into a smile.

"Hey. Can I help you?"

"I was looking for Ethan. I'm an old friend of his. I was in the area and thought I'd stop by." His voice had a faint southern drawl to it. Like maybe he'd been born in the south, but hadn't lived there in a while.

Will wasn't aware Ethan had told any of his "old friends" where he was living now, but he fought off the twinge of jealousy and realized he was being ridiculous. This was Ethan's house now, too. He had every right to tell whomever he wanted where he lived. "He's not here right now, but you're welcome to come in if you'd like. He should be home soon."

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks." The man held out his hand. "Jackson Stone."

Will shook hands with him. "Will McClaren."

As Jackson entered the house, his eyes roamed it from floor to ceiling. "Nice place."

"Thanks. Can I get you something? A soda? Beer?"

An oddly suggestive smile flashed across his face. "Beer would be good."

Will wondered at the strange look, but gestured the man to have a seat in the living room while he went into the kitchen.

When he returned, he handed a bottle to the visitor, who sat on the couch, then sank into one of the chairs and opened his.

"So, you and Ethan are living here together, huh?"

A red warning flag popped up in Will's mind at that. It was a leading question if he'd ever heard one. And he honestly wasn't sure how "out" Ethan had been in his previous life. Was Jackson fishing for information, or was it a simple comment meant to be taken at face value? He opted to respond simply. Because either way, it wasn't any of this man's business as far as Will was concerned.

"Yeah, we live here."

Again Jackson smiled, this time as if he knew something Will didn't. Then he took a long pull from his beer bottle.

The look irked Will for some reason, but if this was a friend of Ethan's, he owed it to Eth to be nice.

"So," he said, to make conversation, "you said you're an old friend of Ethan's. How long have you known him?" *'Cause I'm positive not as long as I have.*

"About ten years. We used to spend a lot of time together."

The twinge of jealousy was back. Many of the years he'd been away from Ethan, this man had been in his life.

Jackson took another swig from his beer bottle. "We had some good times. Used to go clubbing together. Ethan, man, he was something," he said, shaking his head. A soft laugh rumbled from him. He glanced around the house again. "Hard to believe he's settled down to the domestic life. I never would have pegged him for that."

Breathe, Will told himself, drinking his beer. *Don't let him get to you. A lot of guys sow their wild oats in their twenties. Ethan's older now. He's been through a shit-load since then. He's here now with you because he wants to be here.*

"Yeah," Jackson continued, "We used to go out almost every night, see how many hot bodies we could pick up. Although ... most of the time, even though the looking was good, and we did a lot playing around, we ended up leaving together." He gave Will a pointed look with a salacious smile, as if he felt he needed to make it clear what he meant by them "leaving" together. "Sometimes we brought someone or maybe a couple of *someones* along, but more often it was just us."

Okay, now the twinge had grown into a full-fledged ball of hot tar in the pit of Will's gut. He did *not* want to hear this. Or rather, he didn't want to hear it from this guy, with the smarmy look on his face as if he were implying Ethan found him hotter and more exciting than he could ever find Will. He took several swallows of his beer, and tried to look casual, but it was damned hard.

When Will didn't respond, Jackson chuckled again. "Of course," he said, "when we moved to Paris, we played the field a lot less."

"Ethan lived in Paris?" Will blurted out, then wanted to kick himself in the ass for saying it aloud. He hadn't wanted Jackson to draw him into the conversation, and sure as hell didn't want him to know he knew things about Ethan Will didn't. *Shit*.

Jackson gave him a raised eyebrow look. "You didn't know?" Then he smiled again. "Yeah, we lived there. The two of us, along with Josette and Gabrielle. You ever slept with a French woman? Damn, they know tricks you can't imagine.



And the four of us together ... well, let's just say the landlord had complaints about us more than once."

Jackson's low chuckle grated along Will's nerve endings. Will lifted his beer bottle to his lips only to discover it was already empty.

Jackson rose and headed into the kitchen, and Will watched him go, wondering what the hell the guy was up to, moving around the house like he lived here. "Uh, can I get you something else?" he asked.

"Actually," the man said, opening the refrigerator door, then shutting it, "I was just going to get you another beer, since you're out."

Will had to bite his tongue at that before he said something nasty. He didn't want this jerk to know he was getting to him. But when he saw Jackson pause and look down at the note Ethan had left him earlier, presumably reading it, Will almost lost it.

When Jackson returned and handed Will the already opened beer, Will took it, but set it down on the coffee table. He gave Jackson a steady "I'm not amused" look.

At that, the other man's eyes widened as if he'd just realized he'd been behaving badly. An expression of abject apology crossed his face. "I'm sorry, man. I've been out of line. Sometimes I just open my mouth and I don't think. And that"—he gestured toward the kitchen—"well, I had no right to invade your privacy. My apologies."

That put Will on the spot, so even though he had no interest in forgiving the man, he'd look like a complete asshole if he didn't acknowledge the apology.

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

He nodded and mumbled, "It's okay."

"Please, drink the beer. A peace offering."

Will sighed and picked it up. A peace offering with beer he'd paid for himself. But he understood it was the thought that counted.

"So, tell me about yourself," Jackson said. "I know Ethan thinks the world of you. He always has..."

## CHAPTER 6

Huffing out a disgruntled sigh, Ethan lifted his wrist to glance at his watch that wasn't there. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He reached into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out his cell phone to see the time on it.

Ten minutes to five.

Daniels and his associate were fifty minutes late, which irked the hell out of Ethan. He liked timeliness in people. Especially people he worked with. He hoped this wasn't going to be typical in his dealings with Jarvis & Phipps. They were looking to set up relationships with companies in half a dozen other countries, several of which found tardiness a direct insult. He'd have to counsel Daniels and anyone else who might be in on the negotiations about that.

Not having anything but Daniels's LA office phone number, Ethan hesitated calling to see what was up, but then decided what the hell. Daniels's secretary no doubt had the man's cell number, then Ethan could call him directly and ask if they'd run into problems.

But after three rings, Daniels's phone went to voice mail. Ethan left a brief message for him to call Ethan when he was back in the office, but didn't go into details. With Daniels here in New Mexico, who knew how long it'd be before the man would be in his office again.

So he called information and got the number for the Hotel Saint Francis. When 411 automatically connected him and a clerk answered, Ethan said, "Hi, this is Ethan Gallagher. I had

a message from your concierge earlier today that I was to meet one of your guests, Matt Daniels, this evening. He hasn't arrived, so I wondered if he might be there at the hotel."

"Matt Daniels..." the clerk said slowly, as if searching the hotel database for the name. "Ah! You said your name was Gallagher?"

"That's right."

"Mr. Daniels left a message for you a little while ago. He said he didn't have your cell phone number or he would have called you himself. He wanted you to know he's running late, but should be able to meet you by six o'clock at the already arranged location."

Ethan uttered a silent grumble. Daniels did have his cell number because Ethan had given it to him on Thursday when they'd talked. But maybe he'd lost it. Again, another strike against the man and his professionalism.

"Okay, thanks," he told the clerk. "I appreciate the information. And should Mr. Daniels call back, would it be possible for you to give him my number so he can contact me directly?"

"Of course, sir."

Ethan rattled it off and hung up.

He looked at the time on phone again. 4:59. He had another hour to wait.

"Damn it."

He tried calling Will's cell again, but still received no answer. He called home as well, just in case Will was already there, but it rang and rang. The answering machine never

came on. Maybe they'd accidentally turned it off. So he tried the phone line in his office, which they'd just had installed. It also rang over and over with no response. He'd set up answering service for that phone, but the phone company had said it might be a few days before the service was active. Clearly it wasn't yet. Although he doubted Will would have checked that voice mail anyway.

He contemplated going to his car and taking a drive to kill the time, but decided against it since it was rush hour and he'd probably never find another halfway close parking space. He was already two blocks away as it was. Plus, the downtown restaurant was beginning to fill up with after-work diners. He might come back and have to wait an hour or more for a table at the popular eatery.

Instead, he sweet-talked the waitress into holding his table for him for a couple of minutes while he went out to the newspaper machines on the sidewalk. He returned with a copy of *USA Today* and a local Santa Fe paper. Then he ordered a Jack and Coke and settled in for the long haul.

At 6:15, however, he'd had enough. His patience was stretched as far as it could go, and his temper wasn't far behind.

He called the hotel again.

Yet a different clerk answered the phone this time, and had to look Daniels's name up on the computer. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Mr. Daniels checked out almost an hour ago."

"What? I just called a little over an hour ago and was told nothing about this. Are you certain he checked out?"

"Yes, sir."

"My name is Ethan Gallagher. Did he happen to leave a message for me?"

"No, I don't see anything. I'm sorry, sir."

Ethan thanked the man and hung up, having to work hard at not taking his frustrations out on an innocent party.

Okay, enough was enough. He didn't know what the hell was going on, but he didn't appreciate the way he'd been strung along today. And he'd sure as hell think twice about ever taking on Jarvis & Phipps as a client after this.

He left a twenty and a ten to cover the two drinks he'd had and the time he'd taken up the waitress's table, grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair, and called it a night. He sure as hell had better things he could be doing right now. A smile built in him at the thought of Will. *Much better things.*

He breathed in the scents of the warm evening as he walked the two blocks to his car. Downtown Santa Fe had an ambience all its own—history, thriving Native American and Hispanic cultures, trendy metropolitan area, and tourist mecca.

The walk calmed him, and by the time he reached the Vette, parked on a narrow, quiet, side street, he was more than ready to get home and unwind.

But the first thing he noticed was that the Vette's left rear tire was flat.

"Oh, for fuck sake! What else is going to go wrong today?" He didn't shout it exactly, but it was one more frustrating thing on the list of frustrations of his day, so he wasn't quiet about it either. Luckily no one was near enough to hear him.

He unlocked the car, loosened and yanked off his tie, and had leaned in to throw it and his jacket across to the passenger seat in preparation for changing the tire, when a large brown envelope on the driver's seat caught his attention.

Nothing was written on it to indicate what it might be. And he knew damn good and well he hadn't left it there.

"What the hell?"

A sudden prickle of warning raced up his spine, making the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand up at attention. Someone had been in his car. There was no other explanation.

*Maybe it was Will.* Will had the spare set of keys to the Vette.

But he discounted that almost as soon as he thought it. Yeah, Will worked in Santa Fe, but he would have had no idea Ethan was even in Santa Fe this evening until he got home and read the note. And if he had come back to town, thinking he might meet up with Ethan, he would have come to *La Mariposa* because Ethan had told him that's where he'd be. He wouldn't have driven or walked around the whole of downtown to see if he could find Ethan's car. Nor would he have left something in it. If he'd had something to give to him, he would have given it to him in person.

No. This was something else. He knew it in his gut.

All those thoughts went through his head in a split second as he reached for the envelope.

Cautiously, he squeezed together the metal brad that held it closed and opened the flap. He peered inside and saw papers, so he reached in and pulled them out.

Except they weren't papers. They were pictures—photographs. Full page size. They looked to have been printed on a computer printer.

But what he saw in the first photo had him leaning a hand against the car to steady himself.

It was a photo taken from below, of him standing in the loft window. Nude. With Will behind him, his hand wrapped around Ethan's dick. It had obviously been made on Saturday.

"Oh, shit."

Ethan sank into the car seat.

The next picture had been taken at night with a low shutter speed and no flash, so it was dark, but Ethan had no question as to the location. The deck at home. More specifically, the hammock on the deck at home, with Will lying between Ethan's legs.

The third picture was of them together in the garage, on the chair.

His heart was throbbing by now, each heavy beat making him lightheaded.

Next in the stack were three pictures of Will alone. One showed him working in the garage, his back to the camera, his jean shorts molded to his ass and his muscular back stretching his T-shirt tight as he carried a cardboard box. Another was of him somewhere outside the house, walking, wearing khaki shorts, a long-sleeved tee, and hiking boots.



The third showed him shirtless, tanned and buff, dressed only in jeans, holding a hammer and concentrating on something. Ethan recognized the scene ... it had been taken while Will worked on the deck railing on Friday evening, probably just minutes before Ethan had come out and given him a blowjob.

In red marker at the bottom of the picture someone had written:

*You don't get to have all the fun. I'm having a piece of this.*

*Oh, God.*

Panic shot through Ethan, as cold and agonizing as if someone had pierced him with a razor-sharp shard of ice.

But his heart stopped beating and his fear magnified a hundredfold when he saw the final two papers in the stack. The first, with a ragged edge, had been torn out of his sketchbook. It was one of the pictures he'd drawn at an S&M club. The sheet beneath was blank except for a note written on it:

*Don't even think about calling the cops or I'll kill him.*

In that instant, he knew who was behind this.

"Jesus ... fucking hell..." He shoved his keys into the ignition with shaking hands and started to shut the door when he remembered he had a flat tire.

"Shit, shit, shit!" He pounded the flat of his hand against the steering wheel and fought off a surge of nausea. "You fucking son of a bitch."

He had his phone out, pushing in the numbers to their home phone and Will's cell again, then swearing with a vengeance when, once again, he got no answer.

*God, Will, please, please be okay.*

Barely breathing, barely able to function, his blood running cold, he bolted from the car and began what felt like the long and arduous procedure of changing his flat tire.

He half expected to find his spare flat also ... but it wasn't.

*No, of course not. He doesn't want to keep you away permanently. Just slow you down.*

Just like Ethan had been slowed down all day.

Suddenly, he knew why Daniels had never met him at *La Mariposa*. Daniels had never been in Santa Fe.

Of course ... it made perfect, horrific sense. The missing items in the house, the sensation someone was watching, the answering machine turned off, not being able to get through to Will's phone all day, then the supposed runaround with Daniels this afternoon. Ethan's day planner had been lying right on his desk all weekend with all the information about his business calls in plain sight. It would have been a simple matter for someone to have called Jarvis & Phipps, posing as Ethan, cancelling the real planned phone meeting. And then a few more simple arrangements to lead Ethan to believe Daniels was in town.

It had all been a set-up to get Ethan away from home.

*Will...*

"You, fucker. If you've hurt him, I'll kill *you*."

An agonizing forty-five minutes passed before Ethan pulled into the driveway at home. He'd pushed ninety most of the way up the interstate, praying the whole time he wouldn't get pulled over, because he couldn't trust himself not to drive off

and leave the state patrol in his dust. And that would have caused a whole new set of problems.

Will's truck was parked in front of the house, but Ethan couldn't dredge up any relief at the sight of it. It just meant Will had been home at some point.

It had been so dry the past month that he couldn't tell if there were any new tire tracks in the gravel driveway since Will's truck had pulled in. Someone could have come and gone since then and he wouldn't know it.

He visually searched the yard and the outside of the house, looking for anything suspicious, all the while pissed at himself for not believing in his gut instincts over the past few days when he'd suspected something wasn't right. No, he'd *known* something wasn't right, damn it! But he'd convinced himself he was either imagining it or it was the peeping tom neighbor.

He didn't see anything out here that gave rise to concern, but he had no view of the back or sides of the house, so wasn't sure what he might find elsewhere.

He needed to get out of the car and move, but he'd never in his life felt as naked as he did right now without a weapon of some sort. He'd sold everything in Virginia before he came out here, wanting to put that entire life behind him, and thinking he had.

Now he was questioning his rationale and wishing like hell he'd kept *something*.

He opened the car door and stepped out. Although it had been warm all day, a cool breeze sighed through the pines,

and the leaves on the grove of aspen trees near the porch fluttered.

For a split second he pondered going around to the back of the house to enter, but decided if the person he believed was responsible was here, he'd be watching Ethan anyway right now and would see him no matter where he entered.

He looked in Will's truck as he passed it, noting Will's cell phone lying on the dash, but not finding anything else that would offer up a clue.

From there he went straight up the front steps. The door was unlocked. He pushed it open, but stood back, expecting the possibility of an attack the moment he entered. When he heard and saw nothing, he stepped inside with caution.

"Will?"

No answer. He'd had to hope, but hadn't been expecting it to be that easy.

He saw no one in the living room, so he took a moment to reach inside the closet next to the front door and grab the wooden baseball bat he knew leaned against the wall. Hefting its weight in his hands, he searched the rest of the lower level of the house—the kitchen, both bedrooms, the bathroom—and found nothing. He checked the loft, but discovered no one there either.

He stood in the middle of the living room, turning to make one last visual. "Jackson?" he yelled. "You son of a bitch. If you're here, you damn well better show yourself."

All was silent.

Worry pounded through him with a vengeance. No Will. No Jackson. Where the hell had they gone?

He saw the note he'd left for Will on the kitchen counter, lying down now rather than propped up, indicating Will had seen it and read it. He saw Will's keys on the bookshelf in the living room where he always put them when he walked in the door.

Then he saw three beer bottles in the living room. One on the coffee table directly in front of the couch, and two near the end, by the armchair. Two people had sat here. The bottle in front of the couch and one of the ones at the end were empty. The other one near the end was only half full. Suspicious, he picked up all three bottles and sniffed. The one with beer still in it had a faint odor to it the others didn't. An odor he recognized.

"Shit."

He caught sight of the sliding glass door. It was open an inch or so.

Tightening his hold on the bat, he slid it open and went out.

The deck was empty, and when he leaned out over the rail, he saw nothing underneath it either.

A sudden pinch in his neck startled him. He raised his hand up. His fingers slid over something ... and horror dawned. He jerked out the tiny dart and threw it down, but it was too late. Dizziness swept over him. The bat slid from his hand. He clutched the deck rail, his heart pounding. Then he was sinking to his knees, and, finally, slumping onto the deck.

He heard a sound near him, but couldn't move to see what it was. A shadow passed over him, was leaning down. His

vision was nearly dark and all he could make out was the outline of a face, smiling.

"It's been a while," a voice said, with just a hint of a drawl. A voice both familiar and haunting. "You don't look so good, Ethan."

"Fuck ... you..." Ethan managed to get out, but it was little more than a whisper.

Laughter was his only response. And then, as the blackness fell over him completely, he felt himself hefted off the ground with a grunt and draped over a solid shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

## CHAPTER 7

Will prowled the small, pitch-black space, searching for something—anything—he could use as a weapon or a means to get out of here. But this was already his fifth, or maybe it was his sixth time, feeling along the wooden-beamed dirt walls and cool, hard-packed dirt floor ... and nothing presented itself this time any more than it had before.

He had no idea where he was. Obviously a cellar or some kind of underground storeroom. But under what, or where the building was located, he couldn't guess. He smelled pine mixed with the cool scent of dirt, so suspected he was in the mountains somewhere. Which could mean anything and nothing. The Sangre de Cristos stretched for hundreds of miles, and they weren't the only mountain range in New Mexico. He'd called for help until he was hoarse and finally realized he could be miles from anything and be wasting his breath.

To complicate matters, he had no sense of time. His watch, along with his shoes, socks, belt, and everything in his pockets had been taken from him, leaving him barefoot, clad in his T-shirt and jeans. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, how long he'd been here. He didn't think more than a few hours all together, but he couldn't tell.

"God damn it!" he muttered, staring up. He couldn't reach the ceiling, couldn't touch it if he jumped either. There had to be a trapdoor up there somewhere. But with no way to get up to it, he couldn't access it. He didn't remember being put down here, but suspected there was a retractable ladder that

could be lowered in, then pulled up. Although, from the throbbing ache in his shoulder and left side, he had a feeling no ladder had been involved and he'd simply been dumped in.

What a stupid, fricking idiot he'd been.

Jackson Stone had rubbed him the wrong way from the start, but he didn't have Ethan's instincts and hadn't sensed the guy was dangerous. He'd just thought he was a fuck-head, trying to antagonize Will out of jealousy or something—although that might very well have been part of it. He hadn't even suspected anything when he'd begun feeling dizzy and nauseous. It wasn't until Jackson sat there smiling at him, asking him with obvious fake solicitousness if Will was okay, that it began to sink in maybe the bastard had put something in the beer he'd brought him. And then, as he watched, he saw Jackson pull Ethan's Omega watch out of the pocket of his jeans and check the time. That's when everything had crystallized and Will had stood and, probably foolishly, taken a swing at the man. But as dizzy as he already was, he'd barely managed to nick the guy. And, in payback, Jackson had laid him out with one, or maybe it had been two punches.

That was the last Will remembered, until he'd come to down here, blood still oozing from his lower lip, and the rest of him aching like a sonofabitch.

And here he'd been ever since.

Sick worry ate at him about Ethan and whether or not he was okay. Will wasn't sure if Jackson wanted him, or wanted Ethan and was using him as bait. He suspected the latter, which scared the hell out of him more than if the guy wanted



only Will. The thought of this bastard waylaying Ethan and hurting him left Will sick to his stomach.

He heard movement above him, the creaking of wood—something he hadn't heard since he woke up.

He looked up, waiting, watching.

And then the trapdoor he'd suspected was there opened. Light shot down through the square above him, momentarily blinding him, causing him to raise a hand to his eyes.

He heard a thunk from above, then a dead weight landed on top of him, knocking the breath out of him and crushing him flat on his back on the unforgiving floor.

The door was shut as quickly as it had opened, and through his agony, Will heard the sound of a lock snap closed.

Gasping, trying to drag in air, he wrapped his hands around the heavy weight atop him ... and realized it was a body. The faint, familiar scent of Ethan's expensive aftershave wafted through his senses.

"Oh, shit! Eth?" he managed to croak.

More gently now, he wrapped his arms around what he thought were Ethan's shoulders and slid him off to the side.

Air seeped into Will's lungs, although it hurt like hell to breathe. But that meant nothing to him compared to his fear about Ethan and whether he was dead or alive.

He sat up against his body's protests, and rolled Ethan onto his back.

"Ethan?" he said more loudly. *God, please don't let him be dead.* He ran his hands along his lover's body until he came to his neck. In the dark, he felt for a pulse ... and grew lightheaded with relief when he found one. He leaned close

and heard faint puffs of air escaping Ethan's lips, but Ethan didn't move or respond in any way.

"Damn it, Eth, don't do this."

*Stay calm. Jackson may have drugged him like he did you. Or maybe the fall knocked him out. Give him some time to come around.*

Working methodically, Will ran his hands over Ethan's body, discovering that, like Will, Ethan had been stripped of everything but his shirt and pants. He felt no obvious broken bones. But when he stroked his hands over Ethan's head, his fingers came away wet. He lifted them to his nose and the scent was metallic.

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn." Will found the spot again on the side of his head, and heard Ethan moan when he touched the raised knot. It didn't feel huge, although it was hard to tell by sense of touch alone. Eth's moan had torn at his heartstrings, though. If he could just fucking see, he'd know what he was dealing with here. But that obviously wasn't going to happen.

Will crawled behind him, then sat with his back against the wall and tugged Ethan's head into his lap. He stroked his hair and murmured to him, willing him to wake up and be okay, but kept one hand on Ethan's chest to reassure himself with the comforting thud of his heart. At this point, there was nothing else he could do but wait.

He didn't know how much time passed before Ethan finally stirred. It felt like forever. But when he heard another moan and Ethan's head turned to the side, Will's heart raced. *Thank God.*

"Eth?"

"Will?" His voice sounded dry, raspy, and was barely above a whisper.

"I'm here."

Suddenly, Ethan's entire body tensed ... then, in a startling motion, he was trying to sit up, and trying to scramble back away from Will at the same time. His body began to shake with such intensity it scared the bejesus out of Will.

"God, what's wrong? Ethan? Talk to me."

Was he having some kind of seizure? Maybe from the head injury?

Then, in an agonizing realization, Will knew.

"Oh, God. Close your eyes. Close your eyes and listen to my voice."

Will wrapped his arms around him, but Ethan fought him, in a dead panic now.

"Listen to me," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, even though his heart was pounding. "It's okay. It's me, Will. It's going to be okay. Close your eyes ... it'll help." At least he hoped it would. If he could get Ethan calmed down, get him to close his eyes so he wasn't so overwhelmed by the dark nothingness, then maybe he could talk him through this.

He knew how dark, small, enclosed spaces affected Ethan. Knew the horrible anxiety he suffered. He suspected when Ethan woke up to find himself in utter darkness, uncertain where he was, it had brought all the demons from his previous captivity back to sudden and brutal life. Will's heart ached for him.

He managed to get Ethan against him, so his back was against Will's chest and he sat between Will's legs. Will held him close, gently but firmly, and spoke next to Ethan's ear. "Please. Let me help. You know I'd never hurt you."

Ethan was gasping in air, but he quit fighting and Will sensed his voice was beginning to sink in. "That's it. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Breathe with me. You feel me behind you? Feel me breathing? Breathe with me, babe. In ... out ... in ... out..."

He felt the last of the fight leave Ethan, felt his chest begin to rise and fall in a more regular rhythm.

"I'm right here. I'm right here and I'm not going to leave you," he soothed. "Keep your eyes closed and listen to me, okay?"

He felt the hint of a nod from Ethan.

"I want you to imagine we're at home, sitting on the deck. I'm on the top step and you're sitting on the one below me, leaning back against me. Keep your eyes closed and imagine that's where we are right now. It's a beautiful night ... the stars are so bright above us. The sky's crystal clear. The breeze is blowing through the pine trees and ruffling your hair."

Will stroked his hair and pressed a kiss against the side of his neck.

"Summer's almost here. Can you smell it? The wildflowers down by the creek, the scent of pine needles, the grass in the meadow? I love those smells."

"Me, too," Ethan whispered raggedly. He didn't sound himself, but that he was listening and talking was a good sign.

"Do you hear the crickets? Sometimes they're just crazy loud. And, if you listen closely, you can also hear the owl hooting across the creek. He lives in that big Douglas fir ... you know the one? It's near where the log's lying over the creek. This will be his third summer here. In the winter, his species flies to Mexico."

Will talked and talked ... he didn't know for how long. He just kept at it until he'd exhausted his supply of description and Ethan leaned back against him, heavy and warm, his knees drawn up, his breathing even if not totally relaxed, his head resting against Will's shoulder.

"You doing okay?" Will asked,

"Yeah," Ethan said softly. "Thank you ... for this."

"You're welcome."

"I..." Ethan's voice caught. He tried again. "I just..."

"It's okay. I understand. You don't have to talk about it." God, he loved this man and hated it so damned much when he hurt.

Ethan nodded and Will could almost feel the relief rippling off him at not having to explain.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Ethan asked, his voice still ragged and stretched thin. Will could tell he was fighting to stay in control.

"No, he didn't hurt me." Will didn't mention the ache in his shoulder and side. Or how painful it was to breathe. Ethan

didn't need to worry about him right now. "I was scared as hell about you, though. You were out a long time."

"He shot me with a tranq dart. Depending on what he used and how much of it, it can take a while to wear off. Any idea where we are?"

"In some kind of cellar or basement. It's maybe fifteen feet square. Dirt and wood-beamed walls. Nothing else. No shelves, no furniture, nothing. Just a trapdoor somewhere above us."

"No ladder or way to get up there, obviously?"

"No. And as to where we are geographically?" Will shrugged. "I don't have a clue. I was out when he brought me here. I think he drugged me, too."

"He put something in your beer. I smelled it."

"I figured as much. I didn't know. He showed up at the door and said he was a friend of yours. So I invited him in."

As if he could read Will's feelings of guilt over doing so, Ethan said, "It's not your fault, Will. I suspect he's been in the house numerous times over the past few days."

"He has your watch."

"He has several things. It's part of whatever game he's playing. He sent me on a wild goose chase this afternoon, tampered with our phones ... the list goes on and on. He's also been watching us. And..." He hesitated as if he didn't want to have to say the rest.

"And what?"

"And ... taking pictures."

"Pictures of what?"

"Of us ... in very *intimate* moments."

"Jesus," Will breathed. He suddenly remembered the strange look and knowing smile Jackson had given him when he'd offered him a beer. Damn, had the man been watching that night when Will had used the beer as he sucked off Ethan in the hammock? A nasty little shudder coursed through him at the thought their privacy had been so thoroughly breached.

"Who is he? He told me his name's Jackson Stone. But who is he really?"

Ethan sighed, and his words, when they came, were threaded with what sounded like self-recrimination. "He's the guy in the drawing."

"Drawing?"

"The drawing I did. The one you asked me about."

"Oh ... shit. I thought he looked kind of familiar, but I couldn't place him." A surge of anger at himself swept through Will. "Damn it! Why didn't I recognize him? I would never have let him in the house if I had."

"It wouldn't have mattered. If you'd recognized him and tried to shut him out, he would have overpowered you or threatened you and done what he wanted anyway. I told you ... he's been in the house several times."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know for sure. But he's always had issues, and he blames me for some of them."

"You said it was ugly when you ended it with him."

"It was. He wasn't able to keep it personal ... he let his anger bleed over into his work, my work ... When you train to ... well, to do the job I did, the training can be very realistic. The instructors play games with you, preparing you for things

you might face in the field. They sometimes put the trainees in pairs or teams to work together. But sometimes they pit you against each other as well. When they did ... Jackson got off on it and had a tendency to take things to extremes."

"So he used the training as an open excuse to take out his frustrations on you?"

"Yeah. But it was more than that. He ... tried too hard. Ended up pissing off a lot of people. He kept it all hidden from the instructors, or thought he did. But he played the rest of us off against each other with lies or seduction or whatever. He was a cocky shit, wanted top honors in the class, and wasn't above doing whatever he had to, including hurting people or ruining their reputations, in order to get what he wanted."

"And let me guess ... he didn't get the top honors, did he? You did."

Ethan sighed. "I did. And that was followed up by the fact I got a great assignment and he didn't. He ended up spending a couple of years in a real little shit hole of a place. I always suspected the instructors knew *exactly* what was going on during training and that was their way of teaching him a final lesson."

"But that was a long time ago. Do you think he's still carrying a grudge about it?"

"I didn't see him for several years, but then maybe four years ago he got a temporary assignment to my office. I almost refused to work with him because, in my opinion, he'd always been a loose cannon. I didn't trust him, didn't trust his methods. But in the end, there was no one else and we



needed a second person. He ended up pulling some bullshit on a job that almost got me and one of my assets—a person I was working with to get information—killed. So I had no choice but to report him. He got reams of negative pages added to his file, a pretty good slap on the wrist, and last I'd heard, had ended up back in another miserable shit hole."

"So this is payback."

Another ragged sigh slid from Ethan, sounding so desolate it caused another twinge in Will's heart. "Yeah, it looks that way. I'm sorry, Will. You have to know I would never have intentionally put you in any danger."

"Don't apologize. I know that."

"If he'd hurt you..."

"He didn't. Mostly my pride because I didn't see through him. It's you I'm worried about. Are you okay? Are you hurt physically? Your head has a pretty good knot on it."

"I'll live."

"Are you keeping your eyes closed?"

"Yeah."

"Good. As long as you do that, you can imagine we're anywhere you want us to be."

"I used to do that all the time," Ethan said in a soft voice. "When it got to be too much, I'd close my eyes and imagine myself away from there and back with you. I'd imagine I was lying in your bed with you like I had been that night before I left, and you were rubbing my back and telling me it was too early to be awake. Then you pulled me close and I went back to sleep feeling more secure and more loved than I ever had in my life."

Will's eyes burned with moisture at Ethan's words. "You did?"

"I told you ... you got me through, Will. Just like you did tonight."

A lump of emotion stuck in Will's throat and he couldn't seem to find the right words to respond. So instead, he hugged his arms more tightly around Ethan and hoped Ethan knew he'd always be here for him.

"So what do you think he's going to do with us?" Will asked.

"Not sure. Right now he's toying with us. Making us wait down here without knowing anything in order to build our fear and anxiety. I'm surprised he put us together, though. It's much more effective to separate and isolate. That's what I would have done."

A chill crept up Will's spine. The words were so matter-of-fact, so ... mercenary. Sometimes it was hard for him to reconcile the charming, fun-loving, albeit complicated Ethan he'd known since they were teenagers with the hard-edged man he knew Ethan must have been as a spy. He tried not to think too much about the things Ethan might have done over the years, but sometimes thoughts snuck in anyway. And here, in the dark, with the oppressive silence and building tension pressing in on them, he suddenly couldn't shut them out.

"Nobody's going to know for a while that we're missing," Will said. "I sometimes don't go into the office for several days at a time if I'm working in the field, and I only talk to Jess and my parents once a week or so. Since we were just

down in Albuquerque this weekend, I doubt they'll try to call and be worried. And you didn't have any other client calls scheduled over the next few days, did you?"

"No. We're going to get out of here, though, Will."

Will couldn't tell from his tone if he truly believed it or if he was just saying it to comfort Will.

"I know. I know we will."

Time passed. Hours, although Will had no concept of how many. He dozed and suspected Ethan did as well. His mouth grew dry and a drink started sounding pretty damn good.

They talked some, but Ethan's responses were becoming shorter and he seemed to be pushing them out with difficulty. Will could tell he was fighting to keep a tight rein on his anxiety. He seemed to be withdrawing into himself, and Will wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but his instincts screamed it probably wasn't good.

Something creaked overhead.

His heart thudding, Will rose and looked up. Ethan stayed where he was, sitting against the wall, but Will felt tension rolling off him.

The trap door opened, and the silhouette of a figure darkened the square of light.

"Thirsty, boys?"

Something hit the ground with a plastic-sounding *thunk*.

"Don't drink it," Ethan warned, his voice hoarse and dry.

"He might have drugged it."

Will glanced at him and, in the shaft of dim light, caught a glimpse for the first time of Ethan, taking in, at a glance, his

pale, disheveled look. But what caught his attention and held it were Ethan's haunted eyes.

The sound of harsh laughter came from above. "That's the ten thousand dollar question, isn't it? Do you take a chance it might not be drugged or poisoned, and drink it so you don't die of dehydration? Or do you not drink it ... and die of dehydration. Your call."

The door slammed shut and darkness once again enveloped them.

Will picked up the plastic bottle—it felt like a trail water bottle, with a looped, screw-on top—and sat next to Ethan. The slosh of liquid inside called to him and he wanted it like an addict craving his next hit. He had to force back the almost painful urge to open it and swallow and swallow. "So what do we do?" he asked.

"Open it and let me smell it."

Will did, closing his eyes and ordering himself to ignore the dampness wafting from inside it. He offered it to Ethan. "Here."

He felt Ethan's cool hands close around his and take the bottle from him.

"Do you smell anything?"

"No."

"So we should drink it then?"

"There are a lot of things he could have put in it that don't smell, but they can make you sick or dead all the same. He'd know I'd sniff it, so if he did put something in it, he'd be sure it was odorless."

"Can you tell by tasting a little of it?"

"No."

"You said you smelled it in my beer bottle..."

"He wanted me to find that."

"Oh." Will suddenly felt very naïve. The spy games that seemed so elementary to these two men were overwhelmingly complicated to him. Was this how Ethan had lived his life the past ten years? Second guessing everything, not trusting, seeing multiple sides to every coin and constantly having to weigh and balance the odds as to which meant life and which meant death? Will couldn't even fathom a life like that. No wonder Ethan didn't ever want to talk about it.

"He wouldn't kill us, would he?" Will asked. "Why bother kidnapping us and putting us down here for this long if he planned to kill us by poisoning the water?"

"No, he doesn't want us dead. Not yet anyway."

Okay, that was *not* a comforting thought.

"But he might not be averse to drugging us again, keeping us at his mercy," Ethan said. "On the other hand..."

He was silent for several seconds, and Will could almost hear the wheels in his brain turning.

"I think it's safe to drink it," he finally said.

Shock rippled through Will. "Just like that? Based on ... what? Gut instinct?"

"Yeah. I know Jackson. Whatever he's got planned, he's not going to want either of us half-aware for it. He'll want to be sure we're completely cognizant, so we remember everything he does to us."

Pulses of ice shot through Will's veins. "Jesus. This guy's a nut job, isn't he?"

"Yeah. But there's always a method to his twisted brand of madness."

Will heard Ethan lift the bottle and heard him swallow a couple of times. Then he pressed it against Will's hands. "Here, go ahead and drink. But let's go easy on it. There's no telling how long before we get more."

\* \* \* \*

As it turned out, they didn't have long to wait before Jackson came to visit again. To Ethan's best guess, it couldn't have been more than an hour or two before the trapdoor was flung open.

The shaft of light that fell into the dark cellar lifted a portion of the heavy black shadow that hung over Ethan. He could suddenly draw in a deep breath. But he knew the reprieve would be short-lived. Soon the door would close again and the dark suffocation would once more settle in to continue its slow crush of his chest. Or ... potentially worse, Jackson had decided it was time to play more games with them.

A metal extension ladder was lowered into the cellar.

Ethan eyed it, hoping Jackson would come down it, but knowing he wouldn't—he'd be putting himself at too much risk, knowing there were two of them and they might overpower him. Especially down here with no easy way for him to retreat.

Will started to stand, but Ethan put a hand on his leg to hold him back, never taking his eyes off the light-filled square.

Jackson's form loomed above them in the opening. "Hope you've enjoyed this romantic interlude I've allowed you. But I've found I'm not a real patient person when it comes to sharing attention. I think you've had more than enough time on your own, and now ... it's my turn for some TLC. The question is ... who do I want first?"

Ethan felt Will tense next to him, and once again was swamped with guilt for getting Will into this. His hand, still on Will's thigh, squeezed, trying to offer reassurance, but knowing, even as he did it, that this could get worse before it got better. Jackson was a powder keg. Always had been.

"Nah, who am I kidding?" Jackson was saying. "I already know who I want. No offense, Ethan, old friend, but I've got myself a hankering for that tall, smart, delicious hunk of a boyfriend of yours. Will McClaren ... come on down," he sing-songed. "Or up, as the case may be."

Ethan shot to his feet, his hands clenched into fists so tight his nails dug into his palms. "There is no fucking way, Jackson. No way you're laying a hand on him. He's not coming up there."

"Well, see, here's the thing," Jackson drawled. "Either he comes up that ladder—*alone*—or"—the sound of the slide on a handgun being pulled back echoed through the underground pit—"I shoot him."

Will had risen behind Ethan, and at Jackson's words, a cold fear like Ethan had never known spread through his veins. He

backed up against Will, shielding him with his body, pushing him against the wall. "No way! You'll have to go through me."

"I've got no problem with that."

"Ethan!" Will hissed, "He'll do it, and I'm not losing you!"

But Ethan ignored him, and although Will was taller than he was and more muscular, determination and raw, fear-fed adrenaline boosted his own strength, helping him hold Will where he was.

"Aw ... aren't you two just sweet. Fighting over who gets to be the heroic one."

"Fuck you, Jackson! If you think I'm going to let you lay a finger on him, then you're even more delusional than I thought."

"No, fuck you, Ethan. Oh, but that's right, you don't let anyone fuck you, do you? It's all fine for you to shove your cock in anyone or anything, but no one's allowed to breach your sacred flesh. No one except the beautiful, sainted Will, that is. You seem to have no problem bending over for him. So I'm thinking I want to know what's so damn special about him. What makes him and his dick worthy of going where no man's gone before?"

"Shut the hell up!" Will snarled. "You think I'd ever touch a piece of filth like you?"

Surprise and pride at Will's fervor rippled through Ethan, but it was quickly overshadowed by another surge of icy fear. Will's standing up to him was only pissing Jackson off more.

"We'll just see about that," Jackson said, his tone light. But Ethan heard the barely restrained fury behind the words. "Get up here, McClaren, or your lover's dead."



Will pushed past Ethan, even as Ethan fought to keep him from doing it.

"Eth, stop. Let me go. I'm not giving him a reason to kill you."

Ethan wrapped a hand around Will's flexing bicep. "No ... Will, listen to me," he said with urgency in a quiet tone. "He plays games ... mind games, sex games. He likes pain. He'll try to get into your head."

"I don't care right now. I'll do whatever I have to, to keep him from hurting you. Right now ... I just ... I don't want to leave you down here in the dark," Will whispered, his words ragged with worry.

"Will ... God, you stubborn fool..."

"Get the fuck up here," Jackson ordered. "Now!"

Will grasped the back of Ethan's head and pulled him into a quick, emotionally-charged kiss. "I love you," he breathed against Ethan's ear. "I love you so damned much, and I'm not going to let him kill you," he said fiercely.

Then, before Ethan could argue any further, Will turned and began to climb the ladder.

"No, damn it! Will!" Ethan started to go after him, but the sound of a shot reverberated in the small, tight space.

"Jesus Christ, stop it!" Will shouted. "You bastard! I'm coming up! Ethan? God, are you okay?"

Ethan had fallen and flattened himself on the floor out of instinct. The bullet had lodged in the dirt wall somewhere behind him, but close enough his adrenaline was still pumping hard from the near miss. "I'm okay."

"Stay back," Will ordered. "Damn it, just stay back and don't give him any excuse to hurt you."

"Next time I won't be hitting the wall, Gallagher. Better do what your loverboy says." Jackson's voice was cold.

Ethan watched, his heart in his throat, until Will disappeared through the door. The ladder was pulled up. And when the trapdoor closed, plunging him back into darkness, it was the sound of brutal finality.

"He already is hurting me, Will," Ethan whispered. "In the worst possible way. And he knows it."

## CHAPTER 8

It took every ounce of Ethan's control to keep his sanity. With the darkness and the small space already pushing him to the edge of his endurance, the not knowing what was happening to Will, what horrors he might be suffering at Jackson's hands, slowly and excruciatingly tore chunks out of his soul.

Will should never have had to experience anything like this. But, as always, the blame of him being exposed to such darkness fell on Ethan's shoulders.

Ethan had spent his teens and most of his adult life living behind emotional masks, half-truths, and sometimes outright lies in order to keep the cancers of his life hidden. Growing up, he'd never told a soul about his father's drunken abuse because his dad had told him if he ever did, he'd kill Ethan. Ethan had believed him. Had also believed if his old man got in a big enough rage over it, he'd kill whomever Ethan had confided in. As close as he and Will had been over the years, he'd never even hinted about his home situation. He'd been too afraid of what his dad might do, and also afraid Will and his family would look down on him for bringing such a blight into their lives. Yet he'd discovered last month that Will had known about his dad all along. Clearly, Ethan had done a poor job of protecting Will, and Will had ended up carrying the burden of his dirty little secret anyway.

Years later, when Ethan went to work for the government, he'd hidden that, too. Not only because keeping his true occupation secret was part and parcel of the job, but also

because he'd had to do things in that job that good, upstanding people shouldn't ever have to know about. Yet, once again Will was involved in spite of Ethan's efforts to keep his shadowed past out of their lives. Because of him Will was somewhere right now probably being...

*Jesus, I can't even think about it.*

His Will, with his sweet, sexy smile and quiet strength. How was this going to affect him?

*He is strong, remember that. Look at how he stood up to Jackson. How he walked up that ladder, with his last concern being for you rather than the fate he was walking to meet.*

That thought did little to comfort him because Will hadn't known what he was walking into. Ethan had. He'd experienced Jackson's sociopathic personality firsthand, had seen his almost overzealous delight in eliciting pain from people—physical, mental, emotional ... it didn't matter to Jackson. He got off on making people squirm.

When they'd begun the government training program together, Ethan had been lured in by Jackson's charm and sexy demeanor, had played the kink scene with him a few times on their nights off, and found him a willing, responsive partner. But after the first time or two, each consecutive time they'd been together, Jackson had wanted Ethan to up the stakes, do things to him that Ethan wasn't willing to do. Then Jackson had begun pressuring him to switch roles with him, to let Jackson top him. Ethan had steadfastly refused—he'd never allowed anyone that intimacy because it meant making himself completely vulnerable to someone, which, until Will, he'd never been willing to do. And after seeing the types of

things Jackson was into, Ethan wouldn't have trusted him anyway. That's when he'd told Jackson point-blank he was done.

But, instead of backing off, his rejection had only made Jackson more determined and he'd continued to "coincidentally" run into him at clubs, and pressure him at every turn. When Ethan ignored him, the manipulations and twisted games on the job had begun. And they'd continued until the training was over and the government had sent Jackson off to his assignment.

Yet here they were again, almost ten years later, back at it. Except this time, Ethan had something far more important at stake than ever before. Jackson had finally found a way to breach Ethan's armor. Will was the source of Ethan's strength, the one person he'd ever loved, had ever trusted. And now Jackson was using that, using Will, to get back at him.

Ethan rose to his feet as pain and fury surged in him. "Jackson, you son of a bitch!" he shouted, staring up at where he knew the trapdoor hung above him. "If you're listening, I'm not going to let you get away with this! If you hurt him, I swear to God, I'll make you pay! You hear me? You hear me, you fuck? You hurt him and I'll kill you!"

He shouted until his throat was raw, until he shook from exhaustion, and the god-awful weight of the darkness pressed down on him, swallowing his words. Until he couldn't stand any longer and sank onto the cold dirt floor, his fists clenched, his heart pounding so hard it hurt to breathe.

*We're getting out of here, Will. I promise.*

Hours passed.

Ethan dozed off, only to wake with a vise tightening around his chest from dreams about Will being tortured.

Although he rationed the water left in the water bottle, it dwindled far too fast. He wasn't sure, but suspected he'd been down here in this pit in the dark for at least a full day and night, but possibly longer.

He dozed again, and this time dreamed of being locked in another tiny, airless underground cell. One so small he could never fully stretch out his legs out when he slept, where bugs and other vermin shared his space as a matter of course, and his only light was during the twice a week walk in chains to the interrogation chamber above ground. A walk where he had a few brief minutes to savor the scent and taste of real air and feel the sunlight or moonlight on his skin before he faced more questions, threats, accusations and the guaranteed and agonizing pain that came with them.

\* \* \* \*

"Let me see Ethan," Will rasped the moment Jackson unfastened the gag that had kept Will silent for hours. His throat and mouth were parched, but more than water, right now he was desperate to be sure Ethan was okay.

"Drink your water like a good boy," Jackson said, squatting next to where Will sat nude on the concrete floor and holding the bottle to his lips.

Will wore thick leather cuffs on his ankles that were locked together, and a similar system restrained his wrists behind his back. But he used his shoulder, in a sudden, quick

movement, to knock the bottle out of Jackson's hands. It fell and a puddle formed near the mouth of it. "Let me see him! Is he still down in that damned dark hole?"

Jackson scowled at him and jerked on the short chain that connected one of the D-rings on the heavy leather collar he'd placed around Will's neck to the wall behind him. "You just wasted your water, boy. Don't expect me to get you more."

"I don't care about the water, you bastard. If Ethan's still in that cellar, you get him out now. If you don't get him out and let me see him, you'll get nothing from me, you hear? Not a fucking thing!"

"Did you forget? I already did get something out of you." Jackson smirked.

"Let me see that Ethan's okay or I swear the next time you come near me with your dick I'll tear it off."

Jackson shoved the gag back in Will's mouth and fastened it with a jerk. "Your attitude's going to get you in trouble. I thought you were supposed to be some kind of an intellectual goody-goody, but you're turning into a real pain in the ass. I'm thinking you need a lesson in respect, boy."

He pulled a short whip from the back waistband of his jeans.

*Oh, crap.*

Will barely had time to think or prepare himself before Jackson laid several strokes across Will's bare chest, abs, and thighs, missing his exposed groin by inches. It was obvious right away the strokes weren't meant to be sexual ... they were punishing. Will flinched at each blow, but he ordered himself not to make a sound. He damn well wasn't going to

let Jackson see him as weak. That was what he wanted, Will knew. The man wanted to feel like he was all-powerful and in control ... but he couldn't control everything.

When Jackson paused, Will glared at him, not looking away. *I'll show you intellectual goody-goody.*

Jackson responded by lashing him twice more, these hard enough to leave welts. Each time the leather bit into Will's skin, it hurt like fucking hell, and for several seconds it was hard to breathe without moaning or crying out. But he refused to give in to the urge.

Jackson, it seemed, was out for blood, and Will suspected he'd keep at it until he got it, or until Will gave in to his power trip. But he wasn't going to lie down and let Jackson beat him into submission. He'd do whatever he had to in order to get out of here, to get Ethan out of here. Ethan had already been through too much captivity and torture. Will damn well wasn't going to let him endure any more of it than he had to. The thought of him possibly still stuck down in that dark hole, alone, suffering was Will's motivation to stay strong.

At Will's lack of response, Jackson raised the whip again, and with a low growl, lashed Will several more times. The final stroke across his chest drew blood.

Will's nerves screamed in agony. A cold sweat popped up on his skin. His stomach clenched in a nauseated cramp, and all he wanted to do was curl into a ball. But he didn't allow himself to utter a single sound.

Fury radiated off Jackson. "You know, I think maybe I will go pay a visit to your boyfriend. I imagine he's probably pretty close to losing his mind at this point, trapped down



there in the dark, reliving his old nightmares. Ah ... you seem surprised I know about that."

Jackson gave him a vicious smile. "I know a lot of things you don't know, boy. You might think you can play tough guy, but you're a babe in the woods. You don't have a clue what I'm capable of. What your boyfriend's capable of, for that matter. And, yeah, I know all about Ethan's little stint with the enemy. I know exactly what they do to captives. Would you like me to tell you about the tortures? How many ways they know how to make a man scream? Or would that offend your sensitive, white-bread sensibilities?"

Will's stomach roiled now as he stared in horror at the man. Jackson knew ... he *knew* how Ethan had suffered, and he'd put him down in the ground anyway. *Oh, God*. Not anyway ... on purpose. To play on Ethan's old fears. To punish him.

"I suspect your Ethan—if he hasn't already completely lost it—will be so desperate by now to get out of there he'll be agreeable to whatever I propose. He'll sell his body and soul to escape the hell of where he is."

He stomped out of the tiny shed, slammed the door shut, and Will heard the snap of the padlock.

Rays from the early morning sunlight slid through chinks in the wooden building, but inside Will, a storm churned. His pulse raced and he began to shiver from the clammy layer of moisture on his skin and, he suspected, from shock.

Jackson's final words had hit him hard and deep in a place the whip could never reach.

*Ethan ... hang on. God, please hang on.*

\* \* \* \*

By the time the trapdoor opened again, it was all Ethan could to do drag himself off the floor and stagger to his feet. He raised a hand to protect his eyes from the shaft of light and looked up.

The heavy *thunk* of what sounded like another water bottle, followed by the light *whuff* of something else landed nearby.

"Get a drink and get something to eat," Jackson ordered. "And don't even think about doing something heroic like going on a hunger strike. If you don't drink and eat, then I kill your lover. Plain and simple."

*Thud.* The trap door closed again.

Ethan continued to stare upward for several long seconds, trying to work up the energy to move. But finally, the lure of water got him going.

He slid back to the floor and crawled forward, his body stiff with cold, to find the bottle and a plastic Ziploc bag. When he opened it, he discovered bread and several pieces of beef jerky in it.

He didn't hesitate to eat it. He'd survived on far, far worse, and right now, it was a moot point whether or not he could trust Jackson not to drug him. If he didn't eat or drink, he wouldn't have the strength to take advantage of an opening to escape if it arose.

Damn it ... where was Will? Had Jackson been decent enough to give him food and water also?

Ethan squeezed his eyes closed and tried not to let his imagination run wild with the horrors that had tormented him for hours. Instead, he forced a picture into his mind of Will, looking sexy as hell and smiling as he drove the Vette down to Albuquerque a few days ago. Then followed that by a picture of him leaning over Ethan after he'd given him head on the deck, his gaze filled with love, his voice even more so as he'd told Ethan he didn't ever have to worry about losing him. Then the memory flooded him of Will down here, holding him, breathing with him, talking to him in his soft, deep voice, freely offering comfort to get Ethan through his anxiety.

In his own calm way, Will had always been the strong one between the two of them.

"Stay strong," Ethan whispered. "Stay strong and don't let him get to you in your head. He'll try. He'll play games with you to make you believe things, but don't let him."

The water and food revived him to a certain extent, and for the first time in hours, Ethan felt like he could walk again. He paced the short length of the cellar room, counting off the steps by rote in his head. The movement helped in overcoming the feeling of suffocation. The darkness seemed much blacker and heavier when he was sitting still.

He felt so fucking helpless down here. He had to get out of here. Had to find Will. But how in hell was he going to do that if Jackson left him for hours and hours at a time, only opening that damned door long enough to throw in water and food?

\* \* \* \*

Jackson answered the question for him a short time later. The trapdoor was opened again and Jackson's silhouette filled the opening.

Before Ethan could open his mouth to make demands, Jackson's humorous drawl filled the space.

"Your lover's been passionately pleading on your behalf," Jackson informed him.

The first thought to cross Ethan's mind was that Will was still alive. *Thank God!*

"He vowed to do anything else I wanted, if I'd just promise I'd bring you up out of the mean, bad cellar. And since your Will is one hell of a hot lay and my punishments have looked so fucking sexy on him, I've decided to grant him one little boon. Your rescue from the dark."

"You fucker, Jackson. You better not have hurt him!"

Jackson's laugh was like nails driving under Ethan's skin. "He's learning quickly how much pleasure there is in pain. You ought to see him, Ethan, when he's thrashing beneath me, his eyes glazed with pain and lust, begging me to hurt him, to fuck him."

The food Ethan had eaten churned in his stomach. He knew Jackson's penchant for lies and games, but he also knew the man was capable of having done any number of twisted things to Will. He didn't want to believe him, but knew he didn't dare disbelieve either.

Jackson was laughing. "I've got to hand it to you ... you always did have good taste. He's a hell of a find. And that voice ... all deep and sexy, like you want to fuck his mouth for days, just to be closer to it. And, shit, the boy gives a

blow job like nobody's business. He swallows everything, cleans up after himself, then, with a bit of *encouragement*"—Ethan sickened at the kind of encouragement Jackson was likely to dole out—"he lies down and spreads his legs, ready for a hard fucking."

"Stop it. Just shut the hell up." Ethan's fists were balled at his sides again.

"What's the matter, Gallagher? Jealous? Aw ... poor baby."

"You don't know the first thing about Will." *My Will.*

"Oh, I know quite a lot. And you're about to get a lesson you should have had a long time ago. The one where you learn humility."

Something fell to the ground near Ethan's feet.

"Here's how this is going to go ... You're going to take off all your clothes. Then you're going to put on those handcuffs. Once you have them on, you're going to hold up your arms and show me they're properly in place. If I'm satisfied, I'll lower the ladder. And just so there's no misunderstandings and you don't get any ideas about trying anything daring or heroic ... there's something you need to be very aware of..."

He paused as if making sure Ethan was really listening before he continued.

"I've got your beloved Will wired with explosives. He's got enough C-4 in his slave collar to blow his pretty-ass body into tiny pieces even the coroner won't be able to identify. Let's just say an open casket won't be an option. I'm holding the detonator trigger in my hot little hand as we speak. If you so much as wobble or sneeze coming up the ladder, or you haven't snapped the cuffs closed, he's history."

The bottom dropped out of Ethan's stomach and sheer, numb terror spread through him.

"You son of a bitch. You sick, fucking son of a bitch."

Jackson laughed. "You want to know the best part? He doesn't have a clue what he's carrying around his neck. So if you fuck up, Mr. Wonderful, he'll be completely innocent as to what's about to happen to him."

*No! Oh, God, Will...*

"Get a move on. Because I'm sure you don't want to risk his life, now do you?"

Reeling, with shaking hands, Ethan unbuttoned and slid out of his shirt, then stepped out of his pants and briefs. The damp, soil-scented chill immediately assailed him, creeping through his skin and into his bones. But he barely noticed it, he was so cold already with fear for Will. He tried to remind himself again that Jackson could be lying ... but in his gut, he sensed it was the truth. It was just the kind of thing Jackson would get off on. Just his brand of sick, sadistic perversion. And Jackson would also know it was probably the one and only way he'd be able to control Ethan.

He picked up the handcuffs, finding them to be heavy, standard police cuffs. He snapped one on his left wrist, then taking a deep breath and fighting revulsion, put his right wrist in the second bracelet and pushed the metal closed.

"That's a good boy. Now hold 'em up and let me see you've decided to play nice."

Ethan held his arms up in the air in front of him and tugged them apart to prove to Jackson he'd fastened the cuffs.

"Well, well ... see, you can take orders from me, can't you, Ethan?"

The metal extension ladder appeared in the opening and slid down until the base of it rested on the floor.

"Let's go, loverboy. Slow and easy."

Ethan climbed, forcing one foot up, then another. When he reached the top, Jackson, smirking, stepped back out of his reach as Ethan put his feet on the wood plank flooring.

He leveled a cautious gaze at Jackson, noting the man held a small electronic device in his hand. With a sick sense of knowing, Ethan recognized it as a wireless, remote detonator trigger. It was attached to a chain around Jackson's neck ... where he could keep it close. It wouldn't be something Ethan would be able to wrest away from him easily. Which, no doubt, had been the idea. It was there, taunting Ethan, but making sure he knew Jackson wasn't going to leave it lying around.

*God, this isn't happening.*

With his peripheral vision, in a quick split second, he took in his surroundings ... the inside of what looked like a small, abandoned forest service storage building, with a single, dirt-encrusted window. Aside from the wooden trapdoor in the floor, it was little more than an empty shell. No help here.

"Turn and face the door, then start walking," Jackson ordered. "And again, I don't think I have to remind you, but I will anyway ... no sudden moves or precious Will goes boom."

Swallowing hard, Ethan turned and did as Jackson said.

Sunlight slanted through the towering pine trees, and although it was still cool, the heat of the day was beginning to

build. Based on the time of day it was and his muddled internal clock, Ethan guessed he'd probably been down in that hole about thirty-six hours or so. Which would make this ... Wednesday morning. Probably not long enough for anyone to have noticed he and Will were missing.

He made note of their surroundings, but it was forest ... just like hundreds of thousands of acres of forest across New Mexico. They could be near home, or a hundred miles away from it.

A half-mile or so from the storage building, they came to a tiny, old house in a clearing. It looked to have been built decades before. The wood hadn't been painted in so long it was impossible to tell what color it had been, faded now to a dull, weathered gray. The porch sagged on its posts, and the roof looked like it wouldn't withstand a heavy blow.

He saw no vehicle parked by the house—his first thought in case they managed to escape. How the hell had Jackson gotten them here? He had a vague memory of Jackson hefting him up over his shoulder when he'd drugged Ethan, but there was no way the man could have carried him more than a short distance. And he doubted Jackson could have carried Will at all, or at least not more than a few feet.

"Home sweet home," Jackson drawled. "Like my little slice of paradise?" He chuckled. "I got it cheap. The former owner dropped dead from a heart attack chopping wood, and his kids just wanted to unload it and be done with it."

They climbed the rickety porch steps and Jackson ordered him through the door.



The inside was in hardly better shape than the outside, but an attempt had been made to clean up the worst of the filth—Ethan saw piles of dirt in the corners where it had been swept. The house consisted of a tiny living room and kitchen combination furnished with a small, round wooden table, two ladder-back chairs, and nothing else. The only other rooms were a bedroom and a bathroom. Numerous hooks and chains had been fixed into the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and the kitchen counter was covered in an assortment of traditional BDSM toys he recognized, along with some other extreme-looking objects he didn't. His stomach knotted at what Jackson had done here ... he'd turned the little house into his personal S&M dungeon. *Jesus.*

Ethan could see into the bedroom, which contained a twin bed, and the bathroom from where he stood just inside the door, but found no sign of the tall, dark-headed man he loved.

"Where's Will?" Sick worry ate at him.

"He's otherwise detained. But as long as you follow my directions to the letter, he'll be fine. For now. Remember, Will's very existence is dependent on your perfect behavior."

Jackson's finger stroked over the little electronic triggering device as he met Ethan's gaze and gave him a challenging smile. "You know how this works. I push a button, the explosives in his collar detonate, and it's all over."

"I know how it works, you sick fuck."

"Good. Then I expect your full cooperation. Lay on the floor on your stomach. Spread your legs and put your arms over your head."

Ethan glared at him and didn't move.

Jackson fondled the detonator. "You really don't want to fuck with me, Gallagher. Is your high-handed need to always be the hero worth more than your boy's life?"

"I haven't seen Will. For all I know, he got away from you and he's not even here anymore. You want me to cooperate, then you let me see him."

Ethan knew it was risky—God knows he didn't want to do anything to further endanger Will's life—but he had to know Jackson wasn't bluffing. He needed to see Will. It made him ill to even think it, but it was always even possible Jackson had already killed Will.

Jackson stared at him, his eyes narrowed.

"All right. Get on your knees." Before Ethan could react, Jackson kicked him behind the knees, forcing Ethan's legs to buckle, and dropping him to the floor into position.

The cold metal muzzle of a gun pressed to Ethan's temple. With his free hand, Jackson picked up a TV remote from the counter and aimed it at a small video monitor set up on the same counter. "Look your eyes out."

The monitor flickered on ... and Ethan's heart plummeted.

"This is a live view," Jackson informed him, a gloating tone in his voice.

A huge lump crept up in Ethan's throat.

Jackson was holding Will in what looked like a tiny shed. He was nude, his arms cuffed behind his back, and his ankles cuffed as well. He wore a heavy, thick, black leather collar that was chained to the wall behind him. Will sat with his knees up and slightly bent, his head resting against the wall,

and his eyes closed. But Ethan could tell he wasn't asleep. His breathing was too uneven, and every few seconds, he'd lift his head and gently bang it back against the wall.

What hurt the most, though, was seeing how battered Will was. His lower lip had a raw split on it, a blue-purple bruise bloomed over his left shoulder and upper arm. And then he saw the red, angry welts across his chest and abdomen. Welts that could only have come from a whip.

"You fucker," Ethan breathed, blasting Jackson with a killing look.

"You like my stripes on him? I sure as shit do. Oh, and here's a close-up in case you're interested." He zoomed in on the collar at Will's neck, focusing on the tiny box attached near the rear of it.

The last of Ethan's defenses dissolved when he saw the set of small wires curving out of the top of it and down into the seam between the layers of leather. *Oh, God.*

"You didn't really think I was making it up, did you?" Jackson asked, humor lacing his tone. "You should know me better than that. All right then, show-n-tell time's over." He clicked off the monitor.

"No," Ethan protested.

"Oh, yeah. On your stomach, spread your legs, put your arms over your head."

He ground the gun harder into Ethan's temple, then shoved him forward. Ethan sprawled on the dirty, cracked linoleum.

Ethan didn't fight. The sight of the small detonator and the wires into Will's collar were burned into his brain. If Jackson

pushed the button on that trigger, which was obviously a wireless radio transmitter, Will would be dead before he ever knew anything was wrong. Ethan squeezed his eyes closed. *God ... Not Will.*

Jackson put a knee in his back to ensure he stayed there, then circled Ethan's neck with a wide leather collar that, when buckled, forced him to keep his neck as straight as possible or it dug into him. He wondered if his was filled with explosives also, but discounted it. Jackson didn't need to do that ... he already had Ethan at his mercy because of Will.

Attached to the back of the collar, another long, thick strap of leather rested against his spine. Jackson unlocked Ethan's right hand from the police cuffs and pulled it behind his back, fastening it into a new position with a firm leather cuff attached to the strap that was attached to the collar. He did the same with his other hand. When they were both in place, he made an adjustment that tugged his wrists tighter and higher against his back, until Ethan had virtually no ability to move his arms. If he did, his movement pulled on the collar and choked him.

The inability to move set up a panicked buzz in his mind. He fought to keep the anxiety at bay, but it stood poised to consume him.

In his head he heard Will's soothing voice ... *Close your eyes and breathe.*

He did, drawing in several shaky, deep breaths until the panic began to ease. But he knew he was going to have to compartmentalize the fact he was bound, stash it into a closet in his mind where the panic was free to do its thing, but then

he could shut the door on it ... at least temporarily. He needed to keep his head, and he wasn't going to be able to do that if he let the anxiety control him.

Still keeping his eyes closed, he felt Jackson attach leather cuffs to his ankles, then felt the heavy weight of a spreader bar attached to them so he'd be unable to bring his legs together.

*Fuck. Breathe. And almost in the same thought ... I'll find a way to get you out of this, Will. I swear.*

He heard the clink of chains and out of sheer protective instinct, opened his eyes to find out what the hell Jackson was going to do with them. He almost sighed in relief when he merely attached one to each of the ankle cuffs, then attached the other ends to eye bolts in the floor. In this position, with the restraints Jackson was using, he was completely immobile. He wouldn't be able to get up. But Jackson didn't seem to want to take any chances.

Finally, the man stood over him. "Now that's a damn fine sight if I ever saw one. The perfect and cocky Ethan Gallagher chained in my dungeon, at my mercy. I've been waiting a long time for this." He knelt down and rubbed a callused hand over Ethan's ass, dragging one of his fingers along his crease.

"You're a sick, self-righteous asshole, you know that?" Ethan spat.

"Yeah, I really am. But you're going to learn to like it. Or not. I don't really give a shit one way or another. I have plenty of adventures planned for you regardless."

He was kneeling next to Ethan again, in a position behind his head where Ethan couldn't see him. And then a thick gag

was stuffed into Ethan's mouth, something that protruded into his mouth, filling it with the taste of rubber. He tried to fight, panicking as he was forced to breathe through only his nose, but he was fastened so securely, all he could manage was turning his head from side to side. Jackson shoved his head to the floor face down until he had the strap on the gag fastened.

Black dots danced in front of his eyes and Ethan's pulsed skyrocketed as he fought to stay calm, to accept the gag and keep breathing in spite of it.

Jackson was either oblivious to his distress or didn't care. He stood, picked up a single-tail leather whip and studied it, then Ethan's backside, as if deciding where he'd lay the strokes. "I'm going to enjoy flaying you, seeing your pale skin marked with my stripes, watching the blood bead on the deeper ones. You're going to beg me for mercy, Ethan. Or ... try anyway. And when you do, I'm going to smile at you, then turn you over and dish out the same to your front. After that, when you're dizzy with the pain, and trying desperately to scream, I'll break out some of my other toys."

He laid down the whip and patted a hand on top of a metal box—an electrical unit. Then, with a salacious glitter in his eyes, he picked up an apparatus comprised of a cock-sized ring with a long, thin probe hanging from it. "Ever had your dick stimulated with electricity? This part here"—he pointed to the ring—"goes around your cockhead. And this"—he fingered the six-inch long probe, holding it up for Ethan to better see—"is the real beauty. It slides into your prick nice and deep. Then I attach the whole thing to the wires from my special

box here, turn it on, and *bzzzzt!* Some people find that on lower settings it gives them a special sexual arousal. But turn it up higher and ... well, it all just depends on how well you tolerate pain."

Ethan's insides twisted and a new, more powerful surge of dark suffocation hit him, stealing his breath, stealing his fragile control. His body shook as memories of being tied down, attached to electrodes, and subjected to electric shock torture ripped through him. They'd done it to him several times while he'd been held captive. They'd made him scream and scream until he'd wanted to die.

Memories of Will had been the only thing that had kept him connected to life. The only thing that had kept him sane and able to get through each day and week and month—the possibility that he might one day see Will again, hear the sound of his voice, feel his touch, his kiss, and see the glimmer of love in his eyes.

*Breathe, damn it. Breathe and deal with this.*

He'd get through it here, just like he had back then. This time not just because of Will ... *for* Will.

Almost as if he'd been reading Ethan's mind, Jackson was saying, "Maybe I'll bring your precious boy in so he can watch. So he can see how pathetic you really are, and how easily you succumb to me. I'm going to enjoy watching the look on his face as I play with you and make you scream, then fuck you hard and deep. And when I'm done, I'll let you watch while I do all those things to him as well."

Ethan growled around the gag at the mention of him torturing Will.

"What? You don't like that idea?" Jackson's laughter was icy with disdain. "You're not in a position to call the shots. In case you need a reminder, I'm the top now. And you"—he picked up the whip again and fondled the leather as if it were an intimate object—"are going to discover a whole new world here with me. Under me."

As if to prove his point, he dangled the tip of the whip so it brushed along one of Ethan's thighs, up the curve of his ass, then teased and tickled its way across his lower back just below the wrist restraints. Ethan shuddered and closed his eyes. The moment he did, Jackson flicked the whip hard and a stinging ache seared across the top of his ass.

Ethan's body jerked instinctively, and he hissed at the pain.

"You and I, Ethan my friend, have a few things we need to settle. And I know what you're thinking, so let me speak for you, shall I, since you can't? I know, I know, you want me to let your beloved Will go. If you could, you'd tell me he doesn't have anything to do with this, and you and I should work things out without him."

The whip tails slid directly down Ethan's crack, pausing to dangle against the base of his scrotum. "But you see, Will has everything to do with this. Because once I've had my fun with you and broken you, I won't be needing you any longer. You'll disappear. But Will, on the other hand, is a prize I have no intention of getting rid of. He's sexy, smart, strong, loyal. He's going to be a challenge to train—the boy's got attitude in spades—but, oh, once he is ... he'll be well worth the effort. He'll fetch a hell of a fortune for me on the auction block—do



you have any idea how much people are willing to pay for a well-trained, attractive slave? Or, who knows, I might decide to keep him. Let him service me and cater to my every dirty sexual craving and desire until the end of his days. Either way ... he's not going anywhere."

The whip still lingered at the base of Ethan's balls, teasing, stroking.

"Unless, of course, you decide to play hero and I have to push the button that will make him nothing more than a memory. You see ... as much as I want to train the boy and mold him into the perfect slave, I want to watch you suffer even more. I'll blow him up if I have to. Just give me a reason."

The whip snapped. Ethan's eyes squeezed close and his gut clenched instinctively. But instead of hitting his balls as he'd feared, the blow landed across his upper thighs, just where they joined the curve of his butt.

Ethan groaned, unable to stop the response as his body trembled from the blow.

Jackson's laughter sliced through him like a razor-sharp sword. "Oh, yeah ... this is gonna be a good day!"

## CHAPTER 9

As the morning wore on, Will's thirst became so powerful it was like a constant, low-grade static roar in the back of his mind. He also had to pee. The irony of that wasn't lost on him. But neither of those discomforts compared to his worry about Ethan.

Had Jackson really gone to get Ethan out of the hole in the ground? He hoped so. Yet what he might do with Ethan once he had him out was almost scarier than thinking of Eth trapped down in the dark for hours or days.

Will had thought he'd heard a voice or voices earlier, but wasn't sure where he was located in relation to the house or the old forest service building, so didn't trust his ears. It could have been birds or squirrels. He'd seen plenty of both on his trek through the woods when Jackson had brought him up from underground.

As he had done so many times over the past long hours, he went back over everything that had happened since Jackson had fired the shot that barely missed Ethan, and Will had climbed the ladder. He kept thinking if he examined the events long enough, closely enough, he'd find something he'd missed before. Something that might help them get out of here.

The moment Will had emerged from the hole, Jackson had snapped handcuffs on him, then marched him through the forest—which would have been around noon yesterday—to a tiny, ramshackle house. He'd chained Will to hooks that had been hung from the ceiling of the living room, stripped off

Will's clothes, with Will fighting him every step of the way, then, when he had him nude, he'd given him water and fed him bites of bread and meat. Will had accepted them only because he knew if he refused, the lack of food would weaken him.

After he'd eaten, Jackson had taken great pleasure in describing to Will, in detail, what he planned to do to him. Thanks to Ethan's warning, none of it had surprised Will, but Jackson had explained it with such obvious excitement, chills had rippled through Will, building one on top of another. That's when he'd decided he'd do everything in his power to give Jackson no satisfaction, to show no weakness.

And that was the last thing he'd remembered until he'd awakened here many hours later, well after dark, gagged, cuffed, and wearing a heavy leather collar that was chained to the wall about three feet from the floor. The restraints effectively held him in a sitting position, since the chain wasn't long enough for him to stand or lie down.

Jackson had shown up a short while later, almost as if he'd been expecting Will to come around any moment, with a kerosene lantern for light, a bottle of water, and to regale Will with the tale of how Jackson had tied him to the bed, teased and tormented him, then fucked him ... too bad Will didn't remember because of the drug he'd given him to make him more "pliable."

Before Will could even begin to process the shock and horror he'd been raped while he was unconscious, Jackson took off Will's gag, unzipped his own jeans, and jabbed his cock in Will's face, as if expecting Will to give him head. Will

had snapped at it with his teeth. Jackson had barely pulled back in time.

Furious, Jackson had gagged him again and left without giving him a drink.

And without giving Will a chance to find out about Ethan.

Through the rest of that long night he'd had lots of time to think.

And one of the first things he'd realized was that his body ached like hell in all the places it had since he'd first been thrown into the cellar—his side, his shoulder, which was even worse now with his arm twisted behind his back, his lower lip where Jackson had hit him, and his ribs where Ethan had fallen on him. But, curiously, not in places it probably should have ached if Jackson had, indeed, raped him. Nor, as odd as it sounded, did he *feel* as if he'd been physically violated. Battered and stiff from sitting bare-assed naked on the cold concrete for so long, and having his arms and legs restrained in uncomfortable positions, yes. But his gut, internal, self-protective instincts said Jackson had not forced sex on him.

Between that and what Ethan had told him, about how Jackson would want them fully awake and cognizant so they'd remember what he'd done to them, Will had become convinced Jackson was lying to him.

Ethan had said Jackson got off on playing games, on tormenting people. The more Will had thought about it, the more convinced he'd become that the rape lie was just another of Jackson's games, used to foster fear and perhaps cooperation in Will, and to build on Ethan's terror, worry, and

isolation as he sat in the dark, wondering what was happening to Will.

And then Will suddenly realized what was behind all of this.

Ethan had always gotten the things Jackson wanted. So now Jackson was taking things that were Ethan's. His watch, his underwear, his sketchbook—Will had seen pictures torn from the sketchbook taped to the walls in the house. But also the thing that might hurt Ethan most ... Will.

*You goddamned bastard, Jackson.*

He heard the crunch of footsteps on pine needles. The shadow of a body blocked the light coming through the cracks. A key was shoved into the lock and turned. And then the door opened, revealing the bastard himself.

Jackson didn't enter ... just stood there, staring down at Will, his expression part gloating, part aroused.

*Oh, shit.* This didn't look good.

Jackson had changed out of the jeans he'd had on earlier and now wore skin-tight black leather pants. He was shirtless, showing off a smooth, massive chest, his only adornments the silver earrings in his ears, and a thick silver necklace around his neck with something hanging from it. Will couldn't see what. He carried a chain and what looked like a long strip of leather.

"It's time to play," the man finally said. "I've got your lover up at the house, spread open and waiting for me. I've decided you can watch while I break him."

White-hot fury merged with cold fear inside Will, shunting through his veins, leaving him both livid and sick to his stomach.

Jackson entered the shed and knelt next to Will. He set down the items he'd been carrying—the leather strip turned out to be a leash. "I'm going to take off your gag because I'm looking forward to hearing your protests and then your pleas as I push Ethan to the edge of his endurance."

He unfastened the gag where it was buckled behind Will's head and pulled it free.

"You son of a bitch," Will croaked, his throat so dry he could barely speak.

Jackson only smiled. He retrieved the bottle of water from where it had fallen earlier and held it up to Will's mouth. Only a couple of inches of liquid remained, but this time Will didn't fight. He swallowed every drop, and when the bottle was empty and Jackson pulled it away, he longed for more. But the little bit he'd had had at least moistened his mouth and throat.

Jackson pulled a key out of his pocket. He unlocked the padlock that held Will's ankle cuffs together, but before Will could even contemplate kicking him or doing something crazy, Jackson fastened the short, heavy length of chain to the ring on each one and padlocked the chain in place, leaving Will still restrained, but now he'd be able to walk, albeit with short steps. Then Jackson snapped the leash onto the ring on Will's collar and undid chain from it that had been holding him against the wall.

The man had an elaborate bondage arsenal—Will had seen evidence of it when Jackson had taken him into the house before. There seemed to be no end to his creativity in using

it, nor did he ever seem to be lacking the various bits and pieces of hardware to make it work.

Jackson rose to his feet, gripping the leash in a firm hand. "Get up. And don't try anything stupid."

Will discovered that, after hours in the cramped position, his body bruised and stiff, and his hands still cuffed behind his back, standing was no easy matter.

Using the wall behind him as leverage, he pushed his way up, grimacing and struggling to hold in a series of groans as blood rushed into his legs and feet. It took several moments before he was able to straighten all the way.

Jackson didn't seem to be in a hurry. Probably he knew if he tried to push, he'd end up having to drag Will because there was no way Will could walk until the numb tingling in his legs subsided.

*Damn.* Everything on Will ached. But now that he was standing, by far and away the most urgent pain was his bladder.

"Let's go." Jackson tugged on the leash, giving Will no choice but to move.

When they stepped outside, Will squinted against the glare from the bright sunlight. He staggered several short steps, then jerked to a stop when Jackson yanked on the leash.

"You gotta take a piss?"

Will glared at him. Yeah, he did, but Jackson's vulgarity, and the way he was pulling Will around by the leash, like he was a dog, made him mad as hell.

Jackson's firm hand wrapped around Will's cock, aiming it outward. "So go already."

"I'm not going to do it with you touching me."

"I'm not letting you piss all over yourself either, so you'll do it my way." He began to massage Will's cock, and Will had to bite his lip to hold back his revulsion.

"Stop ... doing that," Will ground out, his voice still not much above a hoarse croak.

Jackson laughed. "Now this is more what I expected ... an intellectual goody-goody who's a prude. Can't take a piss while someone's watching or touching him. We'll have to work on that."

Will swallowed back a string of expletives, knowing if he spouted them it would probably only feed Jackson's amusement. Instead, he closed his eyes and forced his tightly-wound body to relax enough he could do what he needed to do. The idea that the sooner he got it over with the sooner Jackson would unhand him was all the impetus he needed.

That didn't stop Jackson from fondling him a few more strokes before releasing him, however. Will gritted his teeth and didn't say a word, didn't flinch, didn't react. Which, apparently, wasn't what Jackson wanted. He gave Will's shaft an almost painful squeeze, then finally let it go.

"Now move," he ordered.

Will put one foot in front of the other, grimacing as the simple movement of walking caused his already tight muscles to burn and pull. Pine needles dug into the soles of his feet, and the goddamned collar Jackson was leading him by had already rubbed his skin raw in places from its girth and



weight and now the movement of walking created new blisters on top of the old.

He discovered the shed where he'd been chained sat maybe seventy-five yards from the house.

Jackson led him around to the front door, and Will, his heart in his throat, not knowing what he might find inside, crossed the threshold.

The sight of Ethan, eyes closed, gagged, and unmoving on the floor, sent ripples of raw fear through him. Ethan was locked into a heavy, leather neck-to-wrist restraint, his legs were spread, his ankles chained, and several angry, red whip lashes marred the skin across his upper thighs and ass.

"Oh, Christ ... Eth!"

He moved toward Ethan without thinking, only to find himself jerked back so hard by the leash he stumbled and fell to his knees. Agony shot through them, but Jackson didn't give him time to think about it as he tightened the pull on the leash, which pressed the collar against Will's windpipe. He had no choice but to tilt his head back and look up at Jackson behind him if he wanted to breathe.

"Your enthusiasm is sweet, but you're here to watch, boy, not approach him or touch him."

"Fuck you," Will spat.

That resulted in another jerk of the leash, another dig of the heavy collar into his windpipe. Will gagged.

Ethan still hadn't moved, which terrified Will. Was he dead and this was all a trick? Or had he passed out?

"Let me see him. Let me go to him," he said, this time trying to say it in an even tone without the expletive.

"Please."

Jackson's eyebrows shot up. "Well ... you're learning already, aren't you, boy? Always be polite to your master."

Red-hot flames shot through Will's veins, incinerating all pretense of trying to be civil. "You'll never be my master," he ground out in a dry, hoarse snarl.

Jackson's smile was thin-lipped. "That's what Ethan used to say, too. But look at him now." He eased up on the leash so Will could tilt his head forward and see Ethan again. Then Jackson bent close and said against his ear, as if he were sharing an intimate secret, "The thing is ... all you have to do is find the right motivation. It's amazing what someone's willing to do in order to keep ... say ... the one they love alive and well."

"Shit, what have you told him? Ethan, whatever he's told you, don't believe it." When Ethan still didn't respond or move, Will's gut clenched again in fear. "Eth? Ethan!"

"He can't move," Jackson said conversationally.

"God, what have you done to him? Eth?"

"I told you, he can't move. Well, I mean, obviously he can't move his body ... he's a bit tied up at the moment," he quipped. "But he can move his head, except I ordered him not to, so he won't. Nor will he look at you, at least not until I give him permission to, because he knows if he does, I'll kill you. You see ... that collar you're wearing isn't just there to mark you as my slave. It's there to keep Ethan in line."

"What do you mean?" Will asked, a sense of dread beginning to build inside him, but he didn't know exactly why. It was like he sensed impending disaster. It just hadn't struck yet, so he didn't know what form it would take.

Jackson affixed the end of the leash through an eye-bolt jutting from the ceiling, then snapped a double-ended clasp to one on the floor, then into the chain between Will's ankles, trapping him in a kneeling position.

He moved over to crouch next to Ethan, where he unfastened the awful gag and pulled it out of Ethan's mouth. "Your boyfriend wants to know what I'm talking about, Ethan. So I give you permission to tell him. It's only fair he hear it from you, since you're the reason he's wearing it."

Jackson rose again and set the gag on the kitchen counter.

Ethan's head had been facing away from Will. He slowly turned it so his left cheek lay against the linoleum instead of his right. His eyes, startlingly turquoise-blue in his pale, pale face were now open and they swirled with conflicting emotions—love, fury, guilt, fear, but underneath it all a fierce, protective gleam that stirred something deep inside Will.

"The collar..." Ethan rasped, as if he hadn't used his voice in a while. Will knew it was probably from the gag.

"Speak up," Jackson ordered. "Say it so he can hear it. I want there to be no misunderstandings as to who's responsible."

"Just say it," Will said gently. "Whatever it is."

Ethan's eyes fluttered closed as if he were steeling himself for something. When they reopened, his gaze met Will's with terrifying intensity like he was trying to convey some

unspoken something to Will, except Will couldn't tell what it was.

"The collar you're wearing is a bomb."

Everything around Will froze. Jackson and the tiny room disappeared, and the entire universe became his gaze locked with Ethan's.

"What?" he heard himself whisper, but didn't remember opening his mouth to say it.

"It has explosives in it. Jackson's got the remote trigger." Ethan's voice sounded hollow, as if he were speaking from some place far away. "If I don't do everything he says ... he'll press the button ... and..."

"I'll die," Will finished for him, his own stretched-thin voice echoing in his head.

"Yes," Ethan whispered.

"Oh ... Oh ... God."

"Will, we're going—"

Jackson's black-booted foot kicked Ethan between the legs, the blow landing on the inside of one of his thighs, barely missing his balls.

Ethan jerked, his eyes closed, and he groaned in pain.

"Stop! God, stop it," Will cried.

Jackson stood over Ethan. "That was a warning. I didn't say you could speak about anything else."

Then he turned to look at Will. "I think we all know now who's in control here, don't we?" Jackson picked up the small object that hung from the chain around his neck and stroked his fingers over it. It looked like a small pager or a miniature MP-3 player.

A numb chill slid up Will's spine when he realized it was probably the trigger Jackson could use to detonate the explosives.

Jackson lifted an eyebrow and stared from Will to Ethan, whose eyes were open again, then back. "Any questions? Didn't think so. And now that we have that firmly established, and everyone's on the same page, I expect full cooperation from you both."

He looked meaningfully at Will, who swallowed hard, even more acutely aware now of the heavy piece of leather that encircled his neck.

"Let him go. Please," Will said. "Keep me if you want and do what you want with me, but let Ethan go."

A bark of laughter echoed through the room. "'Please, let Ethan go and do what you want with me,'" he mimicked in a falsetto voice. Then he gave a dramatic stage sigh. "What neither of you seems to be able to get into your heads is that this is a package deal ... at least for the moment. You're both going to stay here as my guests until I say otherwise. I have a hankering for you both in your own special ways."

Then he grinned, and it would almost have been charming if one were able to ignore the sadistic glimmer in his brown eyes. "It's like Oreo cookies..." He looked at Ethan. "Hard, tasty outside"—then his gaze slid to Will—"and sweet, creamy filling inside. Even though you can twist them apart and lick off the cream, then devour the cookie, you always have the taste of them both in your mouth. They're meant to be enjoyed together. They wouldn't be as remotely appealing if you were only offered one or the other."

He tugged Will's leash tight, forcing his head up into a rigid position, then patted Will's head as if he were an errant child ... or a pet. Will swallowed against the bile that rose in his throat.

"Now ... let's get back down to business here, shall we? You..." He stared down at Will. "Though I very much like you in this position, on your knees in front of me, and I plan to put that to good use very soon, right now I need you to be a good boy and move over there to the wall." He unfastened Will from the ceiling and the floor. "Let's go. Move."

But when Will tried to stand, Jackson jerked him back down. "I didn't tell you to stand. Stay on your knees and get over there."

With his hands still cuffed behind his back, Will couldn't use them to crawl. He had no choice but to walk awkwardly on his knees. Burning with fury, but helpless to do anything about it, he did as Jackson said.

When he reached the wall, Jackson produced two lengths of chain. He snapped them both to Will's collar, then anchored one in a bolt on the floor two feet to Will's right, and the other to one two feet to his left. There was virtually no play in the chains ... both were cinched in such a way Will couldn't move his head in his current position on his knees. He started to sit, to give himself more flexibility, but Jackson seemed to have been expecting him to do just that and had his whip in hand and flicking out before Will could even drag in a breath in preparation. The blow landed on his chest.

He gasped in shock at the intensity of the pain this time.

"I didn't tell you to sit. You're to stay on your knees, boy." He lifted the whip for another stroke.

"Don't-fucking-hit-him-again!" Ethan growled from behind Jackson.

Jackson paused, the whip drawn. A shimmer of what Will could only describe as glee flickered in his dark eyes, like he'd almost been hoping Ethan would put up a fight. He turned and stepped back enough Will once again had a clear view of Ethan, whose expression was glacial as he stared up at Jackson.

"Did you just speak?" Jackson demanded, staring down at Ethan. "Without my permission? Again?"

"Don't do it again," Ethan repeated, not backing down. "You want to hit somebody, you hit me."

Will was torn between awe at Ethan's icy calm and don't-fuck-with-me tone in the face of Jackson's dangerous insanity, and scared as hell what Jackson would do to Ethan in retaliation for his insolence.

"You forget your place, Ethan." Jackson's voice dripped with venom. The fingers of his free hand slid up to grasp the little metal square hanging on his chest.

Will's breath caught. *Oh, shit.*

Ethan's gaze was locked onto the movement also, and Will saw him flinch almost as if he'd been struck.

"You really don't want to push your luck with me, Gallagher. You're already skating on thin ice."

"Quit it," Will said to Jackson. "Quit dangling my death over his head. You want to kill me, fine. But stop using me against him."

Will could barely believe the words had just come out of his mouth. It *wasn't* fine. He didn't want to die. But he couldn't stand to have this bastard torment Ethan.

Ethan shot Will a warning look that said, *Don't argue ... don't risk yourself.*

Will set his jaw and shook his head.

Jackson seemed to have caught the visual interaction between them. He studied them both, then the foul smirk Will was already recognizing meant trouble brewing twisted the man's lips.

"Okay," he told Will. He dropped the detonator trigger back onto his chest. "I have no problem with being direct. You don't want me to punish him by 'dangling your death over his head.' So be it. For this particular incident, I'm willing to be flexible. And you, boy, can watch while I show him in a more immediate fashion the error of his ways."

He turned and in a smooth motion, the leather tail of the whip flicked out and slashed across Ethan's upper thighs. Ethan stiffened, but didn't cry out. Jackson, however, wasn't ready to stop. He did it again and again, and by the fourth and fifth stroke, Ethan's eyes were closed and he was breathing hard, his body jerking against the restraints.

And still Jackson didn't let up, marking more and more deeply, and drawing deeper and deeper grunts from Ethan that soon became stuttered gasps.

Will's heart pounded. Fury built in him, until it was burning in his veins, under his skin. He jerked at his own restraints, desperate to get free, to rip the whip out of Jackson's hands,



and turn it on him. "Stop it!" he shouted. "Stop hitting him, damn it! STOP!"

Jackson paused and looked up at Will.

Will was almost sick when he saw the expression of glazed-eyed arousal on Jackson's face, and discovered further evidence of it bulging behind the black leather of his groin.

Jackson grinned. He tossed aside the whip and began jerking at the buttons on his leather pants. "Does it turn you on to watch, Will? Do you get excited seeing the leather on his skin, seeing the marks? Does it make you want to shove your dick up his ass and split him in two with a hard fucking?"

"Shut up!"

"Watch and learn, boy. Watch and learn."

Jackson, his cock bulging thick and purple over the top of his half-buttoned crotch, crouched near Ethan's feet. But then Will's heart leapt when he saw Jackson pull a ring of keys from his pocket and realized the man was unfastening the cuffs at Ethan's ankles and removing the spreader bar. Less restraints meant a better chance of finding a way out of this nightmare.

"Get up, Gallagher. I want you on your knees, too."

Will winced in empathy as Ethan crept up, in obvious pain, until he was on his hands and knees. God knows how long he'd been chained there, spread out on the floor. He wished he could see Ethan's face, his eyes, and offer him some visual reassurance, but Ethan was turned away from him now.

"Too slow. Move faster!" Jackson grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up.

Ethan's back was to Will, giving him a clear view of the new angry welts across his thighs, but he also saw how straight Ethan's shoulders were in spite of the restraints. Pride, he realized. Ethan hadn't given up yet. A flare of hope sprang to life in Will.

Jackson picked up a piece of heavy black leather off the kitchen counter.

*What the hell?*

But when he shook it out and Will saw what it was, his heart skipped a beat.

A hood. A complete, full-head, form-fitting bondage hood, with no openings at all that he could see, except for a few metal rivets near the mouth to allow for breathing.

*Oh, God. If he puts that on Ethan...*

The moment Jackson pulled it down over Ethan's face, Ethan's body stiffened and then he began to struggle.

"Remember ... your lover's life is in your hands," Jackson warned, seeming to relish Ethan's distress. He began pulling the leather laces tight on the back of the hood. Which caused Ethan to struggle harder, as, Will knew, more of his breathing space was cut off.

Will recognized the signs of a full-blown, desperate panic attack. The one down in the dark cellar had been bad, but nothing compared to this. This one was unhinging.

Ethan's strangled moans—no words, just awful, terrifying moans, like he was dying—echoed inside the leather. The sound ripped out Will's guts. Tears stung his eyes.

He couldn't bear it. Couldn't let Ethan go through this.

"No! Wait, let me do it!" Will croaked aloud.

Jackson looked over at him, eyebrows arched. "Excuse me?"

"Let me do it," Will repeated. "Let me do *him*. You're right. Watching you whip him ... it made me want to fuck him. So let me do it and you can watch."

Jackson laughed as if Will had just made the funniest joke he'd heard all day.

Ethan's struggling was growing weaker, but his body had begun to shake.

*Convince him, damn it! You have to do this.* "I'm serious. You like to watch, right? You were watching us at our house, taking pictures..." He remembered what Ethan had told him the first night they'd been locked in the cellar. "You get off on it. So why not let me play with him? Let me put him through his paces. And you can watch."

Jackson was still grinning, but Will held his breath because the man actually seemed to be contemplating it. His hands had paused at the back of Ethan's head.

"Think of it this way," Will said, talking for all he was worth. He was trying not to look at Ethan, too afraid he'd give himself away. *Stay cool.* "You can hurt him, tease him, torment him, sure, but I'm thinking you're probably not going to get any sexual reaction out of him. There's too much bad blood between you two. And, I mean, that's half the pleasure of it, right? Don't you want to see him get hard? Don't you want to see him beg to be fucked? I can do that. He'll respond to me. So then you get your pain games, but also you get to watch him cry out in pleasure when he comes."

Jackson's eyes had narrowed as he studied Will.

"What have you got to lose? You're in control. You're holding the remote. It's not like we can go anywhere. So you might as well get the full enjoyment out of it."

Jackson very nearly swaggered at that, and his eyes sparked with superiority.

Oh, yeah ... he liked being reminded of his power.

"It'll be like having your own private show. Two slaves to entertain you instead of one." Will almost choked on the word slave, but he could see he had the bastard eating out of his hand now.

Finally, slowly, Jackson nodded.

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll let you play, boy. But no namby pamby bullshit. If I wanted vanilla, I'd fuck a carton of ice cream."

"No vanilla," Will agreed. *God ... I've got to get that hood off Ethan.*

"And no safe word. That's for wusses."

Jesus. The man was insane. No wonder Ethan had refused to play with this guy after a few times. There was nothing safe, sane, or consensual about the games he played. Not that Will considered himself an expert by any means, but he knew enough to know Jackson violated every basic principle of the BDSM credo.

Will agreed to no safe word, though—to appease Jackson—because he knew Ethan's reactions and expressions during lovemaking so well, Eth wouldn't have to speak to convey his emotions if a problem arose. Not only that, but Will planned to keep it as safe and sane as possible. As much as Jackson would allow.

"You'll have to unfasten me," Will said, cautious. He didn't want to do anything to cause Jackson to change his mind.

"Don't move," Jackson told Ethan with a smirk. Then he strode over and stared down at Will.

On his knees, Will was way too intimately close to Jackson's thick cock, still hard and half-bulging out over the top of his part-way unbuttoned pants. He hoped like hell Jackson wouldn't notice and demand Will suck him before he agreed to play along.

He drew in a shallow breath of relief when the man unfastened both lengths of chain from his collar. Then Jackson fondled the trigger device. "Just remember who's in control here, boy. You play and have your last hurrah before you become my submissive permanently. But don't forget for a second who owns you and who you really have to please."

Will's pulse throbbed. He wasn't likely to forget the consequences of misbehavior. Not with the collar like a lead weight around his neck. Right now, his singular goal was to get to Ethan. He wanted to get that hood off him, touch him, reassure him. And then he'd worry about the deal he'd just made with the devil.

"Speak!" Jackson ordered.

"Yes, I won't forget."

"You won't forget what?"

"Who's in control."

"From here on out you'll address me as master. Is that clear?"

"Yes ... master." Will almost choked on it, but a word was just a word, and if that's what it took ... "I won't forget who's in control, *master*."

Score another one for him. His willingness to do the master thing had obviously pleased Jackson.

"I do like the sound of that," the man said, looking down at Will almost fondly now. "All right then ... stand up."

Will did, once again grimacing as his stiff body protested.

"Turn around and face the wall."

Taking a deep breath, not trusting Jackson for anything, expecting at any moment Jackson might renege and lash out at him somehow, Will turned. But then he heard the clink of metal against metal, felt pressure at his wrists, and his wrists were free.

When he lowered them, agony shot through his shoulders and arms, and it was several seconds before he could even bring his hands to his sides.

"Hurts a bit, huh? Shake it off, boy. It's just a little pain," Jackson said good-naturedly.

*Shake it off?* Will's arms had been behind his back for hours, almost a day. His muscles were pissed and had a right to be, and the fact he was dehydrated wasn't helping them.

But Ethan was a far more pressing concern right now.

"I want free rein to do what I please, with no interruptions," Will told Jackson. He sure as hell didn't want the man breathing down his neck the entire time, ordering him around. He needed Jackson away from Ethan. "Because it'll work better. He's more likely to respond that way."

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

Jackson's full lips quirked in a smile. "Think you can be a decent top, huh?" He backed away, yanked a ladder-back chair out from under the table, dragged it over to a spot in front of the open front door, like a sentinel to keep them from escaping, and sat. He laid his whip and gun on his knees—as a warning, no doubt—then held his arms open. "Let's see what you've got, boy."

## CHAPTER 10

When the hood was loosened and pulled up and off Ethan's head, for several long seconds he kept his eyes closed, simply drawing in deep, unrestricted breaths of air. His lungs hurt like hell, and he was lightheaded. Exhausted. But with the fresh air, came slow relief from the darkness in his mind and that crushed his chest.

He felt warm, gentle, familiar hands on his cheeks—Will's hands—and nearly collapsed in relief. A distant part of himself had heard Will bargaining with Jackson, but he'd never dreamed it would come to pass. How had Will managed it?

His eyes opened to find Will's face, covered in two days worth of dark stubble, sexy as hell and beloved, looking down at him. Will's eyes were as deep green as the forest, and awash with love and concern.

Then one of his hands was at the back of Ethan's head, and he was bending down, pressing his lips against Ethan's, kissing him. The unexpected and almost forbidden sensation of warm lips devouring his, parting them, of Will's tongue invading his mouth in seductive thrusts ... claiming him ... caused a warm rush in Ethan's body.

*Will.* His Will. In the midst of hell, Will was the angel reaching out to pull him back from the brink of fire and brimstone.

"Do you trust me?" Will whispered against his lips.

"Yes."

"Then close your eyes."

Ethan did.



"I'm going to cover your eyes. Just your eyes, nothing else. You'll still be able to breathe normally. And I'm right here. Okay?"

Ethan swallowed hard.

"It's just like having your eyes closed. No more, no less."

*As long as your eyes are closed, you can imagine we're anywhere you want us to be.* The words Will had spoken to him two nights ago came back to him.

"I know it's hard for you, Eth, but it's important. I don't want you distracted."

*It's Will. I trust him...*

"Are you ready?"

He took a deep breath and nodded.

"Nodding isn't enough. I want you to say the words. And I want you to say my name."

Ethan breathed in again. Released it. "Yes, I'm ready, Will." A jolt of heat spread through him at the sound of his voice, a bit husky and breathless, saying Will's name.

"Good. Here we go."

A padded leather blindfold covered his eyes, and he felt an elastic strap settle on the back of head to hold it in place.

Ethan waited for the panic to hit him again ... but it didn't.  
*It's just like having your eyes closed. No more, no less.*

"Now," Will said, stroking his cheek, speaking softly, his words for Ethan alone, "no matter what happens, no matter what you feel or experience, remember it's only us. There's no one but us."

Ethan suddenly understood. With the blindfold on, he wouldn't accidentally open his eyes and remember where

they were, or the circumstances. His chest tightened at Will's thoughtfulness. But at the same time, he *was* reminded of where they were and what was going on ... of the collar around Will's neck. Will had somehow managed to convince Jackson to let him top Ethan for now, but it hit Ethan that, in order to keep Jackson happy, and the two of them alive a little longer, Will wasn't going to be able to hold back. He was going to have to play the role of dominant top to the max, show no weakness, and mold Ethan as his submissive in every way. Apprehension gripped Ethan.

Will seemed to know what was going through his head because his lips closed over Ethan's again, demanding a response, demanding his concentration. At the same time, Will pulled Ethan to his feet, holding onto him around the waist until his stiff legs adjusted to the change.

The long length of Will's firm thighs brushed his and Will pulled him close, insinuating one of them between Ethan's. His hand slid over Ethan's ass and squeezed one of his cheeks in a proprietary way that said without words, "You're mine." As did his cock, half-erect, brushing Ethan's.

Will's attention and his big, warm body edged everything else out of his mind. Ethan nudged his groin in closer to Will's, wanting more contact, but Will suddenly stepped away, not letting him have it.

"Spread your legs," Will said, his voice still gentle, but firmer now.

Ethan did, but found himself shaky without Will's support. His muscles still felt as if they'd been through a wringer.

He almost jumped when he felt hands at his groin, one cupping his balls, the other teasing against the head of his shaft. Then something else brushed his flesh. Will was still holding his balls, slowly rolling them in his palm, but then it changed, and Will was pushing one of them through a piece of what felt like supple leather. A faint thrum began deep inside him at the sensation.

Will moved to the other testicle, easing it through as well. Not the same piece of leather ... a different one, but connected to the first.

Not able to see it, Ethan tried to focus his senses on what was happening. Tried to imagine what Will was doing, how his long, graceful fingers looked against Ethan's sac, and how his balls must look, bulging through what had to be a cock and ball harness. The straps were snug, but suddenly one of them tightened, squeezing Ethan's testicle in a firmer grip that shot another tingle of sensation through him. The other one tightened as well.

Ethan's cock began to harden at all the manipulation, but it wasn't to be left out. With his balls firmly ensconced, next Will eased Ethan's cock through a leather opening as well. He seated the leather at the base of Ethan's shaft and, with a tug and the sound of a snap fastening, the whole connected piece tightened and lifted. Ethan let out a soft hiss at the pressure and sensation. The leather was soft and comfortable, not pinching or rubbing. But at the same time, his balls felt as if they were being squeezed by a leather vise. And his dick was already growing harder, causing the leather to pull everything

tighter still. *Shit*. He wasn't going to be forgetting he was wearing the thing.

He felt Will step away again. But not far. "Sexy as hell," he heard him murmur. "Christ, I might make you wear one of these all the time."

The low-pitched words, filled with sensual pleasure, sent another pulse of heat through him.

"If it gets too tight and starts to hurt, you're to tell me. Understood?"

Ethan nodded.

"No nodding. I told you, you need to speak to me."

An odd quiver of something slid through Ethan at Will's firm tone. *Jesus ... it turns me on*. A part of him wanted to be shocked by that, but he couldn't because he'd had the same reaction a month ago, on the night he'd returned to New Mexico, when Will had punished him for leaving for three years.

"Yes, Will," he whispered.

"Good. Very good."

He heard someone clear a throat ... and was suddenly jolted back to reality. *Jackson. Watching*.

But Will merely said, as if he knew the man's problem, "It's not a safe word, it's a reality. Now stay out of it and fuck off. No more interruptions."

His voice was calm. Deadly calm. And edged with an odd power that sent another shiver through Ethan.

He felt Will walk around him, then stop behind him and step in close, until his long, thick shaft pressed against Ethan's backside, teasing, making him want more. His mouth

lowered to Ethan's shoulder, biting and sucking at the sensitive spot where it sloped up to meet his neck.

Ethan shuddered at the contact, aroused by the sensation of warm breath and even warmer skin. At the sharp pain of teeth nipping followed by the slow, erotic sucking of hot mouth and tongue.

Will's arm curved around his waist and took hold of his jutting cock—jutting because the harness wouldn't let it do anything else. Will's own cock was now nestled in the crack of Ethan's ass.

"You have a perfect, beautiful dick—I've told you that before. But now, dressed like it is, in black leather, with your balls tight and hard ... it makes me want to screw you until your legs give out beneath you and you're sobbing my name."

Will suddenly spun him around, causing him to lose his bearings, then he was bending him forward, until Ethan felt the hard press of wood beneath his cheek and chest. The table? It had to be. It was too low to be a kitchen cabinet. But even though his chest was on the firm surface, his groin was free, and his dick, standing out from his body, hung in midair.

"Oh, yeah," Will breathed. "I like seeing you bent over like this, your ass up and ready for me. That's the way it should be because you know I'm the only one who's allowed to touch it." He ran his fingers along Ethan's crease, brushing them over his tight pucker, causing Ethan to let out a soft moan.

"And you like me to touch it, don't you?"

"Yes."

The sharp crack of a hand came down on his right butt cheek. Ethan jumped, not expecting it at all.

"Yes, *what?*" Will prodded.

*Shit.* "Yes, Will."

"Don't forget again, Ethan."

"I won't ... Will."

"See that you don't."

A hot wave of arousal slid through Ethan's veins ... from what, and why with such intensity, he wasn't sure.

No, that was bullshit. He knew exactly why. Will, this way, in charge, was hot as hell. Check that. He was always hot as hell. But this was above and beyond. This was the stuff of infernos.

"Is anyone but me allowed to fuck your ass?"

"No, never, Will. Only you."

"That's right. And I don't want you to ever forget it. From now on, when I get home from work each night, I want to find you just like this, bent over the table at home, with your ass up in the air, open and ready for me. Understood?"

A slow, powerful shudder shook Ethan at the vision of him doing that very thing, and of Will coming home, finding him that way, and giving him a thorough ass reaming. *Jesus.*

Will's bare hand came down on his butt again with another loud pop.

"What was that for?" Ethan gasped.

"You didn't answer me. So let's try this again. From now on ... when I get home from work, I want to find you just like this, bent over the kitchen table, with your ass open and ready for me. *Understood?*"

"Yes," Ethan whispered, so fucking turned on he could barely speak. "I understand, Will."

"Good. And now there's another matter I need to talk to you about. Did you allow someone else to touch your ass today?"

Ethan's breath caught. He winced at the thought of Jackson's touch. Surely Will wouldn't take issue with that. It wasn't like Ethan could help it.

Will's hand swatted him again, harder this time than the other two, leaving his ass cheek stinging. "Ow!"

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself. I expect you to answer my questions the first time I ask them. Did you let someone else touch your ass today?"

"Yes," Ethan gritted out. Then remembered ... "Will."

"Did we or did we not discuss the fact several weeks ago that I was the first and only person to have that privilege? And didn't I tell you then that no one but me was going to touch it from that time on?"

Ethan gulped. He remembered the conversation well, but had never dreamed it would come back to haunt him like this. "Yes, we did have that conversation, and yes, you did say that, Will."

"And now you have marks on you that someone else put there. On the ass that belongs to me. Someone else's marks on *my* man. This isn't acceptable." Will sounded genuinely upset, as if Ethan had somehow let him down. Which both pissed Ethan off and ripped at his heart because he wouldn't, for anything in the world, have hurt Will. Or maybe Will wasn't upset with him so much as just hurt by Jackson's invasion of every aspect of their lives.

"I didn't let it happen on purpose, and you damn well know it, Will. And if I could get the fucking marks off me, I'd do it in a heartbeat, which I think you also know."

There was a long silence, which felt to Ethan too much like he'd been abandoned. His throat tightened and a shit-load of emotion built in his chest. He swallowed and swallowed trying to hold it back.

Finally, when Will spoke, his voice was thick with some emotion Ethan couldn't read. "You say you'd like to get the marks off you if you could?"

"Yes, God, yes. You have to know I fucking hate everything about them, Will."

"I believe you. But we can't take the marks away, Ethan."

"I know," he murmured under his breath.

Will didn't seem to notice his slip at missing his name.

"There is something else, though. We can cover them."

"Cover them?"

"I can cover them with my own marks."

A bizarre combination of uncertainty and raw lust flooded through Ethan.

"I'm not going to pretend it won't hurt, or pretend you might not very well hate me afterward because you might. But we can't leave things as they are. You have to be punished for allowing this, and we have to make sure my marks are the ones you remember. I think you know that, don't you?"

*Oh, God.* Could he do this? Could he submit to Will this way?



*You don't have any choice. He's not asking. But remember ... this is Will. He loves you. You have to trust that he knows what he's doing, that he knows what's best for you.*

He was startled to realize he was already thinking like a sub.

"Yes, Will," he heard himself say.

"Tell me what I need to hear, Ethan." Will's voice was firm, commanding, but beneath it, Ethan thought he heard a hint of some inner turmoil in Will. Then it was gone, hidden away.

Ethan let a deep breath fill him, and as he released it, he forced himself to release his misgivings and fears. *This is Will.*

"I need ... I *want* you to do whatever you have to to discipline me, Will," he whispered. "So I don't ever forget and screw up again."

"And?"

"And ... I need you to please put your own marks on me and make me yours, Will."

"You already are mine, Ethan. Don't ever mistake that," Will rumbled, leaning down close to Ethan and speaking close to his ear, causing a new shiver of longing to wrack Ethan's body. "You just need a reminder. You like reminders, don't you?" His voice was low, intimate, again meant for Ethan's ears only

The conversation with Will on the deck several nights ago came back to him...

*"You know what you need?"*

*"What?"*

Will sat up. "A reminder."

"Reminder?"

"Remember last month when I told you I was going to make a point of showing you every single day how much I loved you and how important you are to me?"

Ethan smiled. "I remember."

*"Well, it's after midnight, which means it's a new day. And lest you forget..."*

A dizzy warmth filled Ethan, reassuring him. Will was giving him a message.

"Yeah," he breathed. "I do like reminders, Will."

"I know you do."

Will stood again, and Ethan heard him moving around, picking up something from the counter. He held his breath, half afraid, half-aroused, wondering what Will would use, how he would use it.

He wasn't remotely prepared to feel the soft flutter of Will's fingers against his balls. Or the way they slipped up to tickle against his hole, then back down again to stroke the base of his scrotum. His ass clenched in reaction, and his cock, hard as hell in the harness, twitched.

They disappeared, then they were back. This time slippery, teasing around his opening, pressing against it, but not breaching it. Instinctively, Ethan leaned back, wanting them inside him, knowing how damned masterful Will's fingers could be inside him. But they didn't enter him, no matter how much he squirmed. And one of Will's hands grasped Ethan's hip to hold him still.

"If you keep moving that much, I'll have to tie you down," Will said. "If that happened, I'd be very disappointed in you."

The warning in Will's tone was clear ... and Ethan heard it, understood the underlying message. Right now, thanks to Will's intervention, aside from the neck-to-wrist restraint he wore, Ethan was otherwise free. If he moved too much, Jackson might insist Will tie him down, limiting options if a rare chance at freedom arose.

"You're not to move from this position. Is that clear?" Will asked. And again, Ethan heard the subtext in the words.

"Yes, clear, Will."

His long fingers released Ethan's hip.

"You're going to stand still no matter what I do. If you move, it'll only go harder on you. You'll take your punishment because it pleases me. And I know you want to please me."

Will's fingers returned to his ass, slipping down his crack, pushing against his opening, still not entering it, just teasing and making Ethan harder and more needy.

Then something hard, firm, and cool caressed his butt, sliding over it. The length and feel—smooth and wooden—hinted at its purpose ... *Oh, God.*

"You have a fucking beautiful ass," Will rumbled, his voice growing deeper, huskier. "Beautiful, and so damned perfect for this."

The object smacked the fleshy part of his butt with a solid crack.

"Shit!" Ethan jumped, but only at the last split second did he remember to stay in the position he was in, his cheek pressed against the table.

The spank hadn't been hard enough to really hurt, just more of a shock—even though he'd suspected it was

imminent. But he felt certain from the way it had hit, and the sting it had caused even for a mild swat, the wooden paddle had holes in. Which meant if Will decided to swing it harder, it was going to hurt like bloody hell.

*Oh, crap.*

Before he could ready himself, it connected with his flesh again, a little harder this time. Then several more times, each one a fraction harder than the one before.

Ethan's breathing increased, as did his heart rate.

After two more whacks, Will's hand slid down to caress his balls and cock, sending a powerful shot of heat straight to Ethan's groin to merge with the growing heat on his backside. A slick finger pushed into him, without warning or preamble—just straight in as deep as it would go.

"Unnnh! God."

It moved in and out of him a few times, then disappeared. A quiet moan of protest escaped Ethan.

"You want more?" Will's voice caused fiery spasms in his balls.

"Yes. Please, yes."

The hardwood cracked his ass again ... hard. Harder than ever before, eliciting a shocked gasp from him as pain radiated in hot waves from where it had landed.

"Yes, *what?*" Will growled.

*Shit. Shit ...* "Yes, Will," Ethan groaned.

"I'm tired of reminding you, Ethan. You belong to me. Surely you can remember my name. From now on, no more leniency."

Jesus ... *that* had been lenient?

"Yes, Will." He wasn't sure if Will was expecting a response, but didn't want to not answer in case he was, to avoid another wallop like the one Will had just delivered.

But true to his word, Will was *not* lenient.

The smacks came faster ... and harder, landing on the fleshy part of Ethan's ass directly over his quivering hole. The blows seared Ethan's ass with a furious heat.

He gasped each time the wood landed, but then the gasps evolved into soft groans, which eventually evolved into desperate moans. It burned ... *shit*, it burned so badly. But at the same time, his cock and balls had grown rock hard, and swells of magma flooded through him, each one taking him farther and farther out into the unknown world of pain mixed with a throbbing, sensual pleasure.

"You are so fucking gorgeous like this," Will said, his voice hoarse. "Christ ... do you have any idea what you look like, with your perfect ass all red and hot, begging me to fuck it? How much I love hearing you moan and seeing you tremble at my touch?"

The blows continued to fall, but Will's voice, that deep, sexy, beloved voice was like the erotic embrace that held Ethan up and kept him floating in the churning hot sea.

"I'm gonna make damn sure you remember who you belong to. Whose ass this is. Whose body this is. But it's more than that, Ethan. Because it's not just your body I want. It's never been just your body. I want it all. Your body, your heart, and your soul."

"Yes," Ethan moaned, barely able to speak he was so overwhelmed with sensation. "Yes. Need you, Will..."

"Yes, you do. And you're not ever going to forget that again, are you? You're never again going to forget who you belong to."

"No ... God, no ... never. Please, Will."

The hardwood continued to fall on his flesh, but Ethan nearly came undone when Will moved in closer to his side, his thick, erect shaft pressing against Ethan's hip, and his hand wrapped around Ethan's painfully rigid dick, pulling the skin up and down.

"Jesus ... fuck," Ethan cried, needing to come so badly, but unable to because of the rings around his cock and balls.

"That's it, baby. Let go ... let go of everything and let me take care of you. Give yourself up to me, trust me ... don't be afraid. I won't ever let you fall. I'm right here. I'll always be right here, giving you what you need."

Everything ceased to exist except the blazing inferno inside Ethan ... he could no longer tell whether it came from the blows delivered to his ass that hurt so damn good, or from Will's sensuous, demanding voice, or the gentle hand that brought agonizing pleasure to his groin. It all blurred together, swirling him in a whirlpool of liquid fire, sucking him into a place he'd never been before, a place of desire so thick and pulsing it was in his veins, pumping through his body, pervading every part of him.

"You need this, baby." Will's voice was low, intense, like sexual and emotional lightning in a bottle. "You know you need this ... need me."

"Yes," Ethan sobbed. "I need this. I need you ... I'm yours..."

"Yeah, you are, Ethan. You're mine."

"Always yours, Will. I belong to you. Oh, God ... belong ... to ... you. Fuck me, please ... I want..."

"What do you want, babe?"

"I want ... *you*," Ethan cried. "In me ... now ... always. Please ... I belong to you, Will. Only you."

Will's hand at his groin disappeared. The blows stopped. Ethan cried out, not knowing why ... from relief or because he wanted more.

But then Will was behind him, against him. The tip of his thick cock probed at Ethan's opening, slippery with lube, and hot.

"Yes ... God, yes ... please, Will."

And then Will was sinking deep, stretching him, stuffing him full.

"Jesus..." Will groaned. "I'll never be able to get enough of you."

Ethan would never be able to get enough of him either. He belonged with Will, belonged *to* him. Needed him like he'd never needed anything.

Will wasn't gentle, and Ethan didn't need him to be. He needed Will to consume him. And that's what Will seemed intent on doing, delving into him with an intensity that shook Ethan all the way to his deepest core.

The fingers of one of his hands curled through Ethan's where they lay cuffed to his back and squeezed. "You're mine, Eth, and I won't ever let anyone touch you again."

Will's other hand slid to Ethan's groin, and when he unsnapped the cock ring, Ethan cried out in relief.

"Come, baby. Come now. You've never deserved it more."

Ethan did ... in an explosion that tore through his balls and up his shaft with such intensity he thought it might rip him inside out. He barely recognized his own desperate voice as it sobbed Will's name.

Will came then, too, plowing into Ethan like a man possessed, as if he needed to fill every crevice and nook of Ethan's body with himself, with his seed. His hands slid up to brush against Ethan's palms again, and as Ethan's body, drained and heavy, sagged against the table, the gentle contact comforted him.

Will slumped over him, breathing hard, feathering kisses against his shoulder. The scent of sex and sweaty male teased at his nostrils, but it wasn't unpleasant. It was, in its own odd way, also comforting, as was Will's weight on top of him.

And then something was pressed into his hand. Something heavy, wooden handled...

*What the hell?*

Ethan came rushing back into his body with a jolt.

His brain named the object Will had just given him under the cover of leaning down over him in the aftermath of their lovemaking—a knife! Where the hell had Will found it? And then, in another shock, he realized the hand that held it was free from the leather cuff at his back. Both his hands were.

Dizzy giddiness swept over him at the smarts and courage of this amazing man. His man.

Ethan felt the soft brush of warm lips against his ear. "I love you," Will whispered.



"I love you, too," Ethan breathed. "Really, really love you."

Still leaning over him, no doubt to conceal Ethan's hands and the weapon, Will eased off Ethan's blindfold. Ethan blinked, letting his eyes readjust to the light, and realized when Will had bent him over the table and positioned him, he'd done it in such a way they were half-facing Jackson.

Damn, Will was good. Ethan had expected to find Jackson behind them. But as it was, with his left cheek still against the table, he was looking directly at the man.

The loud, jarring sound of a hand slapping a bare leg—a strange alternative to clapping—echoed through the room. Jackson sat on the chair in front of the door about fifteen feet away, his leather pants down around his ankles, his knees spread wide, and his wilting cock still in his other hand as he squeezed the last droplets out of it from what had obviously been a voyeuristic orgasm.

In an almost instantaneous sweep of his gaze, Ethan noted all those details, as well as the fact the gun and whip lay on the floor next to the man. But what struck him like a jolt of live current was Jackson's stance. The pervert was relaxed. Completely. As if he were one-hundred-percent confident in the fact Ethan and Will were under his control with no worries.

"Bravo, boys. That was one hell of a show," Jackson said. "You know, Gallagher, I might just decide to keep you around after all. I gotta hand it to your boy Will ... he sure as shit knows how to work you over. I'll be remembering that sight for a long time to come."

Will slid a hand under Ethan's chest and straightened, pulling Ethan up with him, keeping his back against Will's warm, solid abs and chest the whole way, continuing, in a brilliant strategy, to keep Ethan's freedom and weapon hidden. They turned as one unit to face Jackson.

"Yes, indeed. I like your style, boy." Jackson was smiling at Will. "You showed me a side of Ethan here I never knew about. Who knew he'd turn out to be such a fucking perfect submissive? I think I may just keep both of you for myself ... let you play with each other, then play with me. Or maybe it'd just be all three of us at once. You fucking Gallagher. And me fucking you. Yeah..."

He grinned. "Yeah, I like that idea a lot. I think we'll get to that later today. But right now, I've got a problem." He snapped his fingers. "Over here, Gallagher. On your knees in front of me like a good slave. I've shot my load all over myself and you're going to lick it up. Hurry up! Move it!"

Ethan felt Will stiffen behind him, and knew Will's first instinct would be to protect him ... but then he felt the subtle change in his body that indicated he'd just realized the same thing Ethan had the moment Jackson had spoken his order.

With his fingers, Ethan nudged Will in the stomach, hoping Will would know he was telling him to back away and give him some room.

As if it had been a prearranged signal, Will did exactly that. He even gave Ethan a bit of verbal cover, distracting Jackson.

"Remember," Will said, as if cautioning Ethan to mind his submissive manners, "don't speak until you're spoken to. And

if he does ask you to say something, don't forget to call him master."

Jackson practically beamed at Will. "Oh, I like you, boy. I like you a lot."

Ethan, now standing directly in front of Jackson, sank to his knees between Jackson's legs. As close as he could get anyway, with Jackson's leather pants in a wad at his ankles. The man's heavy, tangy musk filled his nostrils and made him want to gag.

Like a beacon, the bomb remote trigger dangled from the chain around Jackson's neck ... close enough Ethan could wrap his hand around it right now. Jackson didn't seem concerned, though, because he believed Ethan's hands were still cuffed behind his back, which would give him no way to touch it.

Keeping his back rigid, Ethan found a comfortable grip on the smooth wooden handle of the knife. A type of Bowie knife, if he didn't miss his guess. Where in the hell Will had found it, he didn't know ... he couldn't imagine Jackson would have left it lying around. But then again, there was a lot of crap piled on the kitchen counter, which was less than a foot from the table. If it had been lying there, Will could easily have picked it up unseen as he moved around. And Jackson hadn't initially been planning for Will to be free, had thought he'd be the only one with access to the toys and hardware.

The blade, Ethan had already discovered by feel, was a good seven inches long, and though not terribly sharp, didn't need to be.

Jackson's hand curved around Ethan's chin, forcing him to look up at him. "Suck my dick. I want to see you lick up every sticky drop of my cum."

Ethan met his gaze without flinching. "Suck mine," he said, and thrust the knife deep into Jackson's lower gut.

The man's eyes widened in shock, but before he even reacted and could double over, Ethan had grasped the little electronic device and with a quick hard yank, jerked it off him.

Ethan pulled the knife free and staggered to his feet. He kicked the gun and whip away, sending them sliding toward Will.

"Fucker!" Jackson yelled, clutching the bleeding wound just above his now limp genitalia, and rising out of the chair. But his pants around his ankles hindered him, and Ethan was already several feet away, his back to Jackson.

"Eth, look out!" Will's white-faced shout of warning came just a split second before he threw himself at Ethan and they both crashed to the floor. At the same time, the sharp crack of gunfire rent the air. The slug had come so close Ethan had almost heard it. It lodged in the kitchen cabinet not six inches to their left.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Gallagher?" Jackson shouted, his voice higher pitched than usual and almost hysterical. "I had another gun strapped under the chair for emergencies!"

Ethan glanced up from beneath the tangle of his and Will's arms, to see Jackson glaring at them triumphantly, pointing a small semi-automatic pistol at them. But even as he watched,

the man's face grew paler and paler. The gut wound was catching up to him.

Then a shadow darkened the doorway behind Jackson. Ethan heard a sick-sounding thud and watched Jackson's eyelids droop closed and his body slump to the floor. And standing behind him, backlit by a sunlit glow, stood a hunched, gray-pony-tailed man clutching a shotgun.

"Was worried about you two. Your cars were parked at the house, but I hadn't seen you since Monday," said a gruff, familiar voice. "Saw your back door standing open, and found a new foot trail through the forest that started behind your house. I tracked you out here."

"Mr. Sutherland?" Will sounded as shocked as Ethan felt.

The old man crossed the room, not seeming to be shocked by their nudity, and entered the bedroom. By the time Will had eased himself off Ethan, he was back, handing a bedsheet to Will and draping a lightweight blanket over Ethan's shoulders as he sat up.

Ethan still held the detonator trigger clutched in his hand. He opened his palm and stared down at it, then looked up to find both Will and Sutherland staring at him. Will looked shaken, as if he'd just now remembered what the little device meant.

"Remote detonator?" Sutherland asked.

Ethan stared at him in shock. Who the hell was this neighbor? "Yeah."

The old man nodded. "U.S. Customs officer for thirty years," he said by way of explanation. "Retired up here ten years ago. Where's the bomb?"

"We need to find keys," Ethan said, scrambling to his feet and wrapping the blanket around his waist. He wasn't going to be able to breathe comfortably until the collar was off Will and far away. "The collar's padlocked on. Jackson's got to have keys here somewhere."

"In his pants pocket," Will said, standing much more slowly, as if there wasn't anything on him that didn't ache. He knotted the sheet just above his hips. "I saw him pull several out of it."

Mr. Sutherland was already searching them—again seemingly nonplused at the fact Jackson was bare-assed—and bare-dicked—naked above the pants at his ankles.

He tossed Ethan a ring that contained several.

But after studying them and eyeing the collar around Will's neck, he knew none of them were the right one. Will took the ring from him, and after a couple of attempts, found the one to unfasten the ankle cuffs that he'd still been wearing. At least that was something. But not enough.

"Fuck," Ethan muttered under his breath. Fear gripped him. What if Jackson was just insane enough he'd dumped the key somewhere? Or what if ... *Oh, shit*. Ethan looked at the collar again, at the tiny wires looping down into the leather, at the steel lock that held the collar together.

"We'll find it," Will said

"Yeah, we will," Ethan responded, keeping his voice steady in spite of his internal concerns. There was no damn way they were going to have made it through this fucking ordeal and in the end not be able to get Will out of danger.

"Here are several." Will had pulled out a drawer in the kitchen. "Good God, he's got a shit-load of them."

Ethan looked into the drawer. "Jesus." There must have been twenty or thirty sets. He searched through them, pulling out only the half dozen he thought looked like a match. But even if he found the right key ... it might not be enough. "Sit down in one of the chairs, Will."

Will's wide-eyed, pale expression said he read Ethan's concern. He pulled out a ladderback chair from the table. "What is it? Tell me."

"There's..." Ethan swallowed back the cold lump of fear in his throat. "There's a possibility he's rigged it so it can't be taken off without activating the detonator."

"Should we call the bomb squad?" Sutherland asked. He'd found a spare set of handcuffs and was pulling Jackson's arms behind his back and snapping them on him.

"I'll look at it first. It's possible it's just a plain old lock and everything will be fine." Ethan's voice sounded confident, in control—a professional at work. Inside, his gut was twisted in knots. This wasn't professional. This was Will.

He moved to stand behind Will and squeezed his shoulder, trying to offer reassurance ... but that had always been Will's *forté*, not his.

Then Will's hand came up and covered his, as if to give him comfort.

Damn it, it wasn't fair. Will was the one potentially still in danger, yet once again, he was the one offering Ethan comfort.

Ethan took a deep breath. *I'm not going to let him die, damn it.*

Willing himself to keep his hands steady, he studied the collar more closely, tracking the wires, examining the small but sturdy padlock, making note of how the two ends of the collar met.

"Well?" Will asked quietly.

"I don't see anything."

"And that's good, right?"

"Yeah. That's good."

"So try the keys."

"Mr. Sutherland..."

"Felix," the old man grunted. "Never did take to the mister thing. And the name Officer Sutherland retired when I did."

"Okay. Felix ... there's an old, abandoned forest service building about a half-mile through the woods to the south. Inside, there's a trapdoor in the floor that leads down into a cellar. My clothes are down there. Would you be willing to go get them?"

"Know the place. Saw it on my way here. Yep, I'll go get your things."

He left without looking back.

"You sent him away just in case, didn't you?" Will asked, worry creasing his forehead.

"I sent him to get my clothes. No ulterior motive."

"For a man who spent the past ten years telling lies and convincing people he's anything but who he really is, you suck at lying to me."

"I really think it's okay," Ethan said, sticking to his story.



But even though he'd seen no evidence Jackson had rigged the lock or collar, Ethan's heart was still in his throat as he slid each of the keys into the lock and tried it. The fifth one turned the lock. He held his breath as the lock snicked open. And again as he unbuckled the thing.

And then it was off.

Will, visibly shaken, let out a long-held breath.

Ethan carried the bomb out of the house and several hundred yards into the woods before he set it down.

Only then did he allow silent tears of relief to pool in his eyes.

## **CHAPTER 11**

After he'd dressed and made some phone calls from Felix's cell phone—they hadn't found his and Will's personal effects or shoes in the house ... what Jackson had done with them was anyone's guess—Ethan realized Will was no longer in the house. God knows he couldn't blame him for needing to get out.

Leaving Felix to stand guard over Jackson's still inert form while they waited for the agency to come collect him, he went in search of the man he loved.

He found him sitting in the afternoon sunlight on a huge fallen log out back of the house, his legs drawn up so his bare feet rested on the wood, his arms crossed over them, and his head resting on his arms. Will's clothes had been in the house and he'd donned them earlier. Dressed in a gray T-shirt and jeans, even after nearly two days of hell, he was a sight for Ethan's starved eyes.

"Hey," Ethan said, sitting next to him and handing Will a bottle of water from the stash Mr. Sutherland had brought with him. The old guy had been like a Boy Scout ... prepared. He'd had water, food, a first-aid kit, and assorted other gems in his backpack he'd left outside the door before he entered the house.

Will looked up and accepted the bottle with a faint smile. "Thanks." He didn't open it, though, Ethan noticed.

They'd barely talked, and hadn't touched at all, since Ethan had taken the collar off him ... and Ethan was feeling the loss of closeness.

When he'd returned from leaving the collar in the forest, there'd been practical matters to attend to, with convincing Felix that calling the county sheriff wasn't a great idea being at the top of the list. Ethan had known the agency would want to be notified first, and from there, he'd do whatever they requested. As it was, they'd told him no one else was to touch Jackson or the crime scene until they got there. Ethan had told them about the stab wound in the stomach, and reminded them stomach wounds could be fatal. They'd said they'd hurry. Which could mean they'd arrive in a few minutes or a few hours.

Felix had finally relented after Ethan broke down and told him someone higher-up than the county sheriff was coming.

The old guy had peered at him with piercing black eyes ... raven eyes, Ethan couldn't help but think. Which fit the image he and Will had discussed several weeks earlier, about how the old man looked like a raven when he stood out on his perch on his deck, his binoculars in hand.

"You work for one of those three-letter agencies out of Washington," he'd said, as if that explained everything.

"Something like that."

"Well, all right then. Why didn't you just say so before?"

*All right then.*

"So, Felix said we're only about five miles from home as the crow flies," Ethan told Will, trying to draw him into conversation and end the odd, stretched silence between them. "He said he'd seen someone lurking around in the woods the past few days, so when he saw the cars but not us, he got to worrying someone had maybe broken into the

house and killed us in our sleep. Then he found the trail leading away from the house and decided to follow it."

Will nodded.

With a sigh, Ethan continued, "Jackson was no doubt hiking over to watch us. That would draw less suspicion than driving and having to leave a car parked on the road for people to notice. And, in theory, it would have worked. He just never banked on us having a nosy neighbor who has nothing better to do with his retired life than peer through his binoculars all days. Felix told me, by the way, he uses his binoculars to watch *wildlife*."

Ethan paused, hoping to get a smile out of Will at that, but Will seemed oblivious to the humor.

"Jackson couldn't have carried us here on foot," Will said. "He had to have had a vehicle for that." His voice was quiet. Too quiet.

"Felix found a truck parked in the woods not too far from here. That's probably what Jackson used to get us here."

Another nod was Will's only response, which worried Ethan. He'd known there was a good possibility all the trauma and stress would catch up to Will, but it still made his heart hurt like hell that Will had to feel any more pain. Damn it, it just wasn't fair, he thought again. Will shouldn't have had to go through any of this.

"What's on your mind, Will?"

He shrugged. "Nothing in particular."

"Now who sucks at lying?" He slid a hand over to cover Will's. "I'm so, so sorry this happened. I told you this already

I know, but I would never intentionally have put you in danger. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course I know. It's not your fault, Eth" he said, and turned his hand up to wrap his fingers through Ethan's. "And for the record, because I don't know what the bastard might have told you ... he didn't do anything to me. I mean, he whipped me, but he didn't..."

"Rape you?" Ethan asked softly, hating the words. He'd wondered, but hadn't known how to ask.

"He didn't rape me. He told me he did while I was drugged, but I know he didn't. It was a lie to manipulate me. And maybe to manipulate you."

Ethan hadn't realized he was holding his breath, or just how much that had been eating at him down inside, until now. "He ... hinted at it to me."

"It was just a lie."

"What all did Jackson tell you? About me, or about anything? I don't want you to worry and wonder either about anything he said. So let's get it out in the open."

"Okay. But what he told me isn't really bothering me," Will said.

"I'm glad, but let's talk about it anyway." Better to get it out now. Even if Will didn't think any of it was bothering him right now, it didn't mean that things Jackson had said wouldn't come back to haunt him later. Ethan knew ... he'd been there before.

"He said you lived in Paris. Is that true?"

Ethan sighed. "Yeah, for about a year I worked out of the Paris office. And before you ask why I didn't tell you at the

time, I couldn't figure out a way to tell you I was living there in the context of the job you were supposed to think I was doing. It was easier, if you asked, to let you think I had simply traveled there and stayed for a bit. And since we mostly emailed during those years rather than called, I could be anywhere in the world and you wouldn't know where I was emailing you from."

"He said you two lived together there, along with two women named Gabrielle and Josette. He said you all had wild sex together all the time."

"Fucking bastard," Ethan muttered. "First of all, we did *not* live together. In fact, he was only in Paris a few short weeks. Remember when I told you he was temporarily assigned to my office and I got stuck working with him? The time he almost got me and my asset killed? Well that was in Paris. Josette was my asset he almost got murdered. Gabrielle was her friend and someone we were watching. Gabrielle's father was a high-level French arms dealer whom we believed was supplying terrorists with weapons and weapon parts. Josette was working for us, passing information. There was no wild sex. There was no sex at all, except maybe in Jackson's dreams."

Another sigh escaped him. "I thought you'd be interesting in knowing that when I called the agency, they told me Jackson was booted a few months ago."

Will's eyebrows drew together. "They're still coming here to claim him, though? Why, if he was fired?"

Anger surged through Ethan. "Because they have new evidence against him suggesting he may have been behind some information leaking that jeopardized national security."

"Meaning what? That he sold out to the other side?"

Ethan dragged in a deep breath. Then another, as he stared, unseeing, out into the forest.

"What is it, Eth?" Will's green-eyed gaze had settled on him, intent, concerned.

"I just found this out today. They think..." Ethan stumbled over the words. "They think he may have been the one responsible for the leak that led to my capture three years ago."

"Oh ... *shit*." Will squeezed his hand. "How? Jesus ... why? Why would he do that?"

"Remember I told you after the French incident when I reported him, he was sent off to yet another crappy posting in a little, unstable, war-torn county? Well, I guess he made some bad connections and spent a couple of months being tortured at the hands of an insurgent group. He blamed me."

"Why?" But then Will answered his own question. "Because you reported him and were the reason he got in trouble and ended up at the shit job in the first place."

"Yeah."

"So he decided to pay you back by making sure you were captured? Jesus Christ. He was so obsessed with getting back at you he was willing to see you die at the enemy's hands for it?"

Ethan's chest tightened at Will's outrage. He shared it and had said much the same thing to his old boss on the phone just fifteen minutes before.

"Okay, he spent two months in hell," Will said. "But for you, it was three years. Three long fucking years! But that wasn't enough and so he came here to finish his revenge?"

"That's what it looks like."

"I hope the bastard fucking fries!"

Ethan watched as a myriad of emotions crossed Will's face in a hurry.

Then Will ran a hand through his dark hair. "Okay, I don't know if I mean that or not ... I don't like thinking about anyone dying."

"I know." Ethan put his free hand on Will's arm, his chest squeezing, wishing again for the several dozenth time that Will hadn't ever had to experience any of this.

"It's just..." Will faced him, tension and confusion lining his face. "He could have killed you. He wanted to kill you. And I just ... damn it, I just ... I don't like feeling this way, wishing bad things on anyone, but I can't help it. I want him to pay. I want him to suffer." Will's shoulders slumped and he pulled his hand free from Ethan's, dropped his face into his hands, and scrubbed them over his cheeks. "God, is that just awful?"

Ethan put an arm around Will's shoulder. "It's not awful. He did some terrible things to you, too." The sight of the raw, red skin around Will's neck reminded him all over again how close he'd come to losing him.

"No. I mean ... yeah, but that's nothing compared to what you've been through," Will said. "You lost almost three years



of your life because of that bastard. And then, to have him bring you out here, lock you in the dark knowing how you'd suffered ... Shit. But what's really killing me..." His voice caught, and Ethan suspected they were finally getting to the truth about what was bothering Will.

"What? Tell me."

"I ... I helped him."

"What?" Ethan put a hand under Will's chin and lifted his face until he could see Will's tormented green gaze. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"What happened in there ... what I did to you..."

A warm rush spread through Ethan and he almost smiled, but didn't, for Will's sake, because Will was clearly torn up.

"You think pretty damned fast on your feet, Dr. McClaren."

"I was improvising." Will swallowed hard. "I didn't know what else to do."

"Will, look at me and listen very carefully to what I'm about to tell you. What you *did* in there was save our lives. Your quick thinking under awful, traumatic conditions was not only brilliant, it was one of the bravest things I've seen. And I'm not just talking about unfastening my wrists and giving me the knife, although I could have kissed you on the spot when I realized what you'd done. I'm talking about how you stood up to Jackson, how you figured out his weaknesses, his obsessions, then turned the tables on him and used them against him. You not only kept him from raping me, you played up to his need to feel powerful and kept him distracted, which ultimately left him vulnerable."

"But I know how you feel about being restrained. How you feel about being struck. I hit you, Eth. Over and over..."

"Believe me, I'm aware of that," Ethan said with a smile. "I'm going to feel it every time I sit down for the next week—"

"Oh, God!" Will squeezed his eyes closed, turned away, and ran his hands through his hair again. "See, that's what I mean. I'm no better than Jackson. Or your son of a bitch father."

"No. Damn it, listen to me. And quit looking away." He turned Will to face him once again. "You are *nothing* like them. Tell me something ... when you were wielding that piece of wood and using it on me, were you doing it out of anger?"

"No, God, of course not."

"Were you doing it out jealousy? Or revenge? Or just plain because you wanted to hurt me?"

"No!"

"My point exactly. There's a huge difference between you and Jackson, and you and my dad. Jackson's wanted revenge on me almost from the moment he met me. The man's a sociopath and a sadist—he gets off on pain for the sake of pain. My dad hated me because I reminded him of my mom, who ran off with someone else and dumped him when I was two, then had the gall to get herself killed a year later so he was stuck with me. And he also hated me because the alcohol made him furious at the world and I happened to be the easiest to take it out on.

"You, on the other hand"—Ethan smiled at him—"love me. And I felt it every single time that wood made contact with me."

Will didn't look convinced. "How is that possible?"

"It's possible because I trust you and because I know you'd never hurt me intentionally. Even in the position you were in, having to convince Jackson you were doing it to bring me pain, making him believe I was suffering and humiliated because that's what Jackson wanted, you never once stepped across that line between sensual, loving domination and the uglier sadomasochist world Jackson prefers."

At Will's continuing troubled expression, Ethan said, "Let me put it this way. Do you think I would have had a hard-on, or begged to be fucked, or had the single most mind-blowing orgasm and emotional experience of my life if it had been anyone but you touching me?"

That seemed to catch Will's attention and sink in. His eyes widened as he stared at Ethan. "Most mind-blowing of your life?" he whispered.

Ethan would never cease to be amazed at how much he loved Will McClaren.

"You took me to a place I'd never been before, Will. Somewhere ... outside myself. To a place where I didn't care where we were or who was watching ... I just wanted, *needed*, to belong to you. Utterly and completely."

He saw Will swallow. Then swallow again. "And ... that's a good thing?" he asked, his voice soft and hoarse.

Ethan pulled him into a kiss—packed with all the love and passion he felt for this man. Then he looked Will directly in the eyes. "I'd go there with you again."

The stunned expression on Will's face was one Ethan knew he'd remember forever.

\* \* \* \*

It was late afternoon when Felix Sutherland dropped them off at home. The old guy had turned into a hell of a surprise, and Will wasn't sure they'd ever be able to thank him sufficiently for coming to find them and showing up at just the right time.

Ethan began shedding his clothes the moment they were inside the front door. "I'm taking a bath. I can't wait another second."

Will followed, uncertainty suddenly overwhelming him. He didn't remove any of his clothing, and when Ethan entered the bathroom, Will stopped in the hallway just outside the door. He heard the sound of the tap running in the big Jacuzzi tub, but still he kept his distance, not wanting to invade Ethan's privacy if that's what he needed.

Then Ethan was standing in the doorway, nude, and in spite of the bruises, scrapes, and welts on him, and the exhaustion haunting his face, he was so beautiful Will almost couldn't breathe.

"Why are you still standing here? Did you forget how to take off your clothes?"

Will's chest ached. "I wasn't sure if ... I thought you might want to be alone."

Ethan's eyebrows shot up underneath the locks of hair that had tumbled onto his forehead. Then he shook his head and a soft, fond smile curved his lips. "I know I've told you this before, but I find myself having to say it again ... For such a smart man, you sure can be dumb sometimes."

He moved close to Will and slid his hands up underneath Will's T-shirt, pushing it up and over his chest, then, when Will hesitantly raised his arms, pushing it up and off. He brushed a gentle kiss against Will's lips, then his busy fingers moved to the snap and zipper of Will's jeans, making short work of them. When they lay on the floor with his boxer briefs, Ethan crooked a finger at him.

But Will was still frozen to the spot. "I'm serious, Eth. After everything that happened to you these past couple of days, after what—"

One of Ethan's fingers covered Will's mouth. "I know what you're about to say again, so don't. You were magnificent, Will. Strong, brave ... you did everything exactly right. I've never been prouder of you. And I've never been prouder to have someone watch my back. I don't ever want to hear you worry about this again, okay? I mean it."

Will nodded, wondering how in the hell he could ever live without this man.

Ethan's smile was tired, but filled with love. "Good. Now go get your ass in the tub. We both deserve a good long soak."

They washed each other, gentle and protective of the bruises and welts that covered them both, then soaked their aching muscles in the jetted hot water until they were both as relaxed and pliant as wet noodles.

Only when Will saw Ethan dozing off did they drag themselves out of the tub, towel off, and collapse into the softness of their bed.

\* \* \* \*

Will stretched and opened his eyes to find Ethan lying on his side, facing him, and running gentle fingers through Will's hair. It was still dark outside, but the light from the hallway cast a warm, ethereal glow across Ethan's face. With the bedroom window open, the night breeze stole in, bringing with it the scent of pine and wildflowers.

"Hi," Will said softly.

"Hi." Ethan's soft smile curled around his heart.

Will slid an arm around Ethan's waist and stroked his back. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Yeah, I slept okay. But I woke up and couldn't stop looking at you."

Will brushed his lips against Ethan's, whose were warm and willing and responsive.

"Have I ever told you what a fucking amazing kisser you are?" Ethan asked.

That brought a smile to Will's face. "A time or two."

"I'll never get tired of kissing you." Ethan placed a gentle hand against Will's chest and rolled him onto his back. Then he slid over atop him. Will spread his legs to accommodate him, and sighed when Ethan's weight settled between them, bringing their warm groins into contact.

"You're hard," Ethan said, his eyes sparkling. "Is that for me?"

"Always."

Then Ethan's expression grew serious. Intense. "I want to be inside you, Will."

"I thought you might."

Ethan hesitated, as if searching for the right words. "I really am okay with what happened. This isn't about me needing to prove something to myself or you. I just ... I want ... I guess what I want is to give back some of the incredible closeness and love you gave me today."

Will cupped his cheek. "You don't have to have a reason, Ethan. And you don't have to explain anything. There is no right or wrong, no one way lovemaking has to happen between us. I love bringing you up to the edge, then watching you shatter with pleasure as you go over it. But I love having you inside me just as much. Love having *you* be the one to take *me* over the edge. Our relationship isn't about one person being dominant over the other. It's about love. And sharing. And being close to one another in whatever form that takes at any given time."

"I love you," Ethan said softly, his eyes overflowing with it.

"I love you." And, God, he did.

Will leaned over to the bedside table, slid out the drawer, and pulled out a bottle of lube. He squeezed a generous amount into his palm, then worked his hand between their bodies and massaged the slippery gel onto Ethan's sleek, hot shaft.

Ethan closed his eyes and a slow, appreciative tremor shook his body.

"You're so damned beautiful," Will breathed, watching him.

Ethan's eyes opened and a seductive smile curved his lips.  
"So are you."

He held out two fingers and Will squeezed more lube onto them, knowing without needing to ask, what he wanted. Then he snapped the lid on the bottle closed and let it fall onto the table.

Ethan's rose to his knees between Will's legs, his cock glistening, and pressed his slick fingers against Will's hole.

Will melted back into the pillows and gave himself up to the deep, warm pulses of desire that spread through him at Ethan's confident touch. Ethan circled his opening and slowly pressed into it, causing Will's breath to catch, then release in a series of panted convulsions.

"Feel good?"

"Oh, God, yes."

Ethan slid his fingers out, then pushed back in deeper. Over and over. Until they were buried inside Will, stroking his prostate.

Will groaned and his hips lifted off the bed as bursts of warm lightning coursed through him. His hand curved around his own leaking cock, squeezing it at the base, willing himself not to come yet because the way Ethan was rubbing him, he was seconds from it if Ethan kept it up.

But Ethan knew him almost better than he knew himself. Just when Will thought he might lose the battle, Ethan slid his fingers free, leaving Will empty and powerfully needy.

"Tell me what you want." Ethan's voice was low, laced with love and sex.



"I want you in me. God, I want you in me as fast as you can get there."

He pushed Will's legs up and back, and with a look of raw sensuality on his lean face, pressed the tip of his cock just inside Will's quivering hole, stretching it, making it hungry for more. And then, he was sliding inside, inch by plundering inch.

"Jesus, Will ... you're hot. And so fucking tight. I don't think I'm going to be able to last long. I'm sorry ... I just need you too much." He was already moving in and out in quick, hard thrusts, followed by long, slow, deep ones.

One of Will's hands clutched at the sheets, the other pumped his cock. "Don't you dare apologize. I'm not going to last either. You feel too good."

Ethan pulled one of Will's legs up and draped it over his shoulder, changing his angle of entry.

Will gasped when Ethan's cockhead hit his prostrate, as did every thrust that followed. "Oh, shit. Shit!" His body drew in on itself, his balls tightened and caught fire, and then he was coming, erupting hot, sticky seed in shocking quantity against his chest and stomach, against Ethan's.

Ethan's motions grew intense. He groaned, long and low, and then he was shuddering so violently as his release hit him that the bed shook.

When his softening cock slid from Will, they clung together, not caring about the sweat and cum slickening their skin, just needing to be close and together.

"You're still my best friend, Will. And the love of my life. You always will be. I think this, us ... it's meant to be."

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

"I know it is. We've been through too much together for it not to be."

"Sometimes it doesn't even feel like we're two separate people, does it? It's more like we're two halves of one whole, twined together in the most elemental way."

"Hearts and bones."

Ethan smiled. "I like that."

"I'm yours, you know?" Will said. "For better or for worse."

"And I'm yours. I belong to you, Will McClaren," he said softly. "I always have."

In the dark, their lips found each other in an emotional kiss that sealed the vow.

M. L. Rhodes

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

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

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

\* \* \* \*

Don't miss *Falling*, by M. L. Rhodes,

available at [Amber-Allure.com](http://Amber-Allure.com)!

—An Amazon.com #1 Best Seller in Gay Erotica!

—Just Erotic Romance Reviews Gold Star Award!

*As the leader of an elite British group that hunts criminals of the magic world, Christian Wetherly comes to the U. S. undercover, posing as a British cop, to investigate a series of murders he suspects have been committed by a dark mage. He never expects, however, to find himself intensely attracted to the American police detective in charge of the case. Christian has long struggled with his hidden desires and hasn't admitted them to anyone. But Alec Anderson stirs something deep within him that's difficult to ignore.*

*Still ... even if he could master his fear of coming out, Christian's dedicated himself to protecting the world from magic terrors. It's a dangerous life an ordinary human could never understand or accept. And to complicate matters, Alec's emotionally vulnerable, still grieving the death of his previous lover, a fellow cop killed in the line of duty. So Christian's determined to keep his true occupation and powers hidden from Alec.*

*Neither man can deny the powerful chemistry that burns between them, and both realize they're falling hard for one another, yet with so many secrets and complications, a relationship seems impossible.*

*When the two men become the target of the dark magic, however, and clues about an ancient legacy come to light that indicate Alec may not be exactly what he seems, can they find the strength to tear down all the barriers between them and risk their hearts in order to save each other's lives?*

\* \* \* \*

Don't miss Mosaic Moon, by Jamie Craig,

available at [Amber-Allure.com](http://Amber-Allure.com)!

*Emma Coolidge is accustomed to isolation. Born with the ability to read emotions, Emma reached adulthood without learning how to control her special gift, leading to a life of self-imposed seclusion. Until she meets Gideon Keel and Jesse Madding, a vampire fighting for good and his human lover. Both men befriend her and introduce her to people who can help her create a normal life for herself. Everything is great for Emma for the first time in her life—except for one small problem. She longs to be part of Jesse and Gideon's lives, and their darker games involving bondage and sadism, but believes her desire can be nothing but a private fantasy.*

*Gideon adores Jesse and wants nothing more than to give him everything he wants. When Gideon realizes Jesse wants Emma, as well, he decides to invite Emma into their games. But a disturbing new crime distracts Gideon from his goal. Jesse and Gideon are forced to investigate a string of grave desecrations that are somehow siphoning power from the most powerful mage in Chicago. They must unravel the mystery of who is stealing Black John's power, why, and how to reverse it before they can devote their time and energy to their mutual desire for a third in their bed.*

\* \* \* \*

Don't miss Adeno, by Gabrina Garza,

available at [AmberHeat.com](http://AmberHeat.com)!

An Amber Heat Wave Contest Winner!

*Freedom can be denied, but desire and love know no bounds...*

*Nasora, a born healer, finds herself increasingly drawn to a young fighter named Adeno. Her only purpose in the arena, however, is to heal the fighters if they return alive and victorious. And time and again, Nasora brings back Adeno from the brink of death. Adeno's body is meant only for combat, yet the connection Nasora feels toward the arena warrior deepens into something primal ... something forbidden.*

*When at last she decides she can no longer see Adeno enslaved, and he no longer wishes to be physically healed, Nasora wonders if she has the strength to heal him in a different way. And will she be able to free her lover after his owner, who also has designs on Nasora and seeks revenge against Adeno, interferes with her plans?*

Do you know about Amber Quill's Rewards Program?

For every ten books bought, receive one free!

Visit all three of Amber Quill's web sites

for our very latest releases!!

\* \* \* \*

AMBER HEAT EROTICA

Gimme Fever!!

Steamy, sensual genre fiction...

[www.AmberHeat.com](http://www.AmberHeat.com)

\* \* \* \*

AMBER ALLURE

Where love is blind to gender...

[www.Amber-Allure.com](http://www.Amber-Allure.com)

\* \* \* \*

Hearts and Bones  
*by M. L. Rhodes*

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

Quality Books, Print And Electronic

Genre fiction at its best!

[www.AmberQuill.com](http://www.AmberQuill.com)

---

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com).