

M. L. RHODES

PASSION

PASSION

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As Robert took in the sights of the pub at a glance, he was struck again by how damned good he felt. Energized, yet relaxed. Ready for...well, whatever adventure might await him.

He peeled off his coat and noticed a couple of younger men and one guy about his age or a little older with a nice bod and graying hair already eyeing him, measuring him up as a potential hook-up. He eyed them back and smiled, letting it be known he was in the market tonight.

Oh, yeah. He felt certain it was going to be a good night, and all that warm-fuzzy home and hearth, love and romance BS of earlier this evening would fade away as soon as he had his arms around a hard, hot body. This was the way his life was meant to be. This was what it was all about.

And then, like steel drawn inevitably to a magnet, his gaze fell on the one person in all the world who could, and did, cause everything else to fade away.

Robert's pulse pounded. His breathing came out in slow huffs. And his groin tightened in an ache that was one part lust

and two parts agony for what it could never, ever have.

Jesse McIntyre.

The pub's buff, bearded, blue-eyed, extremely hot, extremely fuckable, and extremely *straight* and way off-limits bartender...

ALSO BY M. L. RHODES

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PASSION

BY

M. L. RHODES

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PASSION
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“Without passion, man is a mere latent force and possibility, like the flint which awaits the shock of the iron before it can give forth its spark.”

—Henri-Frédéric Amiel

“Love without passion is dreary; passion without love is horrific.”

—Lord Byron

“Passion, it lies in all of us, sleeping...waiting...and though unwanted...unbidden...it will stir...”

—Joss Whedon

“Never underestimate the power of passion.”

—Eve Sawyer

CHAPTER 1

On a Friday evening in January, while the rest of the folks in town were fighting their way home through blowing snow and over slick roads, Robert Bauer had a date with destiny.

As with most people in his position, he didn't yet know it...

* * *

By the time the gray darkness of the winter evening began to settle over town, the snow, which had started off as a light dusting that morning, fell harder than it had all day, coming down in a heavy shroud that slowed traffic to a crawl for the evening commute.

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Through the windshield wipers slashing across the glass, Robert Bauer peered into the murk, trying to stay far enough behind the boat-sized Buick ahead of him so that if the damned fool driver who'd slammed on the brakes a few minutes ago and skidded sideways pulled another stunt like that, he wouldn't cause Robert to have an accident as well.

But the driver of the SUV behind Robert was clearly annoyed at Robert's caution since he was riding his ass in a show of cocky four-wheel-drive supremacy.

"Give me a break!" Robert muttered, glancing into the rearview mirror and scowling. "Just because I'm not in a Hummer doesn't mean I don't know how to drive in the snow."

Robert had lived here against the foot of the Rocky Mountains for the past fifteen years and had experience aplenty, not to mention he'd never, in all that time, had an accident. But there was always at least one jackass driver in every snowstorm who thought he or she was hot shit.

The Buick's brake lights snapped on in front of him, glowing like fat, red, twin Christmas bulbs left over from the recent holiday season. The big car slid again, fishtailing from one lane to another.

"Shit!" Robert eased off the gas—not that he was giving it much anyway—and let his Jaguar slow.

The further speed reduction really pissed off the SUV driver behind him, who began flashing his lights at Robert.

"Oh, for God's sake! Yeah, fuck you, too, buddy! You want me to pull over so you can follow the death boat ahead,

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be my guest!”

At the next intersection, he made a right turn onto a less traveled street that led away from the main thoroughfare. The route took him through the sleepy older section of downtown near the university. It would take longer to get across town this way, but hopefully there'd be less idiots on the road.

What he wasn't prepared to find, as he crept through the broad, tree-lined, snowy residential neighborhoods and turned onto old Main Street, was just how deserted this part of town would be. It was like another world. Silent and still.

“Yeah, well, that's a good thing. No other crazies.”

It was as if the snow had drawn everyone into hiding, or at least into hibernation. The warm yellow glow of lights shone through the leaded and stained glass panes of the old Victorian houses like welcome beacons in the storm. Robert had a sudden visual of families gathered around dinner tables or in front of fireplaces, cozy and comfortable and close.

For some reason the thought caused an odd tightening in his chest.

He wasn't sure why. The cozy family life had never been his thing. He'd never had any desire for it, had never had *time* for it. His life revolved around his business, the microelectronics company he'd started from scratch and built from the ground up until it was now one of the preeminent tech companies in the country. While most of his friends had long ago settled down with spouses or live-in lovers, kids and soccer games, pets and minivans, he'd been busting his butt with sixty hour work weeks, a hectic travel schedule, and the

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satisfaction of seeing his company still managing to eke out a decent profit in spite of the difficult economic times. Yeah, they'd had to tighten their belts at Bauer MicroSystems over the past year, but he was damned proud of the fact he hadn't had to lay off a single employee and didn't foresee that changing in the near future. Why? Because Bauer MicroSystems was his life and he'd sweat blood if he had to, to be sure it stayed viable.

That didn't leave time for family or long-term commitments or that highly overrated emotion that was usually required for such things—love.

Still, as the residences on Main Street gave way to more Victorians used for commercial enterprises, Robert had to admit that tonight, for some reason, the thought of going home to his big, quiet house left him feeling cold. A cold that had nothing to do with the frigid wintery blast assailing his car and covering everything in several inches of heavy, wet powder. He actually liked his house and usually found it comfortable for the most part, but it suddenly seemed isolated and lonely as hell. Like the last place he felt like being on a night like tonight.

The urge to delay the inevitable for a little while longer built inside him, leaving him restless. He'd been surrounded by people since he'd arrived at work at 6:45 this morning, yet hadn't had a single minute of down time. It had been one of those days, packed with grueling budget meetings, where he'd had to stay in the role of "the boss" all day, which didn't lend itself to personal conversations or social interactions.

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In the next block he spied the lights on and the *Open* sign still hanging in the window of the local metaphysical store, Shoemaker's Magick Shoppe. Making a spur of the moment decision, he eased the Jag into a parking space right in front of the Victorian that housed the store. He'd been in the place before and often found a good book or two or just enjoyed browsing. The store always had good energy and an inviting feel to it, and he thought if nothing else it would be a pleasant way to kill a few minutes and unwind, while giving the rest of the rush hour drivers a chance to clear off the main drags so he wouldn't have to take back roads all the way home.

Of course, it also didn't hurt that the man who owned and ran the store, Logan Shoemaker, was a cute hunk. Nothing like a little eye candy to cheer up an otherwise dreary night.

Aside from Robert's car, only a handful of others occupied spaces along Main Street, and it looked like most of the other specialty shops that had so far survived the economic recession and were still in business had already closed for the night. In contrast, the lights in the metaphysical store flooded out through the windows and onto the snowy sidewalk in invitation.

Robert climbed out of his car and locked it, then made a dash for the shop.

He twisted the knob and pushed the door inward. A pleasant jingling from the bell above greeted him, along with the surprised look of the store owner himself. Dark eyebrows raised above warm brown eyes, Logan looked startled to see him. He had been headed toward the door...maybe to lock up

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for the night?

“Hey, I’m not catching you too late, am I?” Robert asked with a smile as he stomped his feet, brushed snow off the shoulders of his wool trench coat, and shook it from his head.

Logan offered Robert a return smile that looked genuine, albeit distracted, as if he had something else on his mind. “No, no, come on in.” He waved Robert into the store, then turned toward the cash register.

Unable to resist, Robert watched his backside as he retreated behind the counter. He could find nothing but appreciation for the younger man, whom he figured was probably in his late twenties. With his lean build, dressed in a heavy gray sweater and jeans, and his wavy dark hair curling over his ears and collar, Logan Shoemaker was a definite looker in a tousled, soft-spoken, make-love-not-war kind of way—fitting for the owner of a store like this in a liberal college town. Add in his easy smile and low voice, and he seemed like a nice guy. And from watching him and talking to him on previous visits, Robert would bet his next month’s salary the man was gay. Not that there was anything effeminate or the least bit flaming about him—far from it, actually. It was the fact that when Robert had been in before and made eye contact with him, Logan had met his gaze with a warmth that most straight men wouldn’t.

Robert moved around to one of the shelves to look at the books on spirituality, but continued to watch the man, who seemed to be lost in thought at the counter. The play of emotions that crossed his face alternately intrigued Robert and

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tugged at his heartstrings for some reason he couldn't fathom. Logan looked...troubled. But when he closed his eyes as whatever thought he was lost in took over, his expression softened and Robert could swear now he looked like he was reliving some kind of erotic daydream.

Robert found himself drawn to him, moving toward the counter in rapt fascination. And then the troubled lines around Logan's mouth tightened again and he let out a soft, tortured-sounding sigh.

"Anything I can do to help?" Robert asked, speaking without thinking, and realizing too late that he'd probably just interrupted something very personal.

Logan's eyes flew open and a faint blush crept up his cheeks. "Um...what?"

He could have backed off, probably should have, but he was already in this far, so Robert repeated what he'd said. "I said, anything I can do to help? You looked like you were reliving something pretty amazing, but then you looked sad, like maybe whoever he was left you sleeping alone when it was all over."

Okay, so it was a test of sorts, to see if the younger man was really gay. He hadn't actually planned it...it just came out, and now Robert waited to find out what would happen. The truth was, Robert realized he could see himself spending a pleasant evening with Logan Shoemaker, and maybe if he played his cards right, they might hit it off and that could happen.

"Uh..."

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He went for broke. "A man like you should definitely not be sleeping alone." Robert rested a hand on the counter and leaned in closer. "Whoever he is or was, you deserve better. Which is why I thought maybe I could help."

Logan swallowed hard, looking startled, but not by any means scared off at Robert's implications. "Thanks, but...I'm good. Really."

"Aw, come on. Let me buy you a drink on this snowy night. You can tell me all about it. Then we can go to my place. I've got a big fireplace. A sheepskin rug. We can see where it goes from there."

Okay, that last bit was too much—he'd known it the moment it came out his mouth, but it had been too late to stop it. Damn, he hadn't meant to sound that desperate. And when was the last time he'd invited someone home with him? Months? A year? Longer? It wasn't something he made a habit of doing.

Logan's brows drew together, but then a slight smile curved his lips. "Did you, um, open that bottle by any chance?" he asked, motioning with his head toward the register.

That threw Robert for a loop. He didn't have a clue what the man was talking about. "What?"

"That little bottle of oil, right there." Logan pointed to a tiny bottle of gold oil sitting next to the cash register. It had a purple tag tied around its lid. "Did you open it?"

Robert glanced at it, then looked back up at Logan, still confused. "No. Should I have?"

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“Oh.” Logan’s eyes opened wide in obvious surprise. “Uh...no. No.” He looked like he wasn’t quite sure what to think, like he’d fully expected Robert to tell him he’d opened the bottle...which Robert found odd since he’d never even noticed the stuff until Logan pointed it out.

Robert arched a brow. “You sure you’re okay? You’d better let me buy you that drink.”

“No,” Logan said loudly, startling Robert with his emphatic tone. Then another red flush spread up his cheeks. “No. I mean, thanks, but drinks and I...” His voice lowered and now he sounded apologetic and maybe even a little embarrassed. “We don’t get along too well.”

It made Robert wonder if maybe there’d been a recent hangover in Logan’s past that he was still feeling the pain over.

He gave Logan an understanding smile. “Hey, that’s cool. How about dinner then? No pressure for anything else.” And he meant it. He liked the guy, what he knew of him, and Logan didn’t strike him as the type to rush home with anyone and jump into bed, which was why it had been stupid of him to hint at such a thing in the first place. Sometimes Robert could kick himself for his lack of finesse when it came to things like this—too many years of working hard and not enough mingling for social reasons. You’d think at forty years old he’d know better. He’d gladly settle for getting to know Logan now and maybe have a shot at something more at a later date. “Just dinner and a chance to talk,” he assured him. “The truth is, I’ve been in here several times and I like you.

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I'd like to get to know you better."

Logan smiled, but that look of apology still bled in around the edges of it. "You're a really great guy...Robert, right? And I appreciate the offer. I do." His voice lowered. "But...there's someone else."

Ah. He should have realized already. "The guy who leaves you sleeping?"

"Yeah. But..." A soft chuckle escaped Logan. "He's not what you might think."

Disappointment shot through Robert as the night loomed empty and lonely ahead of him once again, but he understood. Just because he'd never been one for commitment didn't mean he didn't respect other people's decision to have that in their lives. He offered Logan a smile. "Well, I had to ask, but I do understand. If he ever breaks your heart, though..."

"If he ever breaks my heart, I think I'll probably kick his ass," Logan said with a grin.

Whoever he was, he deserved to have his ass kicked if he screwed up a relationship with this man. He suspected Logan Shoemaker was the type who played for keeps, and he'd make a hell of a boyfriend. He hoped the lucky bastard who'd snagged his heart appreciated him. For a moment, Robert was jealous of the guy.

"I'm sure you will. So what's in the bottle you were asking me about?" He picked up the small bottle of golden oil and studied the tag. In a flowery, beautiful, gold script was written a single word: *PASSION*.

What was this? Based on Logan's reaction earlier, maybe

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it was supposed to be some kind of aphrodisiac.

“Passion?” he said aloud. “Hmm...” He started to open it but Logan set a hand on top of his.

“Trust me, you don’t need to spend your money on this. You’ve already got this naturally.”

Robert flashed him another smile. “Is that a compliment?”

“You know it is. And I’m serious.”

Robert sobered, suddenly feeling far too old to have to be playing the pick-up game, and yet, what else was there for him with his busy lifestyle? “I appreciate your faith in me more than you know. But the truth is, when you reach a certain age, it just isn’t as easy as it used to be.”

He set the bottle of oil on the counter in front of Logan, pulled out his wallet, and handed him his Platinum Visa.

“Do you want to open it first so you know what you’re getting?” Logan asked.

“Does it work?”

Logan let out a soft laugh. “Oh, yeah. It works.”

“Then that’s all I need to know. I trust you.”

A smile quirked at Logan’s lips and he studied Robert, as if seeing him in a new light. “You’re an interesting man, Robert. Some lucky guy doesn’t yet know what he’s missing. But I suspect he’s going to find out real soon.”

That was a nice damn thing for him to say. Probably nicer than Robert deserved. But he appreciated it.

“And you, I might add,” Robert told him, “are equally interesting...trying to talk me out of buying what I’m guessing is a pricey item. I don’t know many people with that kind of

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honesty.”

They shared a companionable grin. As Logan rang up the oil and placed it in a small bag, which Robert pocketed in his coat, Robert decided that even if Logan was romantically involved with someone else—and truthfully, it was probably just as well he was because he deserved the real deal, something Robert wouldn’t be able to give him—he could still foresee the two of them becoming friends. And that wasn’t a bad thing at all. Friends were good.

But as he stepped back out into the freezing, snowy night and walked to his car, another wave of loneliness hit him.

He slid behind the wheel, started the Jag and pulled out onto the street.

What the hell was wrong with him tonight? He seldom got this maudlin. Why was he once again dreading going home? And worse still, why had he let thoughts of cozy family comforts, and the way Logan Shoemaker’s eyes had glazed with what looked a hell of a lot like love when he spoke of his current squeeze get to him so much? Robert was fine with his life. Always had been. He didn’t need or want anything else.

He really needed to get himself out of this odd funk.

Hell, if he couldn’t spend an evening with a nice guy like the shopkeeper, maybe he needed some other company tonight to take the edge off. Maybe a couple of drinks, a warm body to dance with, and perhaps even a hot hand to jack him off would ease the ache. It had been a while since he’d let someone else take care of his physical needs. In fact, that was probably part of his problem. All work and no play had made Robert a dull

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boy. And snowstorm or not, it was Friday night so there should be other people out socializing tonight.

Making a decision, he turned at the next light and headed toward his favorite bar in a busier part of town.

Yeah, and going there has nothing do with maybe seeing a certain hot-as-hell blue-eyed someone...

A warm ball of heat built low in his belly at the thought, but before he could go down that particular dead-end path yet again, he forced the thought from his mind.

What he needed was real, physical comfort...the kind that came from a willing body and no messy complications or expectations for things that could never be.

By the time he pulled into a parallel parking space on the street in front of BJ's Pub, the snow continued to fall heavily, and for a moment Robert hesitated, wondering if maybe he ought to head home and leave his "socializing" for another night. Other cars lined both sides of the street in the block, however—not as many as usual on a weekend night for a place like BJ's, but enough to indicate other people were willing to brave the storm. So he decided since he was already here he might as well go in for a while. He could check on the weather periodically, and if things got worse, he could bail anytime.

He shut off the car, then reached into his pockets to find his gloves. His right hand brushed against the small paper bag that held the oil he'd bought at the metaphysical shop. Robert pulled it out and, in the dim glow of the street light under which he'd parked, slid the bottle from the sack and studied it.

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“Passion...”

He unscrewed the top of the little container, wondering what he was supposed to do with the oil. He didn't expect it to amount to much of anything—probably just some rose- or lilac- or gardenia-scented aromatherapy nonsense like one of those frou-frou scented candles that proclaimed they could fill your life with romance.

But when he lifted the bottle to his nose, a faint aroma he couldn't place wafted from it. It was immediately followed by a shocking and fiery jolt of sensation that coursed through him. It filled his head, then shot down and out into the rest of his body, leaving him tingling all over, causing his pulse to race, and creating a quivering ache in his balls and his suddenly swelling cock.

“Christ!” Robert held the bottle away and shuddered as arousal pulsed through him in hot waves. “What the hell is this stuff?”

He looked at the label again, the purple tag with the fancy gold script, but aside from the word *PASSION* on one side and the price on the other with the tiniest lettering below the price that said *Greystone* there was no indication of its ingredients. Greystone? Probably the manufacturer.

After a minute or so, his body's reaction calmed and Robert wondered if maybe he'd just imagined it. Maybe he was so lonely that just the *idea* of an aphrodisiac had turned him on. Because surely nothing as basic as an aromatherapy oil could cause what had just happened to him.

But when he took another sniff... *Holy God!* It happened

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all over again, this time leaving him practically panting as his now-hard cock pressed against the fly of his wool gabardine suit pants. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe through the powerful arousal.

When it had passed, he studied the bottle again. It was tiny and still offered no clues. The effects of sniffing the stuff was a little like inhaling poppers, something Robert had done his fair share of over the years, especially when he was younger and was out and about more in the gay club scene. And yet, it was different. The oil caused his body to react in a way he couldn't deny, but he didn't feel drugged or high. He just felt...extremely aware and aroused while it lasted.

The thought of going into the bar with a hard-on held a certain amount of appeal...purely for vanity reasons, of course, since he was getting to be one of the "older" crowd, and though young men still seemed drawn to him for some reason, he was also starting to get some brush-offs that he knew were a direct result of the strands of gray that were beginning to show amidst the light brown at his temples. But the results of sniffing the oil didn't last long and he couldn't very well keep pulling out the bottle and taking a whiff from it all night.

"Hmm...I wonder."

He placed the pad of his index finger over the opening and tipped the bottle upside down, then quickly back up so a tiny drop of oil was left on his fingertip.

"What the hell. What's the worst that could happen?" He dabbed the oil against the pulse points at his neck. That way it

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would maybe be close enough he'd be able to smell it on his skin for a while, like aftershave.

He pretty much expected the rush of lust to hit him again...but oddly enough, it didn't. Instead, a slow pleasant heat traveled through his veins, his muscles, his skin, like someone rubbing warm velvet against him. It was arousing, but different from before...this was arousing like a long, slow, sensual kiss that let the passion build gradually. His dick didn't get hard, but it felt like it was a banked fire, pulsing and waiting for the right attention to flare to life. And an overall sense of well-being filled him. The stress of his long day, the drive on the bad roads, and the strange unease he'd been feeling all evening passed. He felt as if he was filled with an energy and confidence he couldn't describe.

"Okay... not sure what you sold me, but so far I'm liking it."

Feeling better than he had all night, Robert slipped the bottle of oil back into his coat pocket, pulled on his gloves, and careful of passing traffic on the slippery, snow-packed street, stepped out of his car.

"Let's go see what BJ's Pub has to offer tonight," he murmured, smiling, his step light in spite of the several inches of snow already covering the ground and continuing to fall around him.

When he pushed his way through the heavy door into the warm brass-and-wood-filled pub, he was immediately hit with the scents of beer and popcorn and lemon-oil soap.

Robert shook the snow off his head and stomped his feet.

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As he'd presumed from the number of cars outside, it was a quiet night at the pub, but about half the tables and maybe half the bar were filled with customers, a trio of men played pool at one of the tables in the rear of the room, and a few couples swayed on the dance floor to a rock ballad.

Though BJ's was LGBT owned and catered to the gay and lesbian crowd, the town had a pretty wide liberal streak, and because the beer and drinks were good and the food was decent, a handful of straight customers were regulars as well. Still, the intention of the place was a gathering spot for gay men and women who could be open about who they were and connect with like-minded and like-oriented people. Robert had discovered BJ's about eight or nine months ago—he wasn't sure how he'd missed it before then—and it was now his favorite bar because it was a little more upscale than a lot of other joints, yet not at all snobby. And it was a far more relaxing and pleasant experience to come here than to deal with the raucous and randy bacchanalias and sex fests that took place at other gay clubs. BJ's was sort of like the friendly neighborhood queer *Cheers*.

As Robert took in the sights of the pub at a glance, he was struck again by how damned good he felt. Energized, yet relaxed. Ready for...well, whatever adventure might await him.

He peeled off his coat and noticed a couple of younger men and one guy about his age or a little older with a nice bod and graying hair already eyeing him, measuring him up as a potential hook-up. He eyed them back and smiled, letting it be

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known he was in the market tonight.

Oh, yeah. He felt certain it was going to be a good night, and all that warm-fuzzy home and hearth, love and romance BS of earlier this evening would fade away as soon as he had his arms around a hard, hot body. This was the way his life was meant to be. This was what it was all about.

And then, like steel drawn inevitably to a magnet, his gaze fell on the one person in all the world who could, and did, cause everything else to fade away.

Robert's pulse pounded. His breathing came out in slow huffs. And his groin tightened in an ache that was one part lust and two parts agony for what it could never, ever have.

Jesse McIntyre.

The pub's buff, bearded, blue-eyed, extremely hot, extremely fuckable, and extremely *straight* and way off-limits bartender.

CHAPTER 2

“Wow, that’s some seriously hot ogling. I’m talking like...volcanic.”

“Hmm?” Jesse asked, concentrating on pouring out a glass of Guinness, holding the glass at an angle as the dark liquid flowed into it from the tap, then straightening it when the beer approached the rim. He set it on the bar to let it settle for a few seconds before he topped it off.

“The hunky businessman who just came in,” Leila said, her voice low, for Jesse’s ears only. “He’s scoping you out like you’re a decadent dessert and he’s been starving for a long damn time.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jesse didn’t look

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up, keeping his gaze locked studiously on the glass of dark beer like it was the most important thing in his universe at the moment.

“Right there. By the door. My God, how can you miss him? He’s radiating so much sex appeal even I’m a little turned on by him.”

Jesse picked up the beer glass again and held it back under the tap to fill the last inch or so. After he’d returned it to the bar top, alongside the other drinks he’d poured for the group at one of the pool tables, he grabbed a margarita glass from the rack above his head to start on another order.

“Oh no...you are not ignoring me,” Leila said, catching his arm from across the bar.

“Hey, trying to work here.”

But when he looked at her, exasperated, her eyes widened and a knowing smile curved her full, red lips. “Ahhh...” she said softly. “So it’s that way, is it?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Who is he?”

“Who?” Jesse gently pulled away, turning his back on her, and returned to his drink making.

“The hunk in the gray Armani suit who looks like Brad Pitt—sexy, mature Brad, not skinny, young, *Thelma and Louise* Brad. He’s now moved to a table in the corner, by the way, and is already being approached by a swishy bubble-butt who’s waaaay too young for him. Ack! No, no, no, Mr. Armani...you don’t want him. He’s not at all right for you,” she murmured under her breath, obviously watching what was

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taking place between the two.

Jesse was glad he wasn't watching. And yet he couldn't stop his gaze from lifting briefly to the mirrored wall back of the bar to catch a glimpse of what was going on behind him...where a spiky-haired, perky college boy with painted on jeans and a tight purple shirt stood hand on hip next to the businessman's table. Jesse looked away, not wanting to see what happened.

"So who is he?" Leila asked again.

"How should I know? I just work here," Jesse told her. "I don't keep track of everyone who comes in."

"Right. So you're telling me Mr. Hot and Sexy Corporate Dude has never been in before tonight, or if he has, you've never, for even a second, noticed him, or served him a beer, or talked to him."

"That's right." He finished the margarita, then nodded a thanks to the waiter who came to collect the tray load of drinks.

Leila grabbed his arm again, and reeled him in toward her. Her dark eyes were filled with sympathy.

"Don't look at me like that, Lei."

"Then don't tell me tall tales." Her voice lowered. "Jess," she said gently, "I know how you feel. I do, you *know* I do. But, sweetie, how long are you going to keep tormenting yourself, refusing to forgive yourself, before you think about getting out there again?"

"I don't want to talk about this right now."

"You never do. And most of the time I understand. But it's

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been almost two and a half years, hon. And that man sitting over in the corner keeps looking at you when he thinks you won't notice, and what I'm seeing in his eyes isn't just lust. He's looking at you through eyes that have been seeing you for a while and wanting from afar. Don't play games with me and tell me you don't know him or haven't noticed."

"You know the rules. I don't interact socially with customers. Period. No exceptions. *Ever*." His voice had hardened and though he hated the sound of it, especially taking that tone with Leila of all people, who'd been his savior in so many ways, he didn't like having his back against the wall. Yet that's what she was doing to him right now, and here, in the bar, of all places. The one place he really wasn't going to have this conversation.

She sighed and gave him another long, worried look, but she patted his hand, then let go. "Okay, I know. But it kills me to see you so alone. You do your job here, you go to the studio, you teach, go to class, you sleep, then get up to do it all again the next day, and the next. You deserve more than that."

"I'm fine with what I have."

"No, you're pretending to be fine with what you have, but I live with you, remember? You're lonely, Jesse, whether you want to admit it or not." It had been a while since she'd used that concerned voice with him, and he both hated the way it made him feel, and hated that he was causing her grief.

"I'm okay with the way things are, Leila." He tried to convey his sincerity in his gaze, and attempted to firm it up with a smile that he didn't quite feel but hoped looked natural.

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“It’s enough for now. I’m just...I’m not ready for anything else yet. I don’t know when I will be, but I have to go with my gut.”

“And my nagging’s not helping.”

He gave her a guilty half-smile.

“All right, message received. I’m backing off.” Her eyes still projected sympathy, though, which he hated. But he didn’t mention it. She patted his bearded cheek. “Just...don’t wait too long, okay?”

He shrugged and gave her another grin, this one genuine. “It’s not like I have a shelf date, you know. I’m not going to go bad like moldy produce if I’m not used by a certain time.”

“I don’t know...” Her lips curled wider, and he could tell she was making an effort to truly change the subject, for which he was grateful. “I guess it depends on whether you’re keeping that pretty tool of yours fresh and mold-free and in working order in the meantime. I wouldn’t want you to forget how to use it.”

He gave her a mock-scandalized look. “Since when did you start noticing my *tool*? Have you been playing peeping tom?”

“Yeah, because you traipsing nude into the kitchen in the middle of the night for a drink when Marley and I are having a midnight snack doesn’t show off any of your assets at all.”

“You and Marley aren’t supposed to be interested in my ‘assets.’”

He read the ticket that had the next order written on it and starting making a mai tai.

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Leila arched a perfect dark brow. "Honey, we don't have to be interested in playing with your assets to appreciate the bountiful artistic beauty with which you've been endowed."

"Oh, so it's the art excuse, is it?" Jesse flashed her another grin as he poured rum and orange curacao.

"It's all in the name of the art, baby. You know that. But speaking of Marley, I'm going to run." She rose from the stool at the end of the bar where she'd been perched and slid her arms into her yellow ski jacket, then zipped up and tossed a red scarf around her neck, which set off her short, dark hair. "I'm going to go pick Marley up from work and then we're headed to Denver for the weekend. Hot party plans for me and my girl! I want to get going before the roads get any worse."

"Be careful. Why don't you call me when you get there so I know you made it safely. Please?"

"Oh my, God. What, am I a teenager and just learning how to drive?"

"No, but I love you and worry about you anyway. Call me, okay?" He came around the end of the bar to stand next to her.

"You're such a worrywart. If I didn't love you so much back, I'd probably find you annoying." But the smile she gave him was fond.

"Just call."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." She grinned and stood on tiptoe in her leather and fur-lined snow boots to brush a platonic kiss over his lips. Then she leaned in against his ear and said softly, "But only if you promise to do me a favor."

"What?"

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“Don’t let Mr. Armani leave here tonight without talking to him.”

Jesse pulled back. “Leila—”

“Talk to him, that’s all I’m asking. I don’t care if it’s ‘How’s it going’ or ‘Here’s your beer.’ Just say *something* to him. Because I’m telling you, he’s got it bad for you and not just in a ‘Hey, baby, let’s go in the men’s room and suck dick’ way. So at least give him a sentence or two.”

“In other words, you want to me to encourage him when you and I both know damn well nothing’s ever going to come of it. That’s not fair. To him or to me.”

“I’m not asking you to marry the man, Jesse. But there’s no law that says you can’t make a friend, is there? Just think about it. Who knows...you might even find out his name and a little something about him.”

She kissed him again, then left before he could protest further.

Dragging in a deep breath, he let his gaze slide to the man in question, who’d lost his suit coat, loosened his tie, and was now leaning against the wall watching a game of pool and chatting up a young guy—not the swishy twink, someone older than that, but younger than Jesse—and acting like he was enjoying the conversation, whatever it was about. Jesse watched him tip back his head and laugh, his white teeth gleaming, the line of his throat begging for a tongue to lick over the supple flesh, his eyes glistening with good humor.

He sure didn’t act like he was pining away to talk to Jesse.

Then the man glanced his way, and in a startling moment,

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as they both realized they'd been caught looking, their gazes locked. A white-hot surge of heat arced between them. But what caused shock to reverberate through Jesse, was the sudden flare of raw longing in those deep indigo eyes. And then it was shuttered, and troubled lines creased the man's forehead.

Shaken, Jesse quickly turned away, his pulse racing. But a slow, undeniable rush of desire thrummed within him that had him picturing the two of them sprawled nude and hungry across a soft bed, bodies slick with sweat, sliding and thrusting against one another until they both came so hard and so long they wouldn't be able to move for days.

Jesus.

Leila had wanted him to find out who he was, but little did she know Jesse already had the man's details burned into his brain. Had for months. The name slid through his thoughts.

"Robert Bauer," he murmured, savoring it on his tongue.

Robert Bauer. Owner and CEO of Bauer MicroSystems. Wears tailored suits that fit him like a fine glove. Drives a silver Jag I couldn't afford if I saved for years. Turned forty in October. Drinks Killian's Red, Scotch, and the occasional vodka martini. He always smells sexy as hell, like expensive spice and citrus, has eyes a man could easily lose his soul in, and a mouth made for pure, delicious sin.

"Oh, shit. I want him," he breathed, finally admitting it out loud. *I want him bad.*

But an ache settled in his chest. It didn't matter how much he wanted him...it would never happen.

PASSION

You know the rules... No interaction with customers.

It had to be that way because Jesse had learned the hard way that even the sexiest, seemingly nicest and most charming—especially the most charming—patrons in places like this could never be trusted. It wasn't a lesson he'd ever forget.

No exceptions. Ever.

Not even for the man in Armani whose presence Jesse had felt like a live current sizzling through his veins the moment he'd walked in the door tonight.

* * *

Though he felt the heady warmth created by the Passion oil still flowing through his veins and pulsing in all the right places, Robert found himself talking, shooting a couple of games of pool, dancing occasionally, but brushing off the invitations he'd received—subtle and not so subtle—for action of the more up-close-and-personal kind. And, damn, he counted himself a hundred kinds of a fool for it because he'd had more invitations tonight in the few hours he'd been here, with the bar only sparsely occupied, than he had in months. Another result of the oil? Maybe. He felt good. Like he was still a pretty damn fine piece of ass.

But every time someone rubbed against him, showing their interest with a stiff cock encased in denim or leather, or settled a squeezing hand on his butt, he felt only mild interest because all he could think about, could see whenever he got a chance to look without being obvious, was the bartender.

PASSION

What the hell is wrong with me? He's off limits. Off...off...big fucking way off limits.

Come on, Robert. You're a smart man. You have two masters degrees, built a company from nothing to a multi-million dollar a year enterprise. You're forty years old and have been around a block or two. Straight is straight.

Although Jesse was always nice, always pleasant, the man never flirted or teased or touched customers in any way like most gay bartenders would. He never let anyone touch him either. And he had a girlfriend. Robert had seen her in here a time or two before. Tonight he'd seen Jesse kissing her, for God's sake.

So why then couldn't he get the stormy churning of those sky blue eyes out of his mind? Why had he felt such a powerful zap of sexual connection between them when their gazes had fused earlier? During that brief second it had occurred, he'd thought it had been a two-way deal. Had thought he'd seen something in Jesse's eyes and the way his body tensed that indicated he'd felt it, too. But since then he'd convinced himself it couldn't have been. No, it had been all on Robert's end and only his wishful imagination that the tall, gorgeous serious-eyed man had reacted.

Pick a guy...you've had a half-dozen seriously interested tonight. Pick one, find a bathroom stall, and let him suck you into oblivion until all this craziness about Jesse McIntyre's gone from your head. And if that doesn't work, go to the closest hotel, get a room, and have hot, heavy, pounding sex—lots of it. Then go home, open that expensive bottle of

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Macallan Fine Oak single malt Scotch you've been saving, and spend the weekend getting plowed.

And then, maybe, if he was lucky, by Monday he'd have straight, unattainable Jesse out of his system for good.

It was a good plan. Maybe even a great one.

In the end, though, around nine o'clock, with the bar emptying out hours earlier than usual because of the weather, Robert made his apologies to the cute blond guy named Andy, the Harvard-schooled attorney with whom he'd spent the past hour having pleasant conversation and a fair bit of casual groping as they shot a game of pool.

Again he wondered when he'd gone completely mad. Andy was the kind of guy he would normally have loved hooking up with for a night of uncomplicated sex. He was intelligent, good-looking, they had some common interests. And the man was clearly in to him. The normal Robert, the Robert before his infatuation with Jesse McIntyre had started several months ago, damn it, would probably have even cultivated the relationship with Andy so that they remained friends and could get together again sometime when it was convenient for them both. He'd often found other single gay businessmen a good fit for him because they, like he, were usually too busy for a home life, and were only looking for occasional sex and companionship without any commitments.

Yet in spite of his best intentions to pound Jesse out of his system with mindless fucking and alcohol, and having a more than willing participant in his hedonistic scheme, Robert couldn't bring himself to take Andy up on his offer that they

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go to his townhome, which Robert had recognized from the address was in a pricey, gated community nearby.

“You’re a great guy,” he told the younger man, “but I’m thinking with the weather being so bad tonight, maybe it’s not the best time.” What a bald-faced lie. The weather was awful, and he probably should be heading home, but if he’d really wanted to get naked with this guy, the weather sure as hell wouldn’t have stopped him, and going to Andy’s nearby townhome would have been plenty warm and safe.

Andy’s lips quirked into a small smile. “If you’re not interested, it’s okay. You can just say so. I don’t offend easily. You don’t have to make an excuse.”

Smart man. He was probably a damned good attorney. But Robert hadn’t become the owner and CEO of a major corporation without learning how to make people believe whatever he needed them to believe. “No excuses.” He smiled at Andy, gave him one of his best and fullest power smiles, and saw the man’s eyes glaze over with lust. “I think you’re amazing and I like you. But I have a dog at home and I’m afraid if I go to your place and the weather gets worse, I won’t be able to get home to her.”

Andy bought right into it with an appreciative smile. “Ah, I can definitely understand that. I’m a dog lover myself. I have a Rhodesian Ridgeback. What’s yours?”

“A black Lab,” Robert lied without missing a beat.

“We ought to get them together sometime, take them hiking and let them run.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Good God...what was he doing? He

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was burning bridges all over the place with this guy and would never be able to see him now should the urge arise. He was usually a straight-shooter with potential lovers, wasn't into lies and game playing. He should have just told Andy the truth. Yeah, that would have been good...*I came in here to get laid, but no one in this place, including you, has revved my engine enough tonight to get my mind off the straight man behind the bar.* He gave a mental groan. It was time to leave before he buried himself even deeper. His obsession with Jesse all night was turning his brain to mush and making him act crazy. "I'm going to head out now," he said, "get on the road."

"I'll walk out with you. I'm headed home, too."

They gathered their overcoats and put them on, and then Andy leaned in close to him and slid a hand down into the front pocket of Robert's pants. "Here's my card. Maybe we can get together later this weekend, or sometime next week."

His hand nudged against Robert's dick, lingering to stroke it with his fingertips through the fabric. The sensation was pleasant, and yet...it didn't light Robert's fire.

He couldn't understand why it didn't, damn it. He'd about decided the Passion oil he'd bought from Logan Shoemaker was a bust. After the way it had affected him when he'd sniffed it, he'd thought he'd have a raging hard-on all night. He still felt energized, sexy, and he'd certainly had plenty of men attracted to him, but none of them had given him a full rise. He felt the potential of getting a full, thick erection, but it was like his damned dick was on standby or something. It was frustrating as hell.

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He didn't let on about any of this to Andy, however. To him, he offered another charming smile. "Thanks."

The man's eyes glazed again. He smiled back. "I'll look forward to hearing from you." He didn't seem to notice that Robert hadn't given him a card in return or made any promises about getting in touch.

He hooked his arm through Robert's and they headed toward the door.

But Robert couldn't bear to leave without casting one final glance at the man who'd been at the center of his thoughts and desires all night.

Jesse stood at the end of the bar closest to the door, wiping its gleaming mahogany surface with a damp rag. His long-sleeved blue denim shirt stretched taut across his broad, muscular shoulders as he moved. His hands were large, his fingers long. The kind of hands that could cup an ass or caress a cock with masterful aplomb. His thick, shoulder-length brown hair that on other men might look scruffy only looked sexy as hell on him where it had fallen down around his face.

Now...*now* Robert's dick decided to perk up. It twitched with interest and began to grow hard the closer he drew to the bartender, like a damned compass needle pointing at true north, or in this case, it's true passion.

Damn it. Why now? This has to stop.

When he was only a few feet away, Robert threw caution to the wind and spoke to the man. "Goodnight."

Jesse looked up. His eyes focused first on Andy's arm twined through Robert's, then his gaze slid slowly upward to

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meet Robert's. For a flash of a second, Robert thought he'd seen...

No, it couldn't be.

But there it was again. *Oh, God.* Was that jealousy he read in Jesse's turbulent, troubled eyes? Then it was gone, as if the other man had stashed it away somewhere and slammed a door on it.

"Night, Robert," he said softly.

His deep voice swirled through Robert's senses, tingling along his nerve endings, scudding through his veins, and settling in his core. *He knows my name.* He didn't think he'd ever heard Jesse say it before.

"You guys be careful out there. I understand the roads are pretty bad and the snow's picking up and getting really heavy."

Robert thought he could listen to that voice for the next hundred years and never get tired of it. It was like liquid head. Liquid *velvet* heat. But even more than the man's voice, was his gaze. He couldn't tear his own away from it. They seemed to be bound together by some invisible force, neither one able to pull free. The intensity of it made him wonder what Jesse looked like when he came. Did those summer-sky eyes darken in pleasure? Did his face tighten, his lips part, and his breathing grow ragged?

"Thanks," Robert vaguely heard Andy say next to him.

And still he couldn't move. He wondered what Jesse's full lips would taste like under his, what the hard planes and angles of the man's chest would feel like beneath his tongue

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and fingertips, how his strong arms would feel wrapped around him.

“Um...Robert?” Andy said, tugging at his arm. “Are we going?”

Finally Robert nodded and with immense effort looked away from Jesse and back to the man at his side who suddenly seemed so much smaller than before, after looking at Jesse’s six-foot-two muscular build. “Yeah...uh, yeah, let’s go.”

He and Andy pushed through the heavy wooden door and out into the thick snow. But Robert dared one last look back over his shoulder and found Jesse watching him with a soulful gaze before the door slammed closed.

CHAPTER 3

Jesse scrubbed hard at a faint mark on the bar top, trying to ignore the tight knot in his gut. The pub was almost empty now, with just a handful of customers left, all of them at tables or playing pool. Which left him alone at the bar. His movements became more and more vicious and his arm began to ache as he dug in harder with the cloth. When he finally realized the mark was a scratch and wasn't coming off, he threw the damp rag on the shelf behind him with a little more violence than was necessary.

Then he sighed loudly and his arms fell to his sides in defeat.

"He left with him, okay?" he murmured. "That's what

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people do at places like this. Deal with it.”

What ate at him, though, was that he didn’t remember seeing Robert leave here with anyone in a long time. Maybe he had once or twice when he’d first started coming in last spring, but in the past few months, he’d always arrived alone, and though he socialized with other men, he’d always left alone. So watching Robert walk out of here snuggled together with the preppy blond had hit Jesse hard.

Was that the type Robert preferred? Pampered Ivy League guys?

Of course he does. What did you expect? They go together perfectly...all pressed and polished in their expensive suits, shoes, and coats, driving their fancy cars, and probably living in big designer mansions. He’s way out of your league. You’ve known that from the start.

Men like Robert weren’t interested in guys like Jesse unless they had some kind of kinky craving to take a walk on the wild side and get it on with a lower class bad boy to put a notch on their bedpost. But after a blow job or maybe a fuck they could brag about to their friends later, they always, *always* went back to their own kind.

And it didn’t matter anyway, damn it. Because rich and powerful or poor and plain, Jesse refused to get involved with someone he’d met in the bar. People went to bars pretty much exclusively to hook up for sex and sometimes for other far less desirable things. Maybe it was cynical of him to generalize that way, but he’d been in this business a long time, had worked at a lot of places, seen or participated in almost every

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lascivious scene that played out. And even though BJ's was classier than most of the joints where Jesse had slung drinks over the years, the basic MO was the same. Lonely people came in, got drunk, got horny, lost all the inhibitions that usually kept decent folk in check, and like lemmings, mindlessly left with whoever promised them a good time.

And the sickest part, was that it was all a big fucking masquerade. You never really *knew* anyone you met at a place like this—what you saw was whatever persona they chose to show you. You didn't have a clue who you were really taking home or going home with. Until it was too late.

Which meant the real Robert Bauer was probably someone far different from the sexy charmer he appeared to be. It was inevitable.

In any case, the man's dry spell from the past several months was apparently over, the way the blond dude was hanging on him.

"They deserve each other. I hope they have a fabulous time fucking each other's brains out on their expensive silk sheets."

The words came out sounding as vicious as he'd intended, but they didn't make him feeling any better. Inside, his stomach gave another dull, aching twist, and the rest of him felt strangely hollow.

He wished he knew what was wrong with him tonight. He'd watched Robert from a distance for months, and couldn't deny he'd quietly fantasized about so many "what ifs" sometimes it had made him crazy, but he'd always been able to keep it in check and not let it get out of control. And when

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he had found himself feeling too torn over the man, he'd always been able to remind himself exactly why he couldn't get involved with him, and *that*, if nothing else, had snapped him back to his right mind in damn fast order.

But tonight, something had been different. He didn't know if it was the conversation with Leila that had opened the floodgates he'd kept tightly closed for months. Or if it had been something about Robert himself this evening that had seduced him, pulling him out of his safety zone, and leaving him exposed and raw.

He just knew he felt like hell and it really sucked.

He'd finished loading dirty glasses in a large plastic tub to take to the dishwasher back in the kitchen, when Benny, one of the owners of BJ's, joined him behind the bar.

Benny was a grizzled but still surprisingly buff man in his mid-fifties, with mostly gray hair he wore in a ponytail, and a gray goatee. He favored beer, rock music, faded blue jeans, flowery tropical print shirts, and flip flops, even in winter. He reminded Jesse of one of the aging perpetual beach bums he'd known in California when he'd lived there. Benny, however, was a Rocky Mountain native born and raised, which always amused Jesse given the man's dress code. Benny's long-time lover and business partner, John, was his exact opposite...Jesse didn't think he'd ever seen John in a pair of jeans. He was a khakis and button-down kind of man. His graying hair was short and neatly trimmed, he had a penchant for fine wines and preferred classical music. While Benny was loud and rowdy, John was soft spoken and gentle. And yet the

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two men had been together for almost thirty years.

See, sometimes opposites can work.

He winced at the voice in his head.

“Business is pretty grim tonight,” Benny said with a sigh. “The storm’s scaring people away.”

“Yeah, I hear it’s getting ugly out there.” The pub had no windows, so there was no way to see the conditions from inside. But each time the door had opened when someone entered or left had given him a glimpse at the snow falling. And the TV hanging from the ceiling over the bar had been scrolling weather warnings across the bottom of all the programs for the past several hours.

“Too bad. Friday night’s usually a good take.” He clapped a hand on Jesse’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go ahead and finish cleaning and close the register at the bar, then head home. I’m going to send the kitchen staff home, too. I’ll stick around for a while longer in case anyone else comes in and wants a drink, but there’s no point keeping full service going.”

“You sure? I don’t mind hanging out for a while.” It wasn’t like he had anything to get home to.

“Yeah, I’m sure. There’s no reason for all of us being stuck here. John already went home, too. I told him to heat up the hot tub for us for later.”

“Lucky you have a hot tub and someone to share it with.”

Benny snorted. “Yeah, well you know what I’ll find when I get home, don’t you?”

“What?”

“The hot tub won’t even have been turned on, and John’ll

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be wrapped up in his favorite purple bathrobe, have his feet on his hot water bottle, and he'll be drinking a hot toddy and watching something tear-jerking on one of the romance channels, dabbing at his eyes with a hanky." Benny shook his head. "My man...he can be such a sappy queen sometimes."

Jesse laughed. It sounded almost rusty since it felt like the first time he'd even cracked a smile in hours. "Yeah, but you wouldn't trade him."

"Nah, he's a keeper, that's for sure," he said with a fond smile. "Don't know of anyone else who would've put up with me all these years. All right, boy-o, finish up and get out of here."

"Okay. I'll let you know before I take off."

"Good man." Benny clapped his shoulder again and disappeared into the kitchen, taking the tub of dirty glasses with him.

As Jesse wiped down the shelves behind the bar, he wondered what he'd do with himself tonight. He never planned to get home before two-thirty or three in the morning on the weekends, and right now it wasn't even 10:00 P.M. With Leila gone until Sunday night, it was going to be pretty damned quiet around their place. Maybe he'd catch up on his sleep for a change.

Alone. As always.

A vision of Robert filled his mind, his head tipped back, his lips parted, his breathing coming out in ragged sighs as Jesse sucked him off, hard and deep. He could almost imagine what the man would taste like, could almost feel his length on

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his tongue.

“Stop. Just stop,” he grumbled, forcing himself back to the here and now. “Damn it.”

But as if simply thinking about him had conjured him up, the front door opened, and when Jesse looked to see who was coming in, the man in his vision became a reality, blowing in on a gust of biting air and snow.

His eyes locked with Jesse’s and what Jesse saw there sent his heart off on a crazy, ragged beat.

“Robert?” he said softly, shocked to see him. He’d left twenty or thirty minutes ago.

“Did you ever have one of those crappy fucking days?”

His voice was hoarse, and there was a tired sag to his shoulders Jesse had never seen on him before. It lured him a step closer. “Is everything okay?”

Robert sighed, then approached the bar and sank onto the closest stool. “I’ve been better.” He set his BlackBerry on the bar, tugged off his leather gloves, and rubbed his hands together. “I went out to get in my car—it’s parked on the street in this block—and someone had smashed in the whole front end...probably lost control and slid into it. And instead of being upstanding about it and at least leaving a note with contact information, whoever did it drove off.”

Jesse winced. No wonder the man was upset. “Well, hell, that sucks.”

“Yeah, it really does.”

“Is it drivable?”

“No. The engine won’t turn over and even if it did, the

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driver's side front quarter panel is smashed in against the tire."

"Did you call the police?"

"Yeah, but they're on cold accident reporting tonight because of the storm. Since it was a hit and run and I wasn't in the car at the time, it's up to me to have the car towed and file an accident report in the next seventy-two hours. So I called the auto club, but because of the weather they're swamped. They said it could be six to eight hours before they can get here with a truck."

"That's crazy! It's not that big a town."

Robert shrugged. "That what I said. It still didn't change the fact it was going to take them that long. I told them not to bother." He shook his head, clearly disgusted. "I'll just leave it where it is for now and they can come get it when the snow's over. The last damn thing I feel like doing after a long day is waiting around until four or five or six in the morning for them to show up."

It almost killed Jesse to say it, but he had to know. "Can your friend, the man you left with, give you a ride home?"

"No," he sat flatly. "He's gone."

Relief surged through Jesse...though it pissed him off he cared so much. The realization that Robert wouldn't be finding sexual solace with the blond man tonight filled him with downright pleasure. More than he had a right to feel.

Jesus. Stop it!

He set a whiskey glass on the counter and poured out two fingers of one of the better single malt Scotches BJ's carried, then slid the glass to Robert.

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The man looked at it and swallowed hard as if Jesse's thoughtfulness had both surprised and touched him. It was a strange thing to see on a man like Robert who was usually so confident and self-assured.

He lifted the glass and looked at Jesse. "How'd you know?"

"Your poison of choice? I'm your friendly neighborhood bartender. It's my job to know what my customers like to drink."

What looked like disappointment flickered in Robert's eyes for a fleeting second, and Jesse had a feeling the man had hoped Jesse knew what he liked because it was him, not because he made a habit of knowing all his customers needs.

It is because it's you. But he couldn't admit it to the man.

Robert drained the glass and set it back on the bar. He let out a deep breath. His voice, when he spoke, was husky. "Damn. That'll warm you up on a cold night."

Jesse held up the bottle offering more, but Robert shook his head. "Thanks, but I better stop there." He pulled out his wallet and slid a twenty dollar bill toward Jesse.

Jesse pushed it back. "It's on the house."

Robert looked like he might argue, but then he nodded and put the bill back in his wallet. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem."

"Do you mind if I sit in here for a few more minutes where it's warm while I make some phone calls? I'm going to try to find a room at a hotel for the night. The snow's really coming down out there, and obviously I'm not going to get home."

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The thought of Robert and a hotel room brought back flashes of sweaty, nude bodies writhing together.

“Yeah, sure,” Jesse rasped. He turned away before Robert noticed the bulge in his jeans that broadcasted exactly where his thoughts had been.

He made himself stay at the other end of the bar for several minutes while Robert spoke on the phone. It seemed as if the nearer he got to the man tonight, the less control he had over himself. It was like Robert radiated some kind of invisible homing signal that Jesse was finding it harder and harder to fight.

But when he heard Robert’s tone turn to frustration, and seconds later saw him set his phone down with a thunk, then drag a hand through his usually tidy hair, Jesse returned, under the guise of picking up the empty whiskey glass still sitting in front of the man.

“Did you get everything squared away?”

“Apparently the interstate’s closed just west of here, headed over the mountains, because of the storm.”

“I didn’t realize it was that bad. They must be getting really pounded up at the higher elevations.”

“Yeah, well with the interstate shut down, it’s forced all the through travelers off the road, so every hotel and motel in town—all whopping three of them—are already filled to capacity. Same with the B&Bs. No rooms available anywhere.” He shook his head and scrubbed at his face with a palm. “Christ. This night just keeps getting better and better.”

The defeat in his voice and in the sag of his shoulders

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twisted the damned knot in Jesse's gut again. And before he could think it through, he offered, "I can give you a ride home."

Robert looked up and his eyes widened in surprise.

He couldn't possibly be any more surprised than Jesse, though. His pulse raced and he alternated between dizzying trails of heat and expectation searing through his nerve endings at the prospect of spending more time with the man, and icy shock and dread squeezing his chest. What the hell had he been thinking? How could he have suggested leaving with a stranger?

The guy's in trouble and it's not like he planned all this...someone smashing up his car and the hotels being full because of the storm. He's frustrated, he's tired, and he's had a crappy night. Besides, he's not really a stranger. And you'll be the one in control...your vehicle, you driving, and all you have to do is drop him off at his door.

"I couldn't ask you to do that," Robert said. "Have you seen it out there? It's snowing like a bitch. Nobody wants to be on the roads tonight. And by the time the bar closes it'll most likely be impassable."

Jesus. I've lost my mind. "It's not a problem. The bar's closing early and I'm leaving now anyway. I've got four-wheel drive. It'll be fine."

Robert's brows drew together and Jesse thought he sensed an inner battle of some sort taking place in the man much like the one he struggled with. Why?

"Jesse, I—"

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“Where else are you going to go, Robert? Places are going to be closing. You sure as hell can’t stay in your car all night—you’d freeze to death. It’s no big deal. I’ll take you home.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t live in town. I live in the foothills west of town.”

“Fine. Like I said, I’ve got four-wheel.” Damn it, why was he arguing with the man? He should take the out Robert was giving him. Why wasn’t he?

Because he’s in trouble and needs help, and in spite of everything, you’re not a selfish prick.

“I...” Robert shook his head and his eyes looked troubled as he gazed at Jesse. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say yes,” Jesse said softly.

“Okay,” Robert murmured. “But if it’s really bad, you have to promise you’ll turn back, and I’ll find something else to do. Maybe I can go to my office and stay there tonight.”

“I’ll get you home,” Jesse assured. “Let me just finish a couple of things here.”

Robert sighed. “All right. If you’re absolutely sure about this, I’d better get some stuff out of my car.”

“I’m sure. And go ahead. Give me about five minutes.”

With shaking hands—God damn it, what was he doing here?—Jesse closed out the register and took the cash and credit slips back to the office for Benny to lock up in the safe.

“I’m leaving now,” he told the older man.

“Be safe. And call in tomorrow about your shift because now the weather forecast is saying the snow may continue

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through tonight and possibly stick around until tomorrow night. If so, I don't know if we'll even bother opening, or if we do, it may only be for a few hours."

"I'll give you a call midday," Jesse promised. His shift usually started at five in the evening.

He turned to leave, but Benny said, "Hey..."

"Yeah?" He looked back at his boss.

"You okay? You look a little green around the gills. Not in an 'I ate bad shrimp' way, but in a 'Holy crap, I think I'm in love with the guy I just fucked and he's going to dump me if he finds out' way."

That drew a soft laugh from Jesse, but at the same time, his stomach did another cramping somersault. "Nah, I'm okay."

Benny nodded, but as Jesse started again to leave, he said, "Would you be interested in hearing a piece of advice from a crusty old fart like me?"

"What's that?"

"I know most people think I'm the balls out, good-time rascal around here and that John's the sensitive one. But what folks often don't realize is that I pay attention. I see what goes on. I listen to what's being said, and just as much to what's not being said. There isn't much I'm not aware of in my own way. Take you and Robert Bauer for example."

A vise constricted around Jesse's lungs at Benny's words and his fingers tightened on the door knob. "What do you mean?"

"You two...you've been eying each other for months. Now, I know how you feel about getting involved with

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customers, and I know why. And I respect that, understand it even, and would probably feel the same way were I in your position, having been through what you have. So I wouldn't dream of telling you what's right and wrong for you. But I usually have pretty good instincts about people, and that man, for all that he's got money and power, he's missing something in his life, the most important something. He's hurting and doesn't even realize it."

That gave Jesse pause.

"And you, you're hurting, too, in a different way," Benny continued. "Now, I don't know if the two of you can cure what ails the other. I don't even know if you can find a way to try. But I do know that nothing can or will ever change for the better in this world if we're not willing to open ourselves up to possibilities."

Jesse struggled between the flare of resentment he felt at Benny's intervention—he was thirty-two years old, for God's sake, not a wet behind the ears teenager—and the urge to spill everything that was troubling him to the older man who'd given him a job and believed in him even when Jesse had no longer believed in himself. But he kept his mouth shut, mostly because he didn't know what to say. He was so torn up over this whole damn thing—wanting Robert but feeling the constant need to push him away to protect himself—that he didn't even know how he felt about it, much less how to put it into words.

"I'm not your father, your big brother, or your keeper," Benny said. "I'm just your friend. I don't expect you to bust

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your ass to do anything 'cause I say so. Feel free to take my advice or leave it—which I know you'll do anyway. But I do care, Jesse. And I know this old world's a real bitch sometimes, so if you ever need to talk, I'm here."

Jesse took a swallow and it ached all the way down. He nodded and opened the door. But before he walked through it, he looked back at Benny, knowing he owed the man more than a nod. "Thanks."

The older man's lips quirked into a smile. "Welcome. Now get the hell out of here."

Jesse grabbed his jacket off the hook in the employee room, shoved his arms into it, and pulled on his rag wool gloves. He felt oddly calmer after listening to Benny. He didn't know why, exactly, except that maybe the fact Benny, who clearly did notice far more than Jesse would ever have given him credit for, hadn't indicated that Robert gave him a bad vibe of any kind. *He's hurting and doesn't even realize it*, Benny had said.

Jesse wondered what he'd meant by that. Why was Robert hurting?

CHAPTER 4

As he was opening the front door, Jesse met Robert coming in. He had the collar of his coat turned up against the cold, carried a briefcase, and had a laptop case slung over his shoulder.

“You ready?” Jesse asked, holding out a hand to take something.

Robert waved off his help. “Yeah, but I have to ask again. Are you sure you want to do this? You really don’t have to.”

“Is it always this hard for you to accept help?” Jesse asked, trying to keep his tone light to cover the huskiness that seemed to slip out whenever he was in close proximity to Robert. “I’m positive. Come on.”

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The moment he was out the door, the snow hit him in an icy blast, stinging his cheeks and whipping his hair around his face. Jesse jerked up the hood of his insulated North Face jacket. Damn, it really was coming down in boatloads...way worse than it had been earlier in the evening when he'd come to work. A good foot already covered the ground. Still, his old Chevy Blazer K5 had big, rugged all-terrain tires and a lift kit, so as long as it didn't snow two or three feet in the next couple of hours it'd be fine.

He led Robert around to the small employee parking lot on the side of the pub, trying to stomp down the snow in the unplowed areas for Robert since the man wasn't remotely dressed for this kind of weather.

When he stopped next to the passenger side of the Blazer to unlock the door, Robert stood next to him waiting. He was only two or three inches shorter than Jesse, which meant he was pushing six-feet himself. And he was close enough that even in the middle of a damned blizzard, it took a good chunk of restraint for Jesse not to wrap a hand around the man's head, pull him close, and plant a kiss on his full, sexy lips right there on the spot. There ought to be a law against somebody looking that good, even with his light brown hair damp from the snow and his cheeks red with cold. Especially with damp hair and red cheeks. *Fuck*.

Jesse forced himself to stay focused on stabbing the key in the keyhole.

"This is great," Robert said, his voice way too damned warm and close.

PASSION

“What?”

“Your Blazer.”

At first Jesse thought the man was joking, until he glanced at him and saw genuine appreciation in his gaze as he studied the big vehicle. That caught Jesse off guard. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “It’s gets me where I need to go.” He pulled the door open. “Get on in while I clear off the snow.”

Robert set his briefcase and laptop on the seat, then slammed the door shut. “I’ll help.”

Jesse didn’t argue. If the man was crazy enough to stand out in the snow in his dress shoes, far be it from him to argue. He had to admit he was pleasantly surprised, though, at how down to earth Robert seemed to be. Not at all the fastidious “I don’t want to get my expensive clothes wet and muddy” type like so many businessmen he’d known. Robert used his arm to swipe the piled-up inches of white stuff off the windshield and hood on his side, while Jesse went around to the driver’s side, grabbed his brush and scraper tool, and set to work there before moving to do the rear window.

When they were back in the Blazer and Jesse had cranked the engine and had the heater blowing full blast, Robert asked, “What year is it?”

“The Blazer? A ’76.”

“What do you have under the hood?”

“350 V8.”

“Nice. It’s in great shape, too.”

Jesse looked at him and couldn’t stop a grin from tugging at his lips. The man drove a luxury sports car and he was

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genuinely interested in Jesse's big, clunky, thirty-year old SUV?

Robert glanced at him and when he saw Jesse's expression a smile turned up one side of his mouth as well. "What? You think I don't know and can't appreciate a classic when I see one?"

"You're...unexpected, that's all."

"Well, I suppose there are worse things to be than that." The smile lingered on his face, and another jolt of raw need hit Jesse right in the gut. Damn the man was hot. And he smelled so fucking good. Like damp wool—which Jesse had never thought of as being an appealing scent until it was connected with Robert, and now, suddenly, it was sexy as sin—but underlying that was Robert's usual warm exotic spice that made his skin tingle and his balls tighten. Jesse had the urge to bury his face in the other man's neck and lick and suck, trying to take in as much of that scent as he could. He wondered if Robert smelled that way all over, even in more intimate places.

Between that and the man's smile it was making him hard as hell.

He drew in a shaky breath. *Time to get this show on the road.*

But as he reached to put the vehicle in gear, his cell phone rang. He almost didn't hear it, muffled beneath his jacket. But the vibration buzzed against his hip.

"Hang on just a sec. I need to check this," he told Robert. He hadn't heard from Leila yet and expected it to be her.

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He stripped off his glove, lifted his ass up off the seat enough to get his hand down into the pocket of his jeans, and pulled out his phone. Leila's number was on the caller ID.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked.

"Whatever happened to hello or hi?" Leila said, her voice perky.

Jesse chuckled. "Yeah, well, hi. And, are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're good. We just got in. The interstate was a nightmare, though. The plows were running, and luckily we got behind one, but it was slow, slow, slow. It took forever. It was a good thing we were going in the direction we were, though, 'cause I heard on the radio the interstate the other way is closed now."

"Yeah, I heard that, too."

"How're things there?"

"Snowing hard. The bar's closing early. I'm leaving right now."

"Okay, you be careful, Jess. Stay warm this weekend."

"Yeah, you, too. Though I know you will."

Leila's soft chuckle slid through the phone line. "Oh, yeah, baby! I'm going to get 'warm' right now, in fact. Love you."

"Love you, too."

He smiled and pressed the off button.

"Your girlfriend?" Robert asked quietly. Too quietly. His smile of earlier was gone and Jesse missed it already. "I saw her earlier tonight. She's cute." He said it with another one of those distressed looks on his face, but quickly hid it away.

Jessie studied him for a moment, and then realized what

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was going on. *Oh, God...he thinks I'm straight.*

He couldn't really say it surprised him. Because he didn't interact or flirt with customers, he was aware some of them had come to the conclusion he was straight. He didn't do anything to correct them because it just made it easier for him to keep to himself.

Which is why you should let Robert keep thinking it.

He might prefer to leave his private life private, but he wasn't a liar. If Robert assumed he was straight that was one thing. But he wouldn't lie to a direct question.

"No, not my girlfriend. She's my housemate, and a good friend. She and *her* girlfriend went to Denver for the weekend. She was just letting me know they got there okay."

Robert's eyebrows rose slightly at the information and Jesse could almost see him trying to sort out what the meant, exactly...about Jesse. It didn't explain one way or the other about his sexual orientation, only that Lei wasn't his girlfriend.

For a second he almost said to hell with it and told Robert the truth. Damn, he wanted the man like he'd never wanted anyone, and he hated feeling so split in two over it. But in the end, he kept his mouth shut. He didn't trust his own judgment about men. Couldn't. And he had the scars to prove it.

So he turned back to the task at hand, which was to get out of here and take Robert home.

Robert told him more specifically where he lived, but after that, they were mostly silent as Jesse concentrated on driving. Only a handful of the town's main streets had been plowed,

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but the snow was falling hard, covering everything back up almost as soon as a plow had passed. And the traffic that was still on the roads moved at a snail's pace.

As Jesse backed off from following the car in front of him too closely, Robert said, "I'm glad you're not one of those SUV drivers in the snow who thinks he's God."

"You mean the jerks who ride the other cars' asses and push people off the road as they zoom by?"

"Yeah. I had one of them following me earlier tonight."

"I hate assholes like that," Jesse said derisively. "They're the ones who end up causing most of the accidents. I don't care how big you are and if you do have four-wheel-drive...you can still hit a patch of ice and slide, the same as anyone else, and if you're going too fast, everyone around you loses."

"Sounds like you grew up driving roads like this. Are you from here?"

"Me?" Jesse laughed. "No. I'm from Southern California originally. I practically lived on the beach most of the time. But a friend and I were big into snowboarding and used to hit the Sierras every winter..." His voice trailed off as the reminder of what had been, and what could never be again—because of him—caused an aching, guilty hole the size of the Grand Canyon to open inside him.

Damn it. He tried to breathe through it, but even after two and a half years, it still had the power to consume him.

"Did I bring up something I shouldn't have?" Robert asked, his voice low.

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Jesse kept his eyes glued to the road and his hands wrapped in a death grip around the steering wheel. “No, it’s fine.”

But he didn’t sound fine, even to himself.

Robert didn’t pursue it and for long minutes after that, all inside the Blazer stayed silent except for the furious *swish-swipe* of the wiper blades, and the blowing of the heater fan, which Jesse switched to the defroster when ice began to build on the windshield. He felt Robert’s gaze on him from time to time, though, and wasn’t sure if it only made him feel worse, or if in some small bizarre way, it was kind of comforting...though he couldn’t understand why it would be when all night long, whenever Robert had looked at him all he’d felt was turmoil.

When they finally made it to the edge of town and turned onto the winding two-lane that climbed into the foothills of the mountains, the traffic died away for the most part, but the roads were worse. The plow had come through here, but not anytime recently. And even more of a concern, the wind had really started to pick up.

The farther they went, the harder the wind blew. Jesse slowed to a crawl because in places the visibility was wretched.

“This isn’t good,” Robert said, his voice tight with concern. “And it’s probably only going to get worse. We almost always have more snow up the side of the hill than in town. Maybe we should go back.”

Jesse contemplated it for a few seconds, then shook his

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head. “Honestly, at this point we’re closer to your house than town.”

“I know, but I wasn’t expecting it to be this bad. The road’s awful.”

“It’s not the road that concerns me. It’s the visibility. Which is why I think we’re probably better off going forward. Because if the wind’s kicked up in town, too, then it’s not going to be better anywhere else. We just need to get somewhere.”

What he didn’t voice was the possibility that once they made it to Robert’s place, he might not be able to leave. Not as long as the weather was doing this. But he couldn’t think about that right now.

“I should have stayed in town. Then you wouldn’t be out in all of this. I’m really sorry.”

Jesse didn’t take his eyes off the swirling glimpses of the road, but he heard the sincerity in Robert’s voice. “Eh, what the hell. I didn’t have anywhere better to be tonight. I probably would have gone home and gone to sleep out of boredom.”

“Yeah, well at least then you’d be warm and safe instead of stuck out in a damned blizzard with me, *because* of me. It wasn’t even supposed to do this according to the weather forecast this morning. We were supposed to have a sixty percent chance of *snow showers* today and tonight they said. Where the hell did this even come from?”

“Didn’t you ever hear that old saying? Sex is like snow—or I guess in this case snow is like sex—you never know how many inches you’re going to get or how long it’ll last.”

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Robert's low, sexy laughter filled Jesse's ears, sending heat flooding through him again.

"So you're saying that when it comes to snow and sex, a little—or *big*—surprise never hurt anyone?"

Jesse shot him a quick grin. "It certainly makes life interesting."

"It certainly does."

The inside of the Blazer suddenly seemed filled with sexual tension. Jesse's heart pounded. His cock tightened and pressed against the zipper of his jeans until it was painful. He had to make a serious effort not to pant, for fuck sake.

Next to him he wondered if Robert was feeling it, too, or if it was all his imagination.

When he dared a glance next to him, in the dim glow of the dash lights he saw Robert let out a slow and obviously controlled breath and shift slightly on the seat in a telltale sign he wasn't too comfortable in his pants at the moment either.

Another jolt of desire shot through Jesse at the knowledge. *Good God.*

"I think my road should be coming up soon," Robert said. His voice was husky, as if he were having trouble focusing on speech. "It's a right turn. Fairweather Lane."

"You're kidding me. That's a joke, right?" Jesse asked.

Another soft huff of laughter came from Robert. "Unfortunately, no. That's really what's it called."

"Okay, well whoever chose it has a sick sense of humor."

"Yeah, the planning commission probably picked it on a sunny day in June. Assholes."

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That drew a laugh from Jesse, and smile from Robert.

“Once we turn, unfortunately it’s still another mile up the road to my place.”

“Kay.” Jesse concentrated hard on the road now, afraid they’d end up off in a ditch if he didn’t. “So where’s that GPS unit I almost bought myself for Christmas when I need it? It would come in handy on a night like this.”

“I have one. Back in my car,” Robert muttered.

The visibility grew worse. Jesse looked down at the speedometer and saw he was going under twenty miles per hour.

“I can’t see a damn thing,” he said. “I’m going to need your help to find your road, okay?”

“Of course. I actually think we’re getting close. Really close. The road should be coming up on your right anytime now. There’s a wooden fence that runs alongside the road. It starts not too far before the green street sign.”

Jesse slowed his speed even more, until they were barely moving. The wind whipped snow in a thick shroud across the windshield. It was whipping it across the road, too, in swirling gusts of pure white.

“I think I see the fence,” Robert said. “Yeah, that’s it for sure. The turn will be in about twenty yards.”

A flash of green was captured for a second in the headlights—the road sign—and Jesse eased off the gas.

“Here. This is it. Turn now.”

“I’m taking this on faith, you know?” Jesse said, because he truly couldn’t see shit in this mess.

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"I know. Trust me."

He cranked the steering wheel to the right and the Blazer made the turn and plowed through a drift. Between gusts he caught a glimpse of the road ahead.

"Perfect," Robert said in an admiring voice. "It's another mile from here. Christ, Jesse, I really am sorry for this."

"Don't worry about it. Just keep watching and let's get us there."

The next twenty minutes were tense. Much of the time Jesse was blind, and when that happened he slowed almost to a stop—he had no choice. The road wound up through what he assumed were probably pine trees, and the incline was steeper than they'd been on before. The Blazer did fine, though, and it continued to plow through the drifts, though it was getting tougher. At one point he was afraid they'd gotten off the road completely, but then realized it was just a much bigger drift than the rest.

When Robert finally indicated his driveway was close, Jesse said, "Please tell me your driveway's not another mile long."

"No, it's about fifty yards."

Which, it turned out, was about twenty-five too long. They got halfway up it and finally ran into a drift that was as high as the hood of the Blazer. Jesse knew better than to even try it. "End of the line."

They got out of the Blazer, and with the help of a flashlight from Jesse's emergency kit, which aided very little, took another ten minutes to walk to the house. They didn't even

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seen the place until they were almost on top of it and the tall mercury vapor lamp on a pole shone a dim glow into the snow.

The house, which Jesse could barely make out, had a large wrap-around deck. They climbed the handful of stairs to the front door and when Robert got the door unlocked, unceremoniously piled inside.

The warmth hit Jesse's frozen cheeks like a furnace—both painful and welcome. Robert flipped on the light in the foyer where they stood and for several long seconds they didn't move, just stood there breathing hard, glad to finally be in out of the awful weather.

Finally, when he'd caught his breath and thought he could feel his face again, Jesse managed to curve his lips into a half-smile. "Well, that was an adventure."

Robert let his briefcase and laptop slide to the hardwood floor and his gaze met Jesse's. His eyes filled with apology and he opened his mouth to speak.

But Jesse shook his head and cut him off before he could. "Don't say it again. It's okay."

"Yeah, well that doesn't make me feel any less crappy about it. And now I'm afraid you're stuck here for a while. There's no way you can make it back to town tonight."

For some reason, the thought didn't bother Jesse as much as he'd believed it would. In fact, the longer he stared into Robert's warm midnight-blue eyes, the more he began to feel another way about it entirely. "I should be saying I'm sorry you're stuck here with me as your unexpected house guest."

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“Unexpected. But not unwelcome,” Robert said quietly.

Something in Robert’s gaze shifted. The longing he saw in it hit Jesse square in the chest, knocking the breath of out him.

But then Robert turned away, his back to Jesse, and began unbuttoning his black wool overcoat. “I...” His voice was hoarse. “I’m going to start a fire. Please, make yourself at home.”

Without giving himself time to doubt his actions, Jesse took a step toward the other man, tired of feeling so torn, and wanting him with an ache that was ripping him inside out. He reached a hand toward Robert’s back.

But before he could touch him, the lights flickered, then went out, leaving them standing in pitch darkness.

“You’ve *got* to be fucking kidding me,” Robert said.

Jesse stood still. He curled his fingers into his palm, then slowly dropped his hand to his side.

Neither of them moved, and he had a sense they were both waiting for the power to come back on again because surely to God it would.

Or not. The wind’s blowing like mad out there. It probably took down some power lines.

A few seconds passed and nothing happened. A few more, and still nothing.

“Shit. After everything else tonight, now this.” Robert sounded tired and frazzled.

And for some crazy reason he couldn’t remotely understand, that only made Jesse want him more.

“All right. Now I’m really going to build a fire,” Robert

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said. "Because if the power decides to stay off, it's going to get cold in here pretty damn quick. Do you still have that flashlight handy?"

"Yeah, right here." Jesse passed it end first to Robert. When Robert's fingers brushed over his as they traded off the light, they both froze for a second, although "froze" probably wasn't the best way to describe the tingling heat that radiated up through Jesse's fingers. He let go, and Robert's palm enclosed the plastic tube. For a second, Jesse wondered what those hands would feel like elsewhere on him.

He dragged in a slow, deep breath, and heard what sounded like Robert doing the same.

And then they parted.

"Thanks," Robert murmured. He switched on the light and aimed it toward what was obviously the living room.

Jesse hadn't noticed anything about the house before the lights went out. He'd been too fixated on the man who lived here. But now, in the beam of the flash, he saw a tall stone fireplace that bisected the living room and...was it the kitchen? Or the dining room? He couldn't tell. But he could see that the fireplace was two-sided, so it would be visible and give heat to both rooms.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

Robert had finished shedding his coat, draping it over the back of a chair, and knelt next to the raised hearth. He set the flashlight on its end so the light now shone upward, giving dim but more widespread illumination to the tall, open-beam-ceilinged room. "There are some candles on the sideboard in

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the dining room. There should be a lighter sitting next to them. And some more candles in one of the drawers.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Jesse peeled off his jacket and, in the dark, couldn’t remotely tell what might be a closet, so he hung his jacket on the doorknob behind him. He bent to untie and tug off his hiking boots, which were still snowy. Then he went in search of more lighting.

By the time he’d found the candles and had lit several, setting them on what turned out to be a broad, natural pine coffee table in the surprisingly comfortable living room, Robert had the beginnings of a flame blazing to life in the fireplace. While he continued to feed small bits of kindling to the fire from the pile of wood in a deep box next to the hearth, Jesse let his gaze roam, and he was immediately struck by just how wrong he’d been in his earlier assessment of Robert’s lifestyle.

The man might drive a Jag and wear high end clothing, but his house was far from a mansion, and his taste in furniture and décor tended toward natural woods, comfortable, thick-cushioned chairs and couches, and paintings of mountain scenes and wildlife. Everything was in colors of dark green, deep burgundy, and warm browns. And while the house looked sizeable from what he’d seen, it was hardly a mansion, and had no hints at first glance—though admittedly it was mostly dark—that it was owned by a man who probably had millions in the bank.

Something caught Jesse’s eyes and made him do a double

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take. On prominent display on a narrow sofa table against one wall sat a tall, hand-thrown pottery urn in a distinctive shape that was wider at the bottom, narrowed to a graceful neck, plunged out again at the rim, and had delicately twisted handles on either side. He crossed the wood floor on silent sock-clad feet to stand in front of it. He didn't need to see it well in the flickering firelight to know the texture of each curve or that it had been glazed in colors that matched the décor of the room. The sight of it caused an odd tremor deep inside him. "This piece of pottery...where did you get it?"

He had his back to Robert and couldn't see him, but Robert's voice came from near the fireplace. "It's amazing, isn't it? I bought it last spring at an art sale at the university."

"Do you know the artist?"

"No." His tone was filled with regret. "I wish I did, though. There are initials on the bottom, but not a full name. I'd love to have more pieces by the same person. When I saw that one, it...I don't know. It spoke to me."

Jesse turned toward the man, his heart thudding in a heavy beat.

Robert still knelt in front of the fire. He'd taken off his suit coat now—it had been thrown across the ottoman of the closest chair to the fire—but still wore his white button-down and tie. As Jesse watched, he rose and reached up to tug at his tie with one hand, and rub his neck with the other. He let out a long sigh.

At this new hint of vulnerability, something inside Jesse cracked...maybe the final wall on that floodgate he'd

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vigilantly held in place for so long.

He crossed to the man who hadn't been out of his thoughts for even a second all evening. Who, if he were being brutally honest with himself, hadn't been far from his thoughts for months.

He stepped up behind him, soaking in the closeness, and slid one arm around Robert's waist and the other around his chest, where he gently pushed Robert's hands out of the way so he could work his tie loose for him.

Robert stiffened in surprise. His breathing came out in soft huffs. "Jesse?" he whispered, sounding as uncertain and torn as Jesse had been all night.

Jesse nuzzled his still-damp hair, breathing in his spicy, intoxicating scent, growing drunk on it and the man it was a part of. The heat of Robert's solid shoulders and back, hard gluts, and legs almost as long as his own seared into him, warm, comfortable, arousing...a perfect combination, a perfect fit.

The tie came loose. Jesse pulled it from around Robert's neck and let it slither to the floor next to them. Robert's top button had already been unfastened. Jesse undid the next two, then slid his hand into the open V, brushing his fingertips over warm skin.

Robert moaned, a soft sound that sped through Jesse's veins like a drug, making him light-headed with need.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, Robert Bauer," he murmured against his ear. "How you smile, how you move, the sound of your voice, wondering how your skin

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would feel under my hands, the way you smell so fucking good it makes me lose my mind.” Jesse’s eyes closed. “I want you. God, please tell me you want me, too.”

CHAPTER 5

This was *everything* Robert wanted. The man, his touch, the feel of his big body pressed against Robert's back. The sound of Jesse's deep voice coiling through his insides, turning his blood to magma. Out of pure instinct his hand came up to rest atop Jesse's around his waist, his fingers curling through the younger man's. But even as they did, his heart sank.

This thing with Jesse felt right in so many ways...except the most important one. Jesse's words about how Robert smelled, and how it made him lose his mind, had reminded Robert like a punch to the stomach that this wasn't real.

Because Jesse was straight.

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Yeah, he'd said the woman who came into the bar to see him sometimes wasn't his girlfriend, but Robert couldn't get the vision of the two of them kissing out of his mind. And yes, he'd given Robert all kinds of mixed messages tonight...the way he'd looked at him, the glimpse of jealousy Robert had thought he'd seen when he was leaving the bar with Andy, the sexual tension in the Blazer, and even now, where their combined desire was a live thing, eddying around them. But although Robert had been going into the pub once every week or two for months, *never*, until this evening, had Jesse indicated in any way he was interested in him. And he sure as hell hadn't indicated he was interested in any other man either.

For a short while tonight, Robert had allowed himself to hope that maybe he'd been wrong, that maybe Jesse was gay or even bi. But he'd known in his heart it was a pipe dream, and the moment Jesse had mentioned his scent and that it messed with his head...Robert had realized with a sinking feeling in his gut what was going on.

The Passion oil he'd bought at the metaphysical store.

It was somehow affecting Jesse, and only making him *think* he wanted Robert. Robert remembered how it had jump-started his libido when he'd sniffed it in his car earlier. And he'd attracted far more interest from men in general at BJ's tonight than he ever had in the past. The aromatherapy oil obviously had something in it, maybe some kind of herb or plant oil that interacted with his body chemistry, causing him to give off extra sex pheromones. He'd heard of perfumes and colognes that claimed to do such things. And it had been all

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well and good when he was trying to pick up a faceless stranger at the bar....

But why did it have to happen with Jesse?

It was a cruel tease. Because when the oil wore off—and frankly, Robert was surprised it hadn't already...he didn't feel like it was affecting him any longer—Jesse wouldn't feel like this anymore. Having been with Jesse, then losing him would be far more painful than never having had him at all. And Jesse would probably be left with a heap of confusion and mistrust and maybe even loathing for Robert and himself.

Robert couldn't let that happen. He turned to look at Jesse.

The man's eyes, even in the firelight, were a clear sky blue and so filled with open desire it stole his breath.

God, why does it have to be like this?

"Jesse..."

Jesse lifted Robert's hand and captured his thumb, drawing it into his mouth and sucking on it until sharp jolts of pure sex fired through Robert. He groaned. Then his chest tightened, and he pulled his thumb free and backed away a step. If he didn't, he'd lose all of his willpower to do the right thing here, and instead he'd crush his mouth to the man's, then probably drop to his knees, jerk open his jeans, and show him just *how* badly he wanted him.

He swallowed hard at the cautious look that had sprung up in Jesse's eyes when he'd backed away. "You have no idea how much I wish this could work, Jesse, but..."

Jesse's mouth tightened. "But?"

"But you and I..." Robert winced, hated it, but knew he

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had to get it out. "We're not right for each other."

The words hung in the air, harsh and painful, and Robert suddenly wished he could take them back.

Jesse's jaw clenched. Now he was the one backing away. Then he slowly nodded. "Yeah, you're right," he said, his voice low. "My mistake. Someone like you, all rich and powerful, wouldn't have any reason to be interested in someone like me."

"What?" Robert's pulse thrummed.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Jesse didn't sound angry, exactly. But there was a hard edge to his tone that implied Robert had cut him deeply with his words. "You with your big important company, your fancy car, your suits that cost more than my monthly paycheck, and probably a list of high-priced degrees from elite universities. I was kidding myself to think maybe it wouldn't matter to you that I'm a fucked-up college dropout who barely makes ends meet as a bartender."

The words stabbed into Robert like dull knife.

"My God. Jesse, that's not what I meant at all. I don't give a damn about that. Wealth and power and material items...they're all superficial. They come and go. They aren't a true measure of a man. It doesn't matter to me what you do for a living or any of that other stuff you said."

"Right. Then what the hell exactly did you mean, Robert? Why don't you spell it out for me."

"How can you even ask me that? You know as well as I do why we aren't right for each other."

Jesse cocked a dark eyebrow. "Enlighten me."

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“Because you’re straight! Because what you’re feeling tonight is just some...some temporary enthrallment. It’s not what you really want. It’s something that suddenly stirred to life and you feel compelled to act on it. But the last thing I want to do is be responsible for making you doubt yourself and wish you hadn’t done something in a moment of...of *passion* that you can never take back.”

Jesse stared at him wide eyed. Where Robert had expected to see anger or denial, instead he saw...he didn’t know what it was, but those blue eyes churned with an emotion that even now made Robert ache with longing to have what he couldn’t.

And then, just like that, Jesse’s shoulders slumped as if the fight had gone out of him. “This is my fault,” he said softly. He stared into the fire.

“It’s nobody’s fault.” *Okay, it’s probably mine...because of that damned oil.* But he didn’t even know how to start explaining *that* to Jesse.

“No. It is my fault.” His gaze lifted to meet Robert’s again. “Robert, I’m not straight. I’ve been out since I was a teenager.”

The words jolted Robert into a momentary state of paralysis. “Wh...at?” he croaked when he could speak again. His heart began pounding.

“I’m gay. I’ve never been with a woman. Never wanted to be. It’s only ever been men.”

“But... But you...”

Jesse grimaced and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I know I don’t interact much with male customers at the pub.”

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“Ever.” Robert finally found his voice. “You don’t *ever* interact with them.”

“Okay, I don’t ever do it. But there’s a reason for that.” He sighed and dragged a hand through his hair, and Robert couldn’t tear his gaze away from how the long, dark shiny strands looked tangled and sexy around Jesse’s fingers. But at the same time, he heard what sounded like real pain in Jesse’s voice, so he did drag his gaze away and let it fall on the man’s beautiful but troubled face.

Jesse turned toward the fireplace, silent. The house creaked from the wind pounding against it. And the only other sound for long moments was the crackling of the logs in the fire.

“You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. It’s not any of my business,” Robert said quietly.

But even knowing it wasn’t his business, he wanted Jesse to share. Hoped he would. He wanted to understand because right now he was confused by Jesse’s actions, and even more so by his own feelings for the man that didn’t just seem to be about sex like they were supposed to be, but instead seemed to revolve around wanting to ease that haunted pain on his face and hold him close and promise that whatever it was, he’d make it better.

“It’s okay. You deserve to understand. I’m not proud of the fact I’ve misled you. Look, I’ve been a bartender since I was twenty-one, and I’ve worked at some completely insane places over the years. I’m talking big L.A. clubs where anything and everything goes—all kinds of sex and

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perversions and drugs. And for a long time I...I was a real player. I partied with the best of them, did a lot of things that, looking back in retrospect, I'd rather not even remember. But a few years ago something happened...something that changed how...how I felt about all that."

His voice caught and though Robert could only see him in silhouette, his face was a mask of agony that pulled at Robert's heartstrings. He'd been to enough clubs and had partied hard enough himself back in the day that he knew what kinds of things could go on. But the look on Jesse's face implied it was something Robert couldn't even imagine. Didn't want to imagine. Every instinct in him wanted to go to the man and offer comfort. But he didn't, because Jesse was radiating the message loud and clear, with his arms crossed defensively, almost protectively, over his chest to stay back because he wanted to be left the hell alone.

Which only made Robert hurt for him even more.

"After that," Jesse said, "I quit. My job. The scene. Everything. I walked away from it all, spent a year on the road, mostly living out of my car, doing odd jobs and trying to..." He swallowed hard. "Basically, trying to escape that life. Then eighteen months ago my friend Leila convinced me to come here and make a fresh start. She had a spare room at her house so we could share expenses, and she's known Benny and John, the owners of BJ's for a long time because she used to waitress there. They asked me to tend bar for them."

He sighed and his shoulders relaxed a bit. "Frankly, I wasn't thrilled with the idea at first...working in a bar again.

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But I needed the money, and BJ's is a decent place. So I took the job, but I mind my own business now. I don't get involved. I don't play the game anymore."

"Which is why people like me very stupidly assume something we don't have any right or real knowledge to assume," Robert said softly, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Jesse."

Jesse finally faced Robert. "It's not stupid. It's understandable. I know my standoffishness has made me the odd man out and led to some customers thinking I'm straight. I don't bother to correct them because I've wanted to be left alone, so it's just easier to let them think that. Or it was...until you started coming to the pub a few months ago."

Robert's heart felt like it stuttered to a halt, then resumed with a pounding rush. "You noticed when I started coming in?"

Jesse's gaze was steady now, filled with heat. "I noticed."

"I thought... I thought tonight was the first time you had," Robert admitted.

"So you implied. You seem to be under the false impression my interest in you just sprang out of the clear blue tonight like magic." Jesse seemed closer, or maybe that was his imagination. "So let me enlighten *you*. Fridays tend to be your favorite night to come into the pub...I figure it's because you stop on your way home from work to relax at the end of the week. You always come in alone—you've never brought anyone with you. You talk, shoot some pool, occasionally dance, you let other men touch you casually and vice versa,

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but for months now you've gone home alone. You drink Killian's, from the bottle not a glass. You sometimes order vodka martinis, but your drink of comfort is single malt Scotch, neat. You drank it down fast tonight when I poured you one, but you usually drink it slowly and savor it because you truly enjoy the taste of it...for you it's not about getting drunk on it like it is with most people."

Robert stared at him, shock and a new and powerful heat ribboning through him.

This time Jesse definitely did take a step closer to him. "You came in on your birthday last October, again by yourself. It was one of the rare times you came on a night other than Friday. It was a Tuesday. You told the waiter you were turning forty."

Now Robert's eyes widened. "You...you were the one, the anonymous 'friend' who sent me the shot of the twenty-five-year old Chivas Regal that night."

At the slight incline of Jesse's head, Robert's pulse raced. "I spent that whole night wondering who would have been that generous, but even more, who would have known me well enough to realize what I liked."

"So let me tell you again," Jesse said, his voice low and husky. He took another step closer. Close enough Robert felt his body heat like a blast furnace through his own clothing. "I didn't just suddenly develop a fascination with you tonight."

"I think I'm finally figuring that out," Robert rasped, a low, heavy ache pulsing in his groin. His palms itched, wanting to be buried in Jesse's hair, then trace down the

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contours of his chest. He was already mentally untucking and unbuttoning Jesse's denim shirt, peeling it back.

"And I'm not straight."

"I'm getting that, too."

"Is there anything else you need me to clear up for you? Any other arguments you want to lay on me?"

"No." Robert's breathing was ragged. "I just need you to do one thing."

"What?"

"Ask me again."

Jesse's dark brows drew together. "Ask you what again?"

"The question you asked me earlier, when you walked up behind me."

Understanding and sultry desire lit in Jesse's eyes. He cupped the back of Robert's head and leaned in close, his mouth just inches from Robert's. "I want you. I've wanted you for a long damn time, Robert. Tell me you want me, too."

Not a question this time. A command. One that seared through Robert, lighting a fire he was afraid might consume him before it was all over.

"Yes. *God* yes, I want you. I have for months."

Their mouths came together in a crush of moist heat and desperate hunger, seeking, finding, and consummating what they'd been dancing around all night. There was no hesitation between them, no awkwardness, only an aching need that neither of them seemed to be able to quench. It was like they'd been waiting so damned long to do this, they couldn't get enough. Robert's hands sank in the soft, thick length of Jesse's

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hair, and Jesse's cradled Robert's ass, pulling his groin snug against his own.

They kissed for a long time, with urgency, yet not in a hurry, exploring every crevice of each other's mouths, learning every curve of lips, the taste, the texture. Their tongues slid together in a slow, sensual screw, sometimes licking deep, others teasing in light flutters.

It all made Robert hot and hard and dizzy for more. He loved to kiss, always had...he couldn't think of anything sexier or more intimate. But for the men he'd slept with over the years, if there'd been any kissing at all, it had been little more than a quick, dispassionate precursor to sex. No true intimacy, no need to forge a deeper connection. It was all surface, those coming together...all about instant gratification and getting off. And since Robert had decided long ago he wasn't interested in love or commitment, he'd accepted that sensual make-out sessions weren't likely going to be part of his life and he'd been fine with that. Or so he'd thought.

But this, with Jesse, was different. It *was* personal, intimate, and deep. So deep it scared the hell out of him because a part of him was afraid he might fall into this well of intoxicating passion and soulful communion and never find his way back out again. And yet he didn't want it to stop. He wanted it to go on and on, wanted to crawl inside this man's skin and stay there.

Jesse unbuttoned the rest of Robert's shirt and pushed it open. His fingers toyed with his nipples, brushing over them with the flats of his fingertips, pinching lightly, circling them

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until the nubs stood at hard attention and sent spikes of heat straight to Robert's groin.

When his mouth finally pulled free of his lips, Jesse kissed his way to Robert's neck where he licked long damp strips beneath his jawline and under his ear. Robert tipped his head to the side to give him better access, and the heat from Jesse's mouth spread through him like an inferno. Between it, the fingers flicking at one of his nipples, the hand that continued kneading his ass, and the bulge of Jesse's hard cock grinding against his, Robert couldn't think straight. Couldn't think at all.

"Jesus, I can't get close enough to you," Jesse groaned.

Robert knew exactly how he felt.

Never breaking his hold on him, Jesse led him the few steps to the couch and pushed him back onto it. Robert reclined with his head on one of the pillows at the end. Jesse turned him until his legs were on the couch as well, then spread them apart and knelt on one knee between them.

His mouth returned to Robert's, kissing him in a slow parry and thrust that made Robert even more crazy than before, if that were possible.

"Want you. All of you." Jesse's breath whispered over his mouth. He rose, unbuckled Robert's belt, unfastened his pants, and pulled them off with no preamble.

Robert's cock jutted against his dark briefs, and Jesse lowered his mouth to it, grazing his teeth over it and sucking it through the fabric until the cotton was wet, and clinging to Robert like a second skin. Only then did Jesse inch the elastic

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band down just below his sac. The elastic dug into him enough to make his dick and balls stand up straight like eager idols waiting to be worshipped.

Which was exactly what Jesse did. His mouth was immediately back to work, but this time on bare skin. The sensation of his damp tongue scraping over tender flesh brought Robert to an all new level of arousal.

Jesse sucked Robert's cockhead into his mouth, eased it out, sucked again. Then he pulled off and moved lower, to draw his balls into his mouth one after the other. He licked and suckled his scrotum, buried his nose in it and breathed deeply, then laved slow arcs around and around the base of his dick.

"You smell and taste so damn good."

His mouth returned to Robert's cock, licking up and down its length, over and over, while one hand wrapped around his balls and tugged on them.

Robert clutched the cushions with one hand, and Jesse's head with the other, his groin thrusting upward, begging for more.

"Jesus, you're hot," Jesse rasped. "I'm going to make you feel so good."

He grasped Robert's briefs and dragged them off. The moment they were gone, he parted Robert's legs once more, pushing them up and back, then lay between them.

A soft hiss of appreciation and a warm steamy exhale fanned against Robert's exposed and clenching opening, sending new currents of lust scudding through him.

"Just when I think you can't possibly get any hotter. Fuck,

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Robert, you have a beautiful ass.”

The words had barely registered, before the first touch of wet tongue to Robert’s hole made him gasp. The next, and the next, and especially the *next*, which circled with brain-melting sensuality, then breached the opening to delve inside, turned the gasps to low, throaty appreciative moans.

Each thrust and swirl, each lingering suck, sent shivers of pleasure through Robert, making him tremble, pulling ever-louder responses from him that he couldn’t control. The more he moaned and writhed, the deeper and more diligently Jesse worked him over, never stopping, never letting up, as if there was nothing in the world he loved more than to fuck Robert’s ass with his mouth.

“Jesse...oh, Christ!” His hips rocked against Jesse, seeking more.

So it came as a total shock when Jesse suddenly pulled away.

“God, please...don’t stop!”

But the heat of Jesse’s mouth found a different target, and the moment he sucked Robert’s aching cock into his mouth, a whole new form of delicious torture began.

Jesse alternated between long, hard suctioning that almost made Robert cry out in pleasure/pain, and gentle sweeps around the head meant to soothe and tease. But when Jesse took him deeper still, until his nose was buried in Robert’s groin and the tip of his dick nudged the back of Jesse’s throat, Robert did cry out...a hoarse gasp that made his throat raw. Then Jesse swallowed, pulling his cock even farther into the

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squeezing depths.

The wet oven and flexing pressure around his shaft almost made him come apart right then. A dull, hot ache built in his balls and flared at the base of his spine.

Jesse pulled off him, looking at him with heavy-lidded, glazed-eyed lust, then swallowed him again.

Robert's heels dug into the couch. His hips rose.

Another long stroke off and back on, then another....another...until Jesse found a rhythm that sent long, shuddering waves of bliss through every part of Robert's body. His back arched. Scorching gasps of air that felt like they came straight off a desert burst from his lungs. Fire raced along his spine and into his cock.

"Jesse....God, Jess..." He thrust hard into Jesse's mouth, all inhibitions shed. "I...I'm not going to last...can't..."

It was the best he could do to give the man a warning that if he wanted to stop, now was the time.

But instead of stopping, Jesse continued playing Robert's cock. And then Robert felt heat and pressure against his ass. *Oh, fuck!* Jesse pushed what felt like two, or, *shit*, maybe three fingers into him.

It was all too much. Sensation spiraled through him, coalescing at the base of his balls, then exploding. His body tensed, arched upward, and he came, jetting spunk down Jesse's throat.

CHAPTER 6

When he was spent, Robert sagged against the couch with a moan.

Jesse rose and found his mouth in a slow, intimate kiss with lots of tongue. He tasted like cum and it was sexy as hell.

“So,” he said, contemplatively, a smile curving his sensual mouth, “you’re an ass man, huh? Give you a mouth or some fingers, and you lose control. Do you have any idea how fucking hot that is?”

Did he have any idea how fucking hot he was? The man was sex personified when he was looking at Robert that way.

“Maybe it’s not the actions so much as the man doing them,” Robert said, his voice still husky from his orgasm.

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That cranked Jesse's smile a notch wider. "Maybe I'll have to put my imagination to work and see what other pleasures I can dream up to test that theory."

Robert's breathing stuttered at the promise in his voice. "Maybe I'll let you. But fair is fair...now it's my turn to uncover some of your intimate secrets. Just what it is, exactly, that makes you tick, Jesse McIntyre?"

Jesse's gaze flared hot at that. "You."

His mouth came down on Robert's again in hungry demand, the kissing even more thorough and erotic than ever.

Damn. Robert had just come and there was no way he could get it back up this soon, but if Jesse continued this, he might cause Robert to set some kind of new record.

The only thing that could make it better was more skin. Jesse's skin.

Somehow, the man had managed to get Robert completely undressed except for his open shirt that might as well be off, while Jesse was still wearing everything. Not that he wasn't a damn fine sight in his faded, ass-hugging blue jeans and denim shirt, because he was and Robert was pretty sure he could stare at and lust after the man for days just like this. And not that Robert didn't find it a huge turn on to be bare-assed naked and exposed while Jesse was clothed...there was something very erotic about it. But he'd long fantasized about what was under Jesse's external packaging, and yearned to find out.

He fumbled open several buttons on Jesse's shirt, then too impatient to finish the rest, he reached for handfuls of it on his back and dragged it upward. "Need this off. Now," he

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growled.

Jesse ducked his head so Robert could pull it off, then sat up enough for it to slide down his arms. Robert tossed it onto the floor.

And then his breath caught at his first view of Jesse shirtless.

“Holy Christ.”

Jesse froze, looking down at him cautiously, as if uncertain what Robert’s reaction meant.

Liquid flames poured through Robert, making his skin tingle, his balls tighten, and his cock jerk in an undeniable attempt at coming alive again.

He sat up and, resting a hand in the middle of Jesse’s chest, pushed him back until Jesse was the one reclining on the couch and Robert knelt between his legs.

“Are there more?” he rasped.

At Jesse’s nod, Robert wasted no time unbuttoning and unzipping the man’s jeans. He pulled them and Jesse’s gray boxer briefs down all at once, and almost choked in raw appreciation at the long, thick, stiff cock jutting from soft whorls of dark hair, set off by the tribal tattoo that started in a V just above Jesse’s pubic hair and branched outward below his navel to open up flame-like, curling around his waist on either side.

He jerked Jesse’s jeans down the rest of the way and let them fall to the floor and shrugged off his own shirt as well. Then he sat back on his heels and soaked in the full sight of the tall, mouth-wateringly spectacular man.

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“Jesse,” he breathed. “My God, you’re beautiful.” His gaze lifted to meet the younger man’s.

A huff of breath escaped Jesse. “For a minute there I was afraid maybe you were one of those men who are turned off by tattoos and piercings,” he said softly.

Robert had trouble even dragging air into his lungs. “Are you kidding me? I’ve never seen anything more fucking sexy in my life.”

His gaze slid downward again. His palms spread across Jesse’s muscular shoulders to finger the dolphin tribal on his left bicep and the green Chinese dragon on the right, over his lightly furred chest where the words “Because I live...” in a fancy script curved above one pierced nipple, then down his ribs to a single tattooed word—“Remember.”

There were other pieces of art...some on his forearms, on his calves, and Robert assumed there’d be more on his back. All together, they lent Jesse’s already spectacular body an unrivaled primitive beauty.

The only thing that marred the perfection was a long, angry, jagged scar, still pink around the edges, that ran across his stomach from one side to the other. Robert’s brows drew together. Good God, it looked like someone had tried to gut him. That thought sent a sharp pain straight through his own gut. He hated the idea that anything bad had happened to Jesse.

Robert leaned down and kissed the scar.

When he looked up, some unnamed emotion swirled in Jesse’s eyes, and it tugged at Robert’s heart. Again he found

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himself wanting to ask what had happened so he could make it better, but he didn't press. If Jesse wanted to share this story at some point, he would. Instead, Robert rose and brushed his lips over his.

Jesse's answering smile made his decision to be patient worthwhile.

Robert returned to his exploration, running his hands down Jesse's washboard abs, then back up again until his thumbs brushed over the small silver rings through his nipples and teased the firm brown nubs themselves.

Jesse sucked in a hissing breath at the contact.

Robert grinned. "Does the piercing make them more sensitive?"

"Yeah."

"So it is good for you or bad for you if I do this?" He flicked his tongue over one of them, around the nipple and into the ring, tugging on it lightly.

Jesse gasped and one of his hands dug into Robert's hair, holding him close. "Ah, God," he groaned.

Robert grinned again. "I take it that's good." He flicked again, swirled his tongue around and around, then finally drew the nipple and ring into his mouth and sucked gently.

Jesse almost came off the couch. His hand stayed on Robert's head. The other clutched at Robert's back.

Robert sucked for a long minute, then released the hard wet pebble and blew on it. He moved to the other and gave it the same attention. When Jesse was writhing beneath him, he licked his way lower, over his abs to the V of the tattoo that

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pointed at exactly what he wanted next.

The hard cock waiting for him, that he immediately took into his mouth because he couldn't resist a second longer, was one of the most beautiful Robert had ever seen. And he'd seen his fair share. As he mouthed it, sliding his tongue up and down the length, running it around the fat head, and savoring the salty flavor of the pre-cum oozing from the slit, he admired it. It was longer than average, and thick enough to make Robert's ass clench in anticipation of how it would burn and stretch in the best way possible going in. He was an equal opportunity lover...liked both giving and receiving. But it had been a long time since he'd been with anyone for more than a quick suck or jerk off, and suddenly all he could think about was having Jesse drive this long, gorgeous piece of meat as far and deep into his ass as it would go. He shivered with need at the thought.

Jesse suddenly put a hand on Robert's head. "Robert... you... unh! Oh, fuck... you have to stop."

Robert did, immediately, releasing Jesse's prick from his mouth. He sat up, concerned. "You okay?"

Jesse sat up, too. "It's...it's been a while for me. A *really* long while. Having you suck me...it's too damned good. I wouldn't last."

"How long since you've been with someone?"

"Since I left California," Jesse said quietly. "Two and a half years."

The admission stunned Robert. How could anyone as gorgeous as Jesse go so long without anyone wanting to be

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with him? Or, he corrected himself, it was the other way around. When Jesse had said earlier he'd quit and walked away from everything, maybe he'd truly meant *everything*, including having sex. My God, whatever had happened to Jesse, it had really torn him apart if he'd gone from the club life to celibacy.

Once again fighting that damned urge to protect and comfort him, Robert pulled him into a kiss. "I don't know why you chose me to be with after all this time when you could have anyone you want, but—"

Jesse pressed a finger to his lips, cutting him off. "You *are* the one I want, Robert. The only one. Do I need to remind you again?" He gave him a hot, open-mouthed kiss, that led to several more kisses, until they were once again fondling and groping and were both breathing hard.

"Are you a top or bottom?" Robert asked after pulling his mouth free to drag in air for about the third time.

"Either. Both."

"What about right now? What do you want right now?"

Jesse's big hands squeezed Robert's butt. "After the way you acted with my mouth and fingers in your ass...what do you think?"

Robert grinned. "I was really hoping you'd say that."

Jesse grinned back. "Do you have condoms and lube?"

"Does the Pope have God?"

That elicited a husky laugh from Jesse. "So point me in the right direction and I'll get them."

"Hell, I'm not even sure I can get them without breaking

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my neck in the dark. I'll go. Would you do me a favor and put another log on the fire, though?"

"Of course."

Robert picked up Jesse's flashlight off the hearth, then with another smile at him, switched it on, and went down the hall to the master bedroom. The house was starting to get cold with the heat off and there was a noticeable difference in temperature between here and the living room.

He pulled out the drawer in the nightstand and snagged a tube of lubrication and a handful of condoms. Then he chuckled as he looked at the long strip of square packages in the beam of the flashlight. "Yeah, being a bit optimistic there, aren't you, Rob?" But he didn't put any of them back. His body might not be as virile as it was at twenty, but depending on how long the storm lasted, who was to say tonight would be his only shot at having a need for all this protection?

As he slid the drawer closed, he shivered. The power had only been out an hour or so. If it stayed out all night, it was going to get damned cold anywhere except right next to the fireplace. An idea came to him. He eyed his bed. "Now that would be warm," he murmured.

When he returned to the living room, he found Jesse crouched in front of the fire, breathtakingly naked, poking at the wood with the metal iron. The muscles in his broad shoulders and back stretched and flexed as he moved, causing the large tattoo of a phoenix on his back to ripple, and making Robert's mouth go dry with longing.

He stood, frozen in place, watching for a long moment.

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What in hell did someone like Jesse McIntyre, who had to be, hands down, one of the sexiest most desirable men he'd ever known, want with him? Robert didn't usually think too much about his age...he felt damned good at forty, stayed in shape, still had a decent body. But watching Jesse, who was clearly years younger than he was, he couldn't help but wonder why Jesse would have picked him.

Jesse's words spoken earlier filled his mind... *"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, Robert Bauer. How you smile, how you move, the sound of your voice, wondering how your skin would feel under my hands... You are the one I want, Robert. The only one."*

"Are you going to stand there all night?" Jesse turned to look over his shoulder, his eyes and smile flashing mischief. "Or are you going to come over here so we can put those things to use." He nodded at the supplies Robert still held.

When he put the iron poker back in the stand and faced Robert, suddenly Robert could concentrate on was the man in front of him.

"Have I told you in the last five minutes or so just how damned gorgeous you are?"

Was that a blush he saw creeping up Jesse's face? Or maybe it was just the heat from the fire.

He moved in front of Robert and cradled his face between his palms. "Have I told you how fucking sexy you are?"

Robert took a hard swallow, but before he could speak, Jesse covered his mouth with his own. The kiss this time was shockingly tender. He'd never known kissing could cover such

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a wide range of expressions and emotions. But then again, he'd never kissed, or known, anyone like Jesse. The man was a constant package of surprises, and every one of them only made Robert want him more.

"C'mere." Jesse pulled his groin in close against his own.

"Wait." Robert grabbed one of Jesse's hands. "I have an idea. Come help me with something?"

Jesse's eyebrows drew together. "Okay..."

Robert grinned. "It's good. You'll like it." He set the condoms and lube on the coffee table and, still holding Jesse's hand, switched the flashlight back on and led him to the bedroom

"Fuck, it's cold in here!"

"Yeah, I know. That's why we're here." Robert set the flashlight on the bedside table so the beam shone up at the ceiling.

"Cause you want to freeze our asses off? Didn't we do enough of that out in the snow earlier?"

Robert laughed. "Quit being a wuss and go around to the other side of the bed." He began tossing the pillows on the floor and pulling off the comforter. The sheets would probably stay on okay.

"Did you just call me a wuss?" There was humor in his voice as he moved around the bed. "You are so paying for that as soon as I get you flat on your back with your legs in the air."

"Is that a promise?"

"Don't push your luck."

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“Damn, and here I thought I had it all figured out how to push your buttons and get what I wanted.”

“I’ll show you how to push buttons, babe. I already know how to push yours, or have you forgotten? Pretty soon you’ll be begging me...but it won’t be to stop.”

Robert felt a rush of pleasure at the endearment, as casual as it had been. God, if he were the type to fall, he could fall pretty damn hard and fast for this man.

Who are you kidding? Haven’t you been falling for him for months? When was the last damn time you actually enjoyed being with someone like this? Never. You’ve got it bad for him and you damn well know it.

“Just grab the mattress, will you? You can put your money where your mouth is when we get this in the living room.”

“Grab the mattress?”

“Yeah, there should be a couple of fabric handles on the side. Reach up under the fitted sheet.”

“We’re taking the mattress in the living room.”

“Yep.”

“And we’re doing it because...”

“Because if you think it’s cold in here now, wait and see what it feels like if the power doesn’t come back on—and let’s face it, the way the storm’s blowing out there, were not getting it back anytime soon. In a few hours, it’ll be cold enough in here to shrivel even your spectacular dick.”

Jesse’s soft laughter shot straight to Robert’s balls.

“It’ll be warm in front of the fire, so we might as well be comfortable in there.”

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"I'm beginning to see your logic. On three, ready? One, two, three. Shit, this is heavy!"

"Yeah, but you'll appreciate it later. It's a pillow top. Very comfy."

"All the better to start taking my pound of flesh from your sexy ass," Jesse grunted.

The promise sent another flood of desire through Robert. At this point, he'd give Jesse whatever he wanted.

They hefted the mattress up and tipped it on end, then got it through the bedroom doorway and carried it into the living room.

"Hang on, let me scoot the coffee table out of the way. Then there should be plenty of room." He pushed it against the couch.

Once they finally had mattress on the floor, it wasn't a bad fit at all. Robert went back to the bedroom and brought out the comforter and pillows and spread them over the bed.

"See? Much more comfortable than the couch or the hard floor," he said to Jesse, who stood on the other side of the mattress. "I'm getting too old for the hard floor thing anyway. You know...my aching back and all."

Jesse snorted and his eyes twinkled. "You're full of shit."

"That's what you think. Come talk to me when *you're* forty."

"How do you know I'm not?"

"Please."

"Okay, let's hear it. How old do you think I am?"

"I think you're...thirty-one."

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A smile canted one side of Jesse's mouth. "I turned thirty-two in December. Not such a smart ass after all, are you?"

Robert laughed. "Yeah, I missed it by a long way. If we'd had this conversation a month ago, I would have been right." He circled around the two-sided fireplace to the large dining room/kitchen. The flames gave off enough light for him to make his way to the refrigerator. He opened it, grabbed two bottles of beer out of the door by feel, then shut it quickly to keep in as much cold as possible in case the electricity was off for hours. He twisted off the tops of the beer and padded back into the living room.

Jesse had pulled down the comforter and the top sheet, and sat on the mattress, his long legs stretched out in front of him toward the fire. He looked up and smile at Robert. "Okay, it's pretty comfortable."

"Told you."

"I pegged you for silk or satin sheets, though. Not flannel."

"Why not flannel? It's soft. It feels good against bare skin."

He offered Jesse one of the beer bottles.

The smile instantly disappeared from Jesse's face and, as he stared at the bottle. "No. Thanks." His voice was tight.

Wondering what was causing the strange reaction, Robert asked, "Can I get you something else then? A soda? Water?"

Jesse shook his head. "No, I'm...I'm good, thanks."

Robert set the extra beer on the coffee table behind the bed, then sat next to Jesse and ran a hand along his hard, warm thigh. "You okay?"

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He took a deep breath and the smile he turned on Robert was natural, but with lingering hints of apology in it. “Yeah. I’m just not thirsty. I’m okay.”

“All right.” Maybe Jesse had alcohol issues. Although, he was a bartender and worked around alcohol every night, so that didn’t quite ring true. Still, he didn’t want to make him uncomfortable, so he asked, “Do you care if I drink?”

Now his smile was truly back to normal. “No, of course not.”

Robert raised the bottle to his mouth and swallowed, letting the cold liquid slide down his throat that was still scratchy from earlier. As he did, he felt the heat of Jesse’s gaze on him, and when he looked, found the other man’s eyes had gone heavy with lust.

“Jesus, even the way you drink is sexy.”

Robert gave him a slow smile, then lifted the beer and took another long swallow, and another, his gaze never leaving Jesse’s.

“You’re a tease. Give me that.” Jesse’s voice was soft and hoarse.

When Robert passed him the bottle, Jesse took a drink from it—okay, clearly no alcohol issues. After he’d swallowed, he let his mouth linger an instant longer than necessary at the opening. As he handed the bottle back, his gaze radiated so much come-hither heat Robert’s body thrummed.

Robert drank again, imagining, or maybe it wasn’t his imagination, Jesse’s irresistible taste on the rim. It made him

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horny as hell.

He passed the bottle again, and by the time Jesse's Adam's apple had slid up and down his sexy throat, Robert couldn't take anymore. He took the bottle out of Jesse's hand and set it on the coffee table, then pulled him into a kiss.

Jesse's arms curled around him, lowering him to the mattress. Robert parted his legs so Jesse could settle between them, and he did, his heavy, warm weight pressing into him. Jesse tasted like cold beer, masculine heat, and sensual seduction. Their tongues tangled. Their cocks, stiff and leaking, rocked together. Jesse's hair fell over his face and teased Robert's skin in alluring caresses. Robert's fingers found his lover's nipples and toyed with them and the small rings attached to them, twisting them gently, tugging on them, until Jesse's breathing came hot and heavy against his mouth.

He wrenched his lips off Robert's and buried his face in his neck, gasping for air. "God, Robert, do you have any idea what you do to me? How you make me feel?"

"I know how you make me feel."

Jesse lifted himself on his arms and stared down into Robert's face. His gaze scorched into Robert before he reached over his head toward the coffee table.

He rose to his knees and tore open one of the condom wrappers.

Robert sat up. "Let me do it."

He pulled the condom from the plastic, grasped Jesse's heavy balls, tugging them down, eliciting a deep, low groan from him, then held his cock at the base and licked over the

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head, gathering up the clear drop of pre-cum at the slit. He couldn't resist the temptation and sucked the plump head into his mouth. Jesse's hand, which he realized was shaking, pressed against the back of head, released, then pressed again as if he were torn, wanting Robert to suck him, but also wanting to hold out for something else.

Robert wanted the something else as much as Jesse did, so he released him with a final kiss at the tip, and rolled the condom down onto his long rod. He grabbed the lube from the table, opened it, poured some in his palm, and slathered it all over the sheathed cock standing at attention in front of him. Jesse's soft groan indicated even that was turning him on.

With a smile Robert looked up at him. "How do you want me?"

"Just like this," Jesse rasped, pushing him to his back. "So I can see your face."

Robert slid his feet up on the bed, and Jesse locked a hand around each calf, lifting his legs to his shoulders.

Robert's breath caught. Seeing Jesse like this, towering over him, captured in the firelight, looking like a modern day version of a Greek god come to life, seared straight into his heart. He'd never, ever craved anyone like he craved Jesse. And he realized it wasn't just about the man's sexy face, glorious body, or the sound of his deep voice that sent shivers of longing through him whenever he heard it. He craved what was inside him, too. The way he'd offered Robert a ride tonight, braving the elements, when he didn't have to. The way he joked and laughed. The way his expressive eyes

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showed his every emotion. He wanted Jesse to trust him enough to share with him whatever had happened in his past that had changed his life so drastically, wanted to hold him close as he fell asleep and wanted to wake up next to him in the morning.

All those things ran through his head in a second, shocking him at just how deeply he felt them.

But then Jesse's slick, lubed fingers were at Robert's ass, pushing inside, stretching him, and everything else...thoughts, the outside world, even the room around him faded away.

Robert's eyes closed and fluttered back open again as heavy, warm sensation spread through his ass.

"Feel good?"

"Oh, yeah," he half sighed, half groaned.

"You ready for more?"

"God yes."

The long, strong fingers disappeared, and a new pressure radiated from his hole as Jesse's thick crown pushed against the ring of muscle. After an agonizing moment, it slid in partway, in a slow, burning ache that felt so good it made Robert dizzy. He clutched at the bedding. "Oh, God...God, Jess."

Jesse's breathing was hoarse. "Jesus, you're so hot and tight."

"Don't stop. Go all the way. God, please! Do it!"

Jesse eased out what felt like a few millimeters, then drove in to his balls.

They both cried out, clinging together.

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Robert's ass ached from the invasion, and he savored every throb, every twinge and sweet, painful sting, but especially the way his insides felt stretched and full to bursting.

"Shit...Robert, shit..." he panted. "Being inside you...it's fucking heaven."

He slid out partway, then pushed back in again.

Robert trembled around him.

"I don't know if I can go slow," Jesse said, his voice a pained, breathless groan. "I'm sorry. You just feel too good."

"I don't want slow. Fill me. Fuck me, Jess." It was a plea. He knew it, but couldn't hold it back. He wanted this too much. Wanted Jesse to take him on this ride and didn't want to stop until neither of them could move or breathe.

Jesse didn't disappoint him, didn't hold back. He plunged into Robert with long, powerful thrusts that made Robert's nerve endings vibrate, each deep stab sending new ripples of fire through him. Over and over until Robert's mind floated separate from his body because it was too incredible, too overwhelming.

His cock bobbed between them from the intensity of Jesse's movements, making it ache. When Jesse's hands dug into his thighs where he held them, Robert savored that ache, too. Anything, everything that made him *feel*, that brought him closer to this man above him.

The sounds of their heavy breathing, their hoarse cries and gravelly moans, their sweat-slicked flesh slapping together filled the air. Robert smelled their musk, too, the raw desire

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that drove them.

When Jesse bent his legs and pushed them back against his chest, tilting his ass up even more, his motions grew more fevered. “Robert...Jesus!”

One of Robert’s hands clutched Jesse’s thigh, his fingers digging into the hot skin and muscle. The other wrapped around his own dick, which could no longer take the agony and wanted release.

Jesse’s strokes deepened. He changed angles again, and now each plunge hit Robert’s prostate. Lights flashed behind Robert’s eyes. Tension coiled through him, squeezing his balls so tight he thought they might pop.

And then Jesse’s muscles contracted. He thrust hard and deep and stayed there. His head tipped back, a guttural groan tore from him, and with a shudder that wracked through his body, he came.

He was so deep inside his orgasm rippled into Robert like a shock wave.

Robert closed his eyes and jacked his own dick, needing with desperation to go there, too. He felt Jesse’s big hand over his own. His fingers tightened around Robert’s, working his cock faster still in hard pulls.

When he opened his eyes, he found Jesse staring down at him with heated intensity, still shuddering from the last of his climax. “Let go, babe. I want to watch you lose it,” he said, his voice like hot velvet.

“Oh, fuck.” He moaned. Fire scudded up his shaft, and at long last cum splashed on their hands and his stomach. Jesse

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didn't release him until he'd milked every drop.

Finally, Robert collapsed back onto the pillows. Before he could even catch his breath, Jesse had pulled out of him and was lying over him, skin to skin, heat to heat, kissing him.

Robert clung to him, exhausted but satiated in a way he'd never been in his life. When Jesse lifted his head and smiled down at him, something inside him, a tight knot that had been squeezing for so long...God, maybe all his life...slipped free.

"Don't move." Jesse gave him another soft brush of a kiss, then rose.

Like that was going to happen.

He returned less than a minute later with a damp washcloth. He'd obviously thrown away the condom in the bathroom. "There was still some hot water left." He sat next to Robert and wiped him clean with a tenderness that made his heart thud.

After he'd draped the cloth over the hearth, he lay down next to Robert on his side, facing him, his hand propped on his hand. "You're being really quiet."

Robert rolled onto his side, tucking an arm under his head and draping the other over Jesse's waist. "I was just thinking."

Jesse's brows tugged together. "About what?"

"It's been a really long time since I've slept with someone... actually *slept* with someone, spent the night. I don't usually do it."

"So... does that mean you don't... want me to be here?" he asked slowly.

His question and the hurt look on his face cut into Robert

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like a hot knife and he suddenly realized how his words had sounded.

“No! God, no, that’s not what I meant at all. I’m sorry, Christ, obviously I’m not very good at this.”

Now Jesse looked hurt *and* confused.

Robert cupped his cheek. “What I’m trying to say, and doing it very badly, is that in the past there’s never been anyone I’ve wanted to be with enough to spend a whole night with them. But with you, it’s different. I want you to stay.”

The tight lines across Jesse’s forehead faded, but uncertainty still lingered in his expression. “Yeah, but you’re sort of stuck with me. It’s not like I could leave if you wanted me to.”

“But that’s the thing.” And it filled Robert with almost a sense of wonder. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Even if you could leave, I still wouldn’t want you to. I want you to be here, Jesse. I’m glad you’re here. I want to wake up next to you.” He kissed him, trying to show him what he didn’t seem to be able to say clearly.

Jesse’s gaze was soft and his smile now was real and warm. “You might not say that when you wake up in the morning and I’ve stolen all the covers. For all you know, I might be a cover hog.”

Robert smiled. “I’ll take my chances.”

Jesse sat up, blew out the candles on the coffee table, and pulled up the sheet and comforter. Then, with another one of those heart-melting smiles, tugged Robert into his arms and held him against his chest.

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And for the first time maybe ever, Robert wondered what it would be like to have this every night.

CHAPTER 7

Still half asleep, Jesse opened his eyes to gray light and a cold nose. He burrowed his face under the covers, and as more awareness returned, realized he was lying on his side, spooning against a warm masculine body. A familiar manly scent swirled through his senses.

Robert.

Jesse's arm lay curled around the man's waist with Robert's fingers twined through his. The heat of his ass cradled Jesse's cock, their legs tangled together, and he felt each rise and fall of Robert's even breathing in his own body pressed so close.

Memories of the night before flooded him...how Robert

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had tasted, how he'd trembled around Jesse as Jesse tongued him, sucked him, then buried his cock inside the man's sexy, willing body and found paradise. How his rich laugh made Jesse smile just thinking about it. How perfectly their bodies fit together, moved together.

God it was good. All of it. Last night. This.

A twinge in his chest, though, made him wonder what happened now. They were from two different worlds. And when he'd finally given in to the months of longing last night, Jesse hadn't thought past that moment. Hadn't thought about how he wanted this to turn out. He wasn't sure what he was willing or able to give beyond right now. And had even less of a clue what Robert expected. Hell, he hadn't planned any of this. And he was pretty sure Robert hadn't either. So where did they go from here?

A powerful gust of wind shook the house. Jesse lifted his head, and over Robert he could see out the sliding glass door that led to what he assumed was the back deck. A snowdrift covered the bottom half of the door, and above it snow still flew with a fury.

Apparently they weren't going anywhere right now.

Instead of concerning him as it probably should, the knowledge sparked a sense of relief in him. For a while longer maybe they didn't have to think past the here and now and could just enjoy this.

The cold creeping through the covers was a problem, though. Obviously the electricity was still off, and the fire must have gone out in the night.

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He eased away from Robert, not wanting to wake him, and slipped out from under the down comforter. “Fuck,” he hissed under his breath when the cold air hit his bare skin.

The fireplace was dark but for a few faint coals still glowing under the grate.

Jesse wondered what time it was. He found his shirt and jeans and pulled them on for warmth, then slid his cell phone out of his pocket and looked at the clock on it. Eight-fifteen. Way too early to be up on a Saturday morning. For him at least. He was used to working bar hours, which meant falling into bed at three in the morning and getting up later. Still, he’d slept surprising well considering it was a strange place, a strange bed, and he couldn’t even remember the last time he’d had someone in his arms all night.

He padded barefoot on the cold hardwood floor to the bathroom to relieve himself, then returned to the living room and opened the wood box next to the hearth. Plenty of kindling and small pieces, but not many medium-sized and only a couple of big logs left. Enough to rebuild the fire now and keep it going for a few more hours, but then they’d need more. He hoped Robert had a stash somewhere. The power had already been off for hours and repair crews probably wouldn’t be able to get out and fix anything until the snow stopped.

Trying to be quiet, he laid out a new fire and lit it, then slowly fed small pieces of wood into it until it was a good-sized, steady flame and he could put one of the big logs on without smothering it.

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He closed the screen and turned back to the bed.

Robert hadn't moved from where he left him. Jesse pulled off his clothes and climbed back beneath the covers, wanting to reclaim the warmth and the man he'd had to leave.

He'd barely gotten the comforter over him when Robert rolled onto his back. His eyes opened, and the smile that curved his lips and the way his gaze grew instantly heated when it lit on Jesse made Jesse's heart do a slow flip-flop.

"Hey. Is it still blizzarding?"

"Mm-hmm. Still going at it." Jesse propped himself up on an elbow and brushed his fingertips over Robert's chest.

Robert let out a low sigh of pleasure and stretched. "It feels early. Were you up just now?"

"Yeah. The fire had gone out so I rebuilt it. It was getting cold in here."

"So come here and let me warm you up." Robert's voice was low, still husky from sleep, and as seductive as fine whiskey. It sent a shot of heat straight to Jesse's groin. Jesus, was the man always this fucking sexy in the mornings?

With a smile, he slid over him.

"Damn you feel good," Robert moaned as Jesse's weight settled atop him. His lips captured Jesse's in an unhurried kiss and his palms rubbed up and down his back.

Jesse felt Robert's cock thickening against his own. He ground his hips in a slow circle against it.

They kissed and fondled, rubbed and groped for a long time, and it felt amazing. Not just the physical stuff, but the not being in a hurry, the not having anyplace else they needed

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to be. He could stay in bed like this with Robert the whole damn day and never get tired of it...which, he realized, was something of a shocker for a guy like him who used to never slow down for anything.

Jesse couldn't remember the last time, if ever, he'd felt this close to anyone he'd slept with. He'd had a few relationships that had lasted several months, but he'd been too much of a "wild child" as his mom used to say to be with anyone for long. He'd lived and worked in L.A. and several beach towns up and down the coast, had even spent a few months in ski towns as the mood hit him. Life had been all about the next wave or the next big snowfall and which parties would be the wildest. That lifestyle had made for plenty of dick and ass whenever he wanted, but most of the guys he'd been with, including the ones long-term, had been of the same mindset as he was...living for the next thrill. The next high. The next whatever-it-was best thing that came along. None of which led to a lot of time for lazy days in bed, hot necking, or actually feeling connected to a lover beyond just the raw lust.

Although, there was something to be said for lust, and just because he loved lying here with Robert didn't mean his cock wasn't beginning to ache, or Robert's hands on him weren't beginning to make him squirm in fiendish, sexual ways.

Robert rolled them over until he was the one on top. Then with a lascivious grin that just looked entirely too damn sexy on the man's chiseled face, he pushed away the covers, slithered down Jesse's body and proceeded to show him just what else he could do with that sinful mouth of his. He licked

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and sucked until Jesse's dick was wet and slick and hard as stone. But what turned Jesse on even more was the sight of Robert looking up at him, his gaze heavy-lidded, his eyes dark with passion, his lips wrapped around Jesse's thick shaft.

"You make me fucking crazy," Jesse groaned.

Robert pulled off and gave him another one of those lecherous smiles. "Yeah, and?"

"I'll show you 'and.' Come up here."

"I don't think so. I'm feeling selfish this morning. I have what I want right here and I'm not giving it up." He palmed Jesse's dick.

"You could share."

Robert playfully arched an eyebrow. Again, way too sexy for words. "Are you saying you want something *else* from me?"

"Jesus, are you going to make me beg?"

Robert just grinned.

"Fine. For God sakes, I want my mouth on you, too. *Please.*"

The low chuckle that heated his groin almost did Jesse in. "All you had to do was say the magic word."

Robert crawled up next to him, kissed him long and deep, then turned around and straddled Jesse's shoulders. When he leaned forward to take Jesse's prick in his mouth again, his muscular ass presented Jesse with the best offer he'd had all day. He spread his cheeks apart with his hands and admired the sight.

"So fucking sexy," he murmured before he buried his

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tongue in it.

Robert lunged back against him and groaned around his cock, sending flares of heat through him.

Oh, yeah. He fisted Robert's shaft, and as Robert sucked him off, he jerked Robert's dick and tongued him.

Very quickly they were rocking together and moaning.

God this was good. Jesse wasn't going to last long like this. And from the sound of it, neither was Robert.

His climax, when it came, hit him hard, leaving him shuddering as Robert licked and swallowed it down. Robert's came right on its heels, his ass clenching and his cock spewing hot seed all over Jesse's hand and chest.

"Holy crap." Robert sank onto the bed next to him, resting his head on Jesse's thigh and looking up at him with a warm gaze.

Jesse smiled at him. "Good morning."

The soft, husky, sexy sound of Robert's laughter curled around him. "Better than any morning I've had in a long time."

"Me, too."

But again he felt an unexpected stutter in his chest, and wondered if this was a one-shot deal, a single morning he'd better enjoy while he could because it might never come again. Or was it the beginning of something else?

The thought of "something else" worried him. He'd spent the past two and a half years feeling scraped raw and empty on the inside, and didn't know if he was capable of offering anyone much more than a hollowed out shell. On the other

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hand, he got a distinctly sick knot at the thought of going back to watching Robert talk and flirt with other men at BJ's, of wondering when he might decide to take someone else home with him, leaving Jesse alone at his bar once again.

"Last night, you left BJ's with that other guy. Did you have plans with him?" He had to ask because it had been eating at him, the way they'd been snuggled together, the man clinging to Robert, sex in his eyes. After the obvious display on the blond man's part, it had shocked him when Robert came back in alone later. Had the dude bailed when he found out about Robert's car being smashed? Had they made plans to hook up later when it was a better time for Robert?

Robert looked at him in surprise. "No. I didn't leave with him. I mean, we were walking out of the bar together to go to our cars, but we weren't *leaving* together. He wanted us to, but I'd already turned him down inside before we left the table."

Jesse's heart squeezed. "You had?"

"Yeah."

"He was holding on to you awfully possessively," he said, trying to keep his tone light and not act like *he* was being possessive.

"Let's face it, you and I were sort of locked in a hot stare there for several seconds. I think you intimidated him. He was hoping to get together with me some other time."

"Will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Get together with him some other time?"

"No."

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Relief coursed through Jesse. Until Robert continued...

"I'm usually far too busy to make plans with anyone. And I can't see him again anyway because I lied to him to get out of going home with him. I don't know that I'd be able to untangle the lie, so I pretty much burned that bridge."

"Can't" see him again. Not "don't want to" or "God, no, Jesse, why would I want to see anyone now that I'm with you?"

That, and the comment about how Robert was too busy to make plans with anyone pretty much gave Jesse the answer he'd been looking for. It seemed obvious to him that Robert didn't want anything from him beyond what was happening right now. And maybe it was for the best. It would be stupid to think a night and morning of mind-blowing sex, enjoyable companionship, and a closeness built by circumstance and being trapped together would lead to anything more.

So why do I feel so crappy if it's for the best?

"If I could move, I'd say let's go take a shower."

Robert's voice pulled Jesse out of his thoughts. "Ugh. A cold shower might put a damper on things."

Or maybe that was good. Better to be realistic and not let himself get any more involved.

"Who said anything about it being cold? Four words... Gas. Hot. Water. Heater."

So much for realism. The prospect of a hot shower was too good to pass up. And then he had a sudden vision of Robert in the shower with him, water droplets sliding down his chest, his firm stomach, and dripping off the tip of his beautiful,

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lickable, suckable cock.

Oh, fuck, I'm in trouble. All his good intentions to not get any more deeply involved slid down the drain in the fantasy shower.

"Are you telling me it actually works even when the power's out?"

"Give the man a little hot water and he looks like a kid at Christmas."

"Actually I was thinking give me hot water and you at the same time and it's way better than Christmas and far too X-rated for kids."

"If you're making promises, it might get me off this bed and moving," Robert said with a smile. "Let's put some more wood on the fire and then it's a date."

Which reminded Jesse of his discovery earlier. "Speaking of... I'm hoping you have a wood pile somewhere because we're almost out in here."

"Well, hell." Robert stood and stared into the box by the hearth.

All Jesse could stare at was his spectacularly sexy backside.

Oh, man, I'm in bigfucking trouble.

"Sorry," Robert said with a sigh. "I'd better get some wood before the fire burns too low. There's a pile at the foot of the stairs by the back deck. It's probably going to take some shoveling to get to it, though. Why don't you go on to the bathroom if you want."

"I have a better idea. How about I help you and then we

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get done faster and can go back to plan A—shower together.” Jesse was already standing and reaching for his jeans.

Robert flashed him a smile. “I like the way you think.”

Jesse smiled back, but the knot in his stomach from earlier had returned. *Yeah, that’s what I do best...think with my dick.*

And we know how well that turns out.

* * *

By mid-afternoon the snow began to taper off, and by dark it was over. The power, however, was still out.

After they’d eaten the omelets they’d cooked for dinner on the gas stove in the kitchen, which Robert had lit with one of the long fireplace matches, Jesse and Robert bundled up and dug a path off the front deck, then hiked down the driveway to the road, which had drifts several feet deep in places. No one was going anywhere until the snow plow came through.

The front end of Jesse’s Blazer was buried by the same drift that had stopped them from continuing up the driveway on Friday night. Only the back end of the vehicle still showed. In the glow of his and Robert’s flashlights, it was a dark blob of red stain in the white.

“We’ll dig it out in the morning,” Robert said. “I’m going to have to dig out the garage, too, so I can get my Jeep out.”

Jesse did a double take. “You have a Jeep?”

“I’m not totally impractical living up here, you know? Yeah, I have an old Jeep Grand Wagoneer. I usually drive it when the weather’s bad.”

“Uh-huh. So you were driving your Jag yesterday in the

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middle of a snowstorm because...?”

“Sixty percent chance of snow showers, remember? The forecasters got it wrong. When I left for work yesterday morning, it wasn’t supposed to do this.”

Jesse chuckled. “Okay, I’ve lived here eighteen months and you’ve been here, did you say fifteen years? So why is it even I know you can’t always trust the weather forecast in the winter and you don’t?”

“Yeah, yeah, smartass.” He smacked Jesse’s ass with his flashlight. Then his voice turned gravelly and the sound sent pulses of heat through Jesse because he recognized it meant Robert wasn’t thinking about the weather anymore. Except maybe the intimate storm that always seem to be churning just below the surface for them both. “Let’s get back to the house.”

When they were in the living room and had stripped off their coats, they kept stripping and then sank onto the mattress kissing. Jesse felt like he couldn’t get enough of the man, but was afraid that, like all rich, decadent things, too much would make him regret it in the end. If he kept this up, he was going to get hurt. And yet, when Robert touched him, kissed him, his willpower was zero.

Robert pushed Jesse onto his hands and knees and moved behind him. “I want you, Jess. Tonight I want to be in you. Is that all right?”

The words caused a deep, aching need to settle in Jesse’s core. “Yeah. Yes. God, yes.”

Robert’s hands, still warm from the fleece-lined gloves he’d worn outside, slid up and down Jesse’s back. He kissed

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him just above his crack. “What does this symbol mean?”

Jesse knew he was referring to the tattoo in black ink at the base of his spine. “It’s the Chinese symbol for passion.”

A soft huff of surprise came from Robert. “Talk about fate,” he murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“I guess...” Robert said softly, “it means if you go looking for passion, you never know where you might find it.”

Jesse was still trying to contemplate the meaning of that when he heard the snick of the cap on the lube, then felt slippery fingers against his crack, around his opening, and sliding inside. His ass spasmed around them and he let out a long, stuttered breath.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s...been a long time.”

“I’ll make it good.”

“I know you will.”

By the time he felt the tip of Robert’s hard cock probing at his ass, Jesse bones had already melted from the long, thorough, erotic finger job he’d given him. His dick stood hard and needy, but not nearly as needy as his ass, which ached to be filled.

Robert slid in inch by slow inch, with Jesse uttering soft whimpers the whole way, not because it hurt—Robert had stretched him so well, there wasn’t even a sting—but because it felt so damned good.

The heat of Robert’s body pressed against him, the way his cock slid into Robert’s depths like it was custom-made for him

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and him alone, the feel of his hands still gently rubbing Jesse's back as if he genuinely cared about him...it was almost too much to take. Even when Robert began to move, it was in long, slow glides that were both sensual and surprisingly tender.

"How's that feel, baby? Good?"

His voice, low and deep and achingly sexy, was a hot caress over Jesse's skin. He could only whimper and nod in response.

Robert continued to stroke in and out of him in that same incredible, deliberate rhythm that sent ribbons of heat twisting and twining in his body, each one taking him deeper inside Jesse, and taking Jesse deeper into a state of pure sensation.

In some part of his mind that was still coherent, Jesse recognized that this was different from anything he'd ever experienced before. No one had ever touched him, spoken to him, held him like this. Not in all his years and all his many sexual encounters.

This wasn't fucking. It was lovemaking.

And it confused the hell out of Jesse.

Robert's warm, damp hand wrapped around the base of Jesse's shaft, squeezing, then began a pumping motion in counterpoint to his thrusts, his fingers sliding over the skin of the swollen flesh.

Between that and the fullness inside him, Jesse found himself rapidly climbing toward release. Just a little more... A little more...

"Oh, God...right...*there!*" he gasped. Heat rushed down

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his spine. His balls tightened. “Robert!” Rapture tore through him, and he erupted in hot bursts of cum. By the time he was spent, he was trembling. If Robert’s arm weren’t around his waist, he didn’t think he’d be able to hold himself up any longer.

Robert’s stroking into him continued. Both of them moaned on each plunge now.

His body tightened behind Jesse, drawing in on itself. Jesse held on, welcoming the sudden intense thrusts that felt like they would spear him right through to his heart. “So good, Jess,” he gasped. “Need you so much.” And then he was over the edge, shaking with his own release.

Jesse pressed back hard against him, wanting to feel it all, absorb it so he wouldn’t ever forget this moment.

When he finally couldn’t support himself, he sank to the bed on his stomach. Robert stayed with him, lying across his back, caressing his hair and nuzzling kisses against the nape of his neck.

Jesse closed his eyes and tried to find a way to piece himself back together after coming apart so completely. Because he knew, in that moment, that somehow, some way he’d fallen hard for Robert. And he was afraid when the weekend was over, he’d be leaving a piece of himself behind with no hope of getting it back.

When Robert finally rolled off him to get rid of the condom, then turned to lie on his side facing Jesse, Jesse said, “Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

He wanted another piece of the man to take with him,

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because he was afraid this might be all he was going to get once he went back to his own life and Robert went back to his.

Robert's hand rubbed up and down Jesse's back again in that motion that felt so good and yet so bittersweet. He was quiet for several seconds, then took a deep breath.

"Okay. I grew up in a little town in southern Indiana. Mostly farmers and blue collar workers. We were poor. Dirt poor. My dad worked at the sheet metal plant and my mom took in other people's laundry. I was an only child and did the usual small town stuff—played sports, hung out with friends. It was an okay upbringing. But when I was a senior in high school, just a couple of months before graduation, my parents caught me with another boy. They'd gone to a church social and I'd hooked up with a guy from another school a few weeks earlier, so he came over and we fooled around while my folks were gone. But then we accidentally fell asleep and when my parents came home, they found us naked in my bed."

Jesse winced. "I take it that didn't go over well."

"That's an understatement. Small town in the Bible belt with devout parents who believed in hellfire and damnation for sinners...not a good scenario. My parents told me I had to swear to them that I would never even think about another male again. I was eighteen years old. I'd know for a couple of years that I was gay, and I don't know...I suppose maybe I should have lied to keep the peace, but I couldn't do it. I told them I couldn't swear it. Wouldn't. So they disowned me. They said I could stay until the end of the school year, and then I was gone."

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He stared at the fire as he spoke, the lines on his forehead deep with what was obviously remembered pain. “They didn’t speak to me for the next two months. Not a word. And when I came home after graduation, which they didn’t attend, my suitcases were packed and sitting on the porch.”

“Jesus, Robert. I’m sorry. What did you do?”

“I left. And I never went back. I got okay grades in high school and I had gotten a partial scholarship to Indiana State, so I hitched a ride to Terre Haute, got a job washing dishes, lived in a tiny, ratty little room in a boarding house, and stayed my four years until I finished my degree. Then I worked my way through a masters degree at Indiana University in Indianapolis. And then I moved here and started my company in the spare bedroom of the apartment I was living in at the time.”

Jesse took a swallow and almost choked on it. He’d been such an ass for some of the things he’d said to Robert, for assumptions he’d made about him. He’d figured Robert had led a privileged life, had gone to Ivy League schools, always had the best of everything. Instead, he’d worked his butt off to get where he was, building himself up from having absolutely nothing but the clothes in his suitcases to being the owner of a big, successful multi-million dollar company.

It made Jesse acutely aware of how truly mismatched he and Robert were, and just how badly he’d screwed up his own life.

“Tell me something about you.”

The question made Jesse wince, because anything he told

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Robert would just make the man realize what a fuck-up he truly was.

"I... I'm not..." He looked away.

"Hey, what is it?" Robert grasped his chin and gently turned his face back until Jesse was looking in Robert's warm eyes. His lips were soft, enticing against Jesse's.

"My life isn't anywhere near as noble as yours. There's nothing really to tell."

"What makes you think my life's so noble? Most of the time, before I moved here, it sucked. And I did a lot of things I'm not proud of. But that's just part of being human. We are who we are, and we do what we have to in order to get by."

Jesse sighed. "I was a brat compared to you."

"How so?"

"My parents divorced when I was thirteen. They both remarried almost immediately and shared custody of me, so I literally had two bedrooms, two sets of clothes, two sets of rules, and parents who were more interested in their new spouses and their new lives than me. So I pretty much did whatever I wanted." He shook his head. "Looking back on it, it's obvious I was acting out, seeking their attention. Not that it mattered because they didn't notice."

Robert's hand continued to make the steady journey up and down his back. It was soothing, and maybe Robert knew that and it's why he was doing it.

"Unlike you, I got only passable grades in school. Not because I couldn't do the work, mostly because I was bored. I was the resident thrill seeker. There was no skateboard flip too

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complicated, no motocross jump too high, no ocean wave too terrifying. When I graduated from high school my parents really wanted me to go to college, so I did since they were paying for it. But, again, I got bored. I wanted to major in one thing, but my parents didn't think it was practical enough. I was a rebel, so I took the classes I wanted anyway, and tried to wedge in their idea of 'practical' around it. That's when I met Leila, my housemate. In college. When I turned twenty-one I quit school and went to work as a bartender because it seemed far more interesting than social psychology or economics or political science. And I already told you last night what I was like once I started hitting the club scene."

He rolled onto his back. "I pretty much wasted away my twenties. Not too impressive compared to someone like you who worked hard and put yourself through college to get degrees."

"You could always go back to school."

"I already am." Although it felt like too little too late. No amount of "fixing" could make up for the way he'd behaved all those years. "I can't afford to go full time, but I'm taking one or two classes a semester...whatever I can scrounge up the money to do."

"You know what I think?" Robert asked, brushing a stray strand of hair back of Jesse's face. "I think it takes a strong person to decide they're not happy with how their life's going and make a change. Most people don't have it in them to do that."

Jesse looked away. *Not strength. Guilt.*

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“Can I ask you something else?”

“I guess.”

Robert’s fingertips traced over the long, jagged scar on Jesse’s abdomen. “What happened here, Jesse?”

A cold knot settled in the pit of Jesse’s gut and he stiffened.

The pain was still raw inside him, even after all this time. And he didn’t want to talk about it. To anyone. Because in the dark of night, he still sometimes woke up in a cold sweat, wracked with guilt. He passed judgment on himself over and over, just like his friend Ryan’s family had done when they came to see him in the hospital.

And he couldn’t bear to have anyone look at him with sympathy either because he didn’t deserve it.

Looking into Robert’s concerned gaze, he wondered how Robert would react. Would it be the judgment card or the pity card? Because it was always one or the other.

Then he shook his head, unwilling to find out.

“I can’t, Robert. I...I just can’t.” He rolled over, turning his back to him, and closing his eyes against the vicious ache that seemed to have taken up permanent residency in him.

“Okay,” Robert said softly, though there was an underlying hint of disappointment in his tone. He brushed a hand over his head. “I understand.”

No, you think you understand, but you don’t. And that’s why this could never work between us.

CHAPTER 8

Robert gazed, unseeing, out the dark window of the plane.

He'd gotten stuck with the inside seat, flying coach, because he'd had to change his ticket on short notice. He'd planned to head home Sunday night, but what should have been a smooth week-long trip to the east coast had turned into one headache after the other. The contract he was supposed to close on hadn't gone as smoothly as planned. The owners of the aerospace company he'd been wooing for months and had thought he'd finally snagged, had decided at the last minute to change some of the terms they'd already agreed on. It had taken some serious ass kissing and negotiation to close the deal. And Robert had *needed* to close the deal to insure

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continued cash flow for Bauer MicroSystems. As bad as the economy was, he couldn't afford to lose a major vendor and put his employees' jobs at risk. So he'd had to stick it out and make it work, no matter how long it took.

Now it was Friday evening, and he was trapped on a crowded plane with other business people wanting to get home to their families for the weekend. And though it shocked the hell out of him to be thinking it, he found himself wishing he were one of them.

Eleven days he'd been gone. Twelve since he'd awakened that Sunday morning to find himself alone in his cold house. The sinking feeling of turning over to an empty bed, discovering Jesse's clothes and coat gone, and then looking out the door to find his SUV gone as well, had caused a dull ache in his chest that hadn't left him since.

He pulled the piece of folded notepaper from his pocket and read it again for the hundredth time since he'd found it lying on the kitchen counter.

Robert,

I heard the snowplow make a pass over the road about four this morning, so I decided to go ahead and get my Blazer out and give you your house and your life back. Thanks for letting me crash this weekend. I know you weren't planning to be stuck with me as a houseguest, so I appreciate your generosity in a difficult situation.

—Jesse

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Give him his house and life back? He'd appreciated Robert's generosity in a "difficult" situation?

The phrases had stuck in Robert's head, and even now, staring at them written in Jesse's tidy, left-slanting script in black ballpoint, they might as well have been written in bold, red marker for the way they leapt off the page and made Robert wince.

Robert had stood in the kitchen holding the paper that morning, much as he did right now, staring down at it, and wondering what had happened to the warm, sensual man he'd spent two nights and a day with. The man who'd held him close all night Friday night, writhed beneath him in passion, and had looked at him with such open emotion in his gaze it had rocked Robert's world on its axis. That man and the one who'd written this note that didn't even hint at any of the closeness they'd shared hardly seemed like the same person.

His first instinct when he realized Jesse was gone was to go after him and find out what the hell had happened. But the fact he didn't even have Jesse's phone number or know where he lived was a stumbling point. He'd called information and they'd had no listing for him.

He'd tried to stay busy that day to keep his mind off the man and his sudden disappearance and the damned note, digging out of the house and clearing the driveway, but it hadn't helped. The hardest part had been getting the mattress back in his bedroom. Not the moving of it—he was able to slide it along the slick hardwood floor—but the memories of

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how he and Jesse had spent the past two nights using it. Jesse's clean scent, along with that of his arousal clung to the sheets, making Robert miss him all the more.

On Monday, he'd spent the morning making arrangement to have his Jag towed and in the shop before he'd had to leave for the airport. He'd called BJ's Pub from the body shop, hoping to get a phone number for Jesse from someone there, but whoever answered the phone informed him they didn't give out employees' personal information. Desperate, he'd asked the person to at least let Jesse know he'd called. The "Yeah, yeah, I'll let him know" from the young male voice at the other end of the line hadn't given him much confidence the message would be passed along. So he'd had to fly off with no way to get in touch with the man who'd taken over all his thoughts.

For twelve days, through every meeting, every solitary and lonely moment spent in the sterile hotel room like all the many hundreds he'd stayed in over the years, all he'd been able to think about was why. Why had Jesse rolled away Saturday night, refusing to tell Robert what had happened to him, refusing even to look at him? Why had Jesse gotten up and snuck out without telling him goodbye? Why had he pretended in the note that there'd been nothing more between them?

Or maybe that hadn't been pretending at all. Maybe that's the way Jesse truly felt. Maybe it had been no more than a hook-up for him. He'd indicated his past was full of them, that he'd been a player, always on the lookout for a good time, and though it had been a while, maybe Robert had the dubious

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honor of being his newest conquest.

It wasn't the first time Robert had tried to follow logic down that path. And as it had every time before, it only led him so far, then the way Jesse had looked at him, had kissed him, had whimpered and moaned and called his name with such raw emotion as they'd made love Saturday night intruded and he couldn't believe it had been nothing but casual and convenient sex.

So what are you going to do about it?

He'd asked himself that question over and over. But what could he do? Jesse's note was almost as empty as the damned hotel room Robert had left behind in Atlanta. He'd given Robert no opening, no indication he wanted to see him again. And the way he'd turned away from him Saturday night, not even responding when Robert had slid up behind him and wrapped his arms around him...all he could figure was that he'd hit such a sore spot with Jesse by asking him about the scar across his stomach and trying to get more of a hint about his past, that he'd pushed the man too far.

Robert had wracked his brain to try to figure out what drove Jesse, and all he could come up with was that someone in his past had hurt him badly. Had it been a love affair gone bad? Bad enough the lover had physically harmed him?

Damn it...the not knowing was killing him.

You have to let it go, Rob. Whatever it is, he doesn't want to talk about it. Doesn't want to talk to you.

He swallowed hard against the hot lump in throat.

"Why does it matter so much to me anyway?" he

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mumbled, staring through the glass to the darkness beyond.

The large man in the seat next to him shifted in the tight space, his arm bumping Robert's. Robert leaned in closer to the window, wishing he were anywhere but here.

No, wishing he were with Jesse.

What the hell was wrong with him? For months he couldn't get Jesse out of his mind, couldn't stop thinking about him, fantasizing about him even though he'd believed the man was straight. And now, although that assumption had been corrected, he still couldn't get the man out of his mind, and Jesse was as unattainable as ever.

But what slayed Robert was that for all these years, all his adult life, he'd never believed in relationships and commitment. They were highly overrated as far as he was concerned. Some people's entire lives revolved around love...finding it, keeping it. People had written poetry about it, had sacrificed for it, had even died for it. And he'd never been able to understand why. Why would anyone want to invest themselves in such a fickle emotion that sounded too good to be true because it *was* too good to be true. When the going got tough, even when someone claimed to love and be committed to the people in their lives, they really only honored that commitment when things were good.

He thought about his own parents. They'd been strict, sure, but he'd never had any trouble getting along with them, had never had any reason to doubt they wouldn't be there for him whenever he needed them. And then, boom, just like that, they discovered one thing about him that offended them and the

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love that was supposed to have been unconditional was taken away. To them the fact he was gay had been all-defining. It had no longer mattered that he was exactly the same person he'd always been during the eighteen years he'd lived with them, that being gay was only one aspect of who he was, not *the* aspect. All that mattered was that he didn't conform to what they thought was right and so they'd judged him on that one point. Like one of those damned clapper lights. Love on. Love off.

And so Robert had had no interest in setting himself up for more of that. He'd chosen to focus on his education, then building his company into something respectable that he and the people who worked for him could be proud of, so none of them had to live in little roach infested boarding house rooms and scrimp for every penny because the people who were supposed to be committed to them had shit on them. Robert couldn't love his employees, per se, but he could sure as hell take care of them and keep them from having to suffer. So he'd dedicated himself to making sure that happened.

Until Jesse.

Until soulful-eyed, gorgeous Jesse had somehow managed to burrow his way into Robert's heart and make him start thinking about what it would be like to have someone to come home to. Someone to fall asleep with every night and wake up next to every morning. Someone to laugh with, eat dinner with, and make love with...really make love, not just have a quickie in a bathroom stall or a hard pounding in a motel room with a stranger he'd never see again. Maybe it had been there

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in Robert's thoughts all along, cloaked, but there nonetheless, all those months he'd watched Jesse. But the weekend spent with the man had pulled the cloak away for good, and when he'd awakened that Sunday morning, he'd never felt so alone and so hollow, like the best thing he'd ever had had just walked out the door and he could never get it back.

Oh God. I'm in love with him

The realization staggered Robert. He scrubbed a hand over his face and moisture stung the back of his closed eyelids.

This isn't happening.

But it already had. Now that he'd named the emotion that had been tearing him apart for days, there was no escaping it.

So you'd better ask yourself again...what are you going to do about it? Are you going to walk away because you're too afraid, or are you going to fight for him?

The captain's voice came over the plane's speaker saying they'd be landing in a few minutes. The man beside Robert brought his seatback forward, jostling Robert again, then mumbled a gruff apology. Robert barely noticed.

With his eyes still closed, he pictured Jesse as he had been that weekend, a mischievous come-hither smile on his face, the way his muscular body moved and rippled, his tattoos, the silver rings in his nipples that even now made Robert's groin tighten because they were so damned sexy.

Did he dare allow himself to hope they could have something? Something real beyond just an amazing weekend?

Hell, but even if he thought they could, it didn't mean Jesse felt the same. Jesse had a wall around him Robert didn't

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know if he'd ever be able to get past. Robert had opened up to him Saturday night, telling him about his family and the humiliation and hurt at being kicked to the curb—something he'd never told anyone else. It had been Robert's dirty little secret since he was eighteen. He'd cut his ties and never been back to his hometown, so no one had ever had to know. But he'd shared it with Jesse.

Jesse hadn't been able to do the same with him because he obviously didn't trust Robert. And how could they ever have something more without trust?

How can you ever earn his trust if you don't let him know you're willing to be there for him?

As the plane touched down on the runway, he finally realized he had to see Jesse. He knew he might be setting himself up for epic failure and another painful rejection. But how could he live with his god-awful ache inside him if he didn't try?

By the time he got through the airport and to his Jeep and made the hour and a half drive back to town, it was almost eight o'clock. He didn't bother stopping at home. Jesse always worked at the pub on Friday nights, so he knew where to find him. Now that he'd made the decision to see Jesse, he wanted nothing more than to look in the man's eyes, pull him into his arms, and kiss him. Granted BJ's wasn't the best place for them to talk, but he had to at least let Jesse know he was back and wanted to try to fix whatever had gotten broken the last time they'd been together.

He found a parking space on a side street because the

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block was crowded with cars tonight. The air was crisp and cold, and a few inches of snow still lingered on the ground from the blizzard two weeks ago, but it seemed as if the town's nightlife had certainly come out in full-force. Robert slid his arms into the sleeves of his overcoat before he got out of the Wagoneer. He hadn't needed it in Atlanta and had left it in the Jeep, knowing he'd want it when he returned.

Then, taking a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for whatever might happen when he faced Jesse, he entered the pub.

Business was in full swing with dance music throbbing in the air, the dance floor and pool tables full, the bar packed. But as his eyes settled on the bar, he stopped short and let out a painful breath.

A good-looking man stood behind the bar, pouring drinks...but it wasn't Jesse. Robert had never seen this guy before. His heart sank. Oh, God...had Jesse quit? Or had something happened to him? Because he was *always* here on Fridays.

He edged through the crowd and pushed his way in to a standing-room-only spot at the bar.

The tall, gangly, bleach-blond bartender who looked like a faux Richie Rich—the designer, not the comic book character—finally approached him after stopping to talk and kiss and laugh with what felt like every other fucking person at the bar first.

He offered Robert a seductive, pouty-lipped smile. “What can I get *you*, gorgeous? And please tell me sex on the beach.

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Or maybe a screaming orgasm? Oh, wait, no, I know what fits you...a slow comfortable screw against the wall.”

The game playing grated Robert’s nerves...not something that happened to him often. But damn it, he wanted only one thing right now. “I don’t want a drink. I’m looking for Jesse. Is he here tonight?”

“Jesse...hmm...” He put a black painted nail against his lips. “I’m not sure who you’re talking about.”

Robert gave a mental eye roll. “Jesse McIntyre? The bartender who’s usually here on Friday nights?”

“Oh, him,” Faux Richie said, dropping his seductive pose. “He’s not here.”

“As in ever anymore? Or as in just tonight he’s not here.”

Faux Richie waved an hand through the air. “He took the night off.”

Robert wasn’t sure if he felt relief that Jesse hadn’t quit and he wouldn’t lose contact with him in the one place where he knew he could always—usually—find him, or frustration because this was the *only* place he knew where to find him, and if Jesse wasn’t here then Robert was at a loss. He wanted to see him and hated feeling so damned cut off from him. He took a gamble, though he didn’t hold out much hope. “Do you by any chance have his phone number?”

Faux Richie cut him off with a hand slicing through the air. “No, no, and no. No personal information shared with customers.”

Robert sighed. “Okay. Thanks anyway,” he mumbled.

“So can I get you a drink now or are you just going to

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stand there taking up my bar space?”

“Have your space.” Robert stepped away from the bar and the spot was immediately filled in behind him.

What the hell did he do now? Damn, he should have asked the smartass if he at least knew when Jesse would be in again. Although Mr. Attitude probably wouldn’t have told him even if he did know.

Robert dragged a hand through his hair and gazed around the pub. A sleekly combed blond head caught his eyes, and then the face came into view. Andy the attorney.

“Oh, shit.” Robert turned and tried to blend in behind a tall leatherman. The last damn thing he needed tonight was to have to fend off the lawyer who’d no doubt be wanting to take him up on the rain check. “Fuck. Fuck.”

Robert pressed his way toward the door, wanting to get out of here. Wanting...Jesse. Damn it.

An arm slid through his...delicate, clad in turquoise. He looked down at a dark pixie head at his shoulder. And when the stranger looked up at him, he found himself looking into an attractive young woman’s face. His breath caught. Not just any woman. Jesse’s friend.

“You’re Leila?”

She smiled and nodded. “Let’s go outside where it’s not so loud and we can talk without shouting.”

A knot settled in Robert’s stomach, wondering what she’d heard about him, what she wanted to talk about. But going outside was fine with him because he’d seen Andy heading his way and escape was a welcome option right now.

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When they exited, Leila led him away from the door to a quiet place against the brick wall. She slid her arm free from around his and wrapped her arms around herself. “Brrr.”

“Would you like my coat?”

“Nah, I’m okay, but thanks.” She smiled at him again and he was struck by just how pretty she really was. Her skin was pale but her dark eyes were almond shaped and he wondered if maybe she was of mixed heritage...maybe part Japanese?

She cut right to the chase. “I heard you at the bar. You’re looking for Jesse?”

He nodded wondering again what Jesse might have told her. “I was surprised he wasn’t here. He usually is on Friday nights.”

“I don’t really know you and you don’t know me, but can I be honest with you?”

Robert nodded, his stomach tightening even more.

“Jesse took the night off tonight. He didn’t really say why, just that he was taking it off. But I think...” She bit her lip. “I think maybe he took it off because he thought you might come looking for him.”

Her words were like a blow to his gut. “Oh, God. Does he hate me that much?” He suddenly felt like he might be sick.

A half-smile teased at her red lips. “Actually, I don’t think he hates you at all. I don’t think that’s the problem.”

Robert frowned, not certain what she meant.

“He didn’t really tell me anything about how he spent that weekend of the blizzard. He just said it had been quiet. But I know he wasn’t home because when I got home Sunday, he

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was cleaning up a mess in the kitchen where the freezer had defrosted and left a huge puddle on the floor. If he'd been home he would have seen it and taken care of it as it happened. Plus, he was still wearing the same clothes he'd had on when I left. I think maybe he spent that weekend with you. Am I right?"

Robert wasn't sure what to say. If Jesse hadn't told her, then did he have a right to?

"Never mind, you don't have to answer that. I just know how you two were looking at each other that night and ever since then, even though he hasn't said a word to me about it, he's been wandering around like he's lost. Like he just lost his best friend—but since I'm his best friend, then I have to assume he's lost something even more important."

"I'm not sure what I am to him."

"Because he won't let you in past his walls?"

Her gaze was sympathetic, understanding, and Robert nodded.

She fished in the pocket of her down vest which she wore over a tight, long-sleeved T-shirt and pulled out a key ring with just a few keys. She worked a silver one off the ring and handed it to him.

"What this?"

"Do you know where Gabrielson Fine Arts Center and School is? Across from the university? It's the red brick building kind of tucked in behind the university's theater."

"I know it."

"If you park on the side street next to it, there's a back

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door. This key unlocks it. Let yourself in, then go down the steps to the pottery studio. That's where Jesse is tonight."

His pulse racing at the possibility of seeing Jesse soon, he said, "You don't even know me. Why are you trusting me with this"—he held up the key—"and him?"

A smile turned up her lips. "Because I read people pretty damn well and like I said, I've seen how you look at him. I've seen how he looks at you. And let's just say I'm a believer in possibilities." Then she sobered. "You're a businessman. You have business cards, right?"

"Yeah," Robert said slowly, not following her.

"Give me one." She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers.

He reached for his wallet in his back pocket, pulled it out, slid a card from it and handed it to her. "Can I ask why?"

She glanced at the card, then back up at him. "Jesse's been hurt enough. So make sure you know what you want before you pursue this any further. Because I won't see him hurt again. And if you do"—she waved his card—"now I know where to find you."

Robert swallowed hard and nodded.

Leila smiled at him and turned toward the building. Then she paused and looked back over her shoulder at him. "And, Robert? He'll probably try to push you away. If you really care...don't let him."

* * *

Robert parked on the quiet side street next to the art center,

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and found the door exactly as Leila had said. The center was dark from what he could tell through the long windows above the door. Maybe Leila had been wrong and Jesse wasn't here at all. He hated to get caught entering a locked building in the dark of night and be accused of being a burglar or something.

A burglar with a key?

It still felt odd. And empty. But as he gazed around he saw a small parking lot in the back. A single vehicle sat in the lot. The dark red and white Blazer.

His pulse thrummed. Without any second thoughts, he unlocked the door and slipped inside, making sure to relock it behind him.

It really was pretty dark, so he stood still for a moment to let his eyes adjust and get his bearings. A dim light burned in one of the studios on this floor that gave off enough of a glow for him to make out the stairs Leila had referred to. They were in the center of the main room where he stood. As he approached them, his dress shoes silent on the carpet that covered the floor around what looked like the reception desk, he saw a light coming from below as well. He went down the stairs...not carpet now, tile, and tried to be as quiet as he could because he honestly wasn't sure what Jesse would do when he saw him.

Leila had said go to the pottery studio, like Robert was supposed to know where that was. But it was obvious when he reached the foot of the stairs. A damp, dusty clay scent filled the air, and he saw a light on and heard a quiet electronic hum in the area to his right.

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When he rounded the corner, in the glow of one overhead hanging light, the sight that greeted him caused him to stop and stare. Heat, longing and...Christ, he couldn't deny it now...*love* pulsed through him.

Jesse sat on a stool dressed in faded, holey blue jeans splashed with dried clay, and a long-sleeved thermal T-shirt with the sleeves pushed partway up his forearms. He leaned over a pottery wheel that spun in front of him. Deep in concentration, his strong, long-fingered hands cradled and stroked a large lump of wet clay as if it were a lover. As he watched, in awe, Jesse dipped his hand in a bucket of water, and the clay began to take shape under his sure, deft touch, first opening, then, as Jesse dipped into the water again and began slow, easy pulling motions, rising up into a cylinder.

Robert wasn't sure how long he stood there captivated as the cylinder grew taller, then began to widen near the base. But as much as he watched the piece of art being shaped before his eyes, he watched the artist as well. Seeing Jesse like this, completely lost in his creation, was one of the most beautiful, *sensual* things he'd ever experienced.

He suddenly remembered the conversation with Jesse that night at his house as he'd built a fire and Jesse had asked him about the pottery urn Robert had on display at home. His eyes widened as he realized the vessel Jesse was creating now was taking on a similar form—not exactly the same, but the same style.

No...it couldn't be. Could it?

He tried to remember what the initials were on the bottom

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of the piece at home... Closing his eyes, he conjured up a mental picture of it. He'd looked at it several times after he'd bought it at the art sale because he wanted desperately to find more pieces by the artist. But the university wasn't sure who'd donated the urn.

What were the damned letters? And then he remembered. JMC.

No...big M, little C.

JMc. He hissed in shock. Jesse McIntyre? *Oh, my God.*

He must have made enough noise to be heard because the wheel suddenly stopped and Jesse turned in his direction.

His eyes widened. And then his brow furrowed. "What are you doing here, Robert?"

Not exactly a warm welcome, but not exactly angry either.

Robert stepped forward, sorry that he'd interrupted Jesse's work. But he obviously couldn't keep standing in the shadows. "I went to BJ's tonight, hoping to see you, but you weren't there. Leila found me and told me where you were. She gave me a key."

Robert held it up, took another step forward and laid it on a canvas-covered table between them, then stepped back. All his instincts yearned to circle the table and pull Jesse into his arms. But the cautious look in Jesse's eyes, and his own sense of self-preservation held him back. "I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"How long were you standing there?"

He couldn't lie. "A few minutes. Jesse...you, this...why didn't you tell me you were an artist?"

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He bit his lip. "Because I'm not. Not really. I'm just starting to get back into it."

"My God, that's so not true. You are. Watching you do this...it's beautiful. You did the piece at my house, didn't you?"

He gave an almost embarrassed half-shrug. "Leila talked me into donating it to the show last spring. She and I took a lot of art classes together in college. That's what she got her degree in. She's a sculptor."

Something clicked for Robert. "Art. Was that what you wanted to major in at college and your parents thought it was too impractical?"

Another shrug, but Robert saw the truth in his face.

"Why didn't you say something that night at my house, that you'd done the piece I have?"

He grabbed up a towel. "I don't know, Robert. I just...I don't really do it for other people or to make money on it. I do it for myself. I teach a couple of classes here at the center and other than that, I...do my own thing."

He rose, threw down the towel, and crossed to the big, industrial sink in the corner and began washing his hands and arms.

Even watching that was an arousing experience for Robert. *Damn*, he had it bad for this man.

When he'd finished and dried his hands on a paper towel, he turned slowly. "What did you want to see me about?"

The lump returned to his throat and Robert wasn't sure if he could speak if he tried. But he did try. Because they needed

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to get this out in the open.

“Why did you leave Sunday morning without waking me?”

“I told you why. I left you a note.”

“I know you left a damned note. I’ve read it. Over and over. Trying to figure out what you were saying.”

“There was no hidden agenda. I said everything plain and clear.”

Robert sighed in frustration. “Yeah, you said you were giving me my house and life back...like you’d somehow stolen them from me? And ‘thanks for being so generous in a difficult situation.’ Which part was difficult, Jesse? I told you more than once and tried to show you several times over that I was glad you were there. So am I to assume that means it was difficult for you, because you didn’t want to be there?”

“Look, you’re a busy man.” Jesse’s voice was raspy. “You said so yourself. I know you have a big company to run and there’s not room in your life for anything else. I also know you’re not into relationships—a man who never spends the night with anyone isn’t exactly interested in second dates. So I was just being respectful of that. Trying to give you what you want and need.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t try to turn this around on me, because this isn’t my deal. It’s yours. You’re putting words in my mouth. I did everything I could that weekend to make sure you knew that even if I am busy, or hadn’t slept overnight with anyone in the

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past, it was different with you. It was all different with you. My God...didn't you feel it? You acted like you did. But then I woke up that morning and you were gone."

"I left the note."

"A note that tried to pretend nothing had happened between us."

"Yeah, and it's been two weeks since I've heard from you, Robert. Did it occur to you in all that time that if what happened between us was so important maybe you could have picked up the phone?"

Sharp bursts of pain shot through Robert's temples. "I tried," he said through gritted teeth. "You didn't leave me a number, in case you don't remember. You're not listed with information, and I didn't know Leila's last name. Whoever I talked to at the bar wouldn't even consider giving out your number, and considering the way you're acting, obviously didn't give you the message I'd called either. What else could I have done?"

Jesse swallowed, then grimaced like it was painful. "So you wait two weeks to come see me?"

"I was out of town, Jesse! On a business trip. I left the Monday after the storm and just got back tonight. I didn't even bother to stop by my house, I went straight to BJ's to see you. But you weren't there. And why is that exactly? Were you trying to avoid me? Because if you were, then you don't get any rights to criticize me for not trying to see you sooner."

"Look..." Jesse dragged in a deep, shaky breath and stabbed a hand through his hair. "We just need to face the

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facts here. You were right that first night, Robert. We're not meant for each other."

"Wh—"

"I'm not ready to be with someone right now. And you said yourself that you're busy, you have your company. I know you're not interested in anything long-term. So I'm making it easy on both of us."

The finality of his words stung Robert to the quick. "Jesse..."

"That's just the way it has to be. I can't...I can't do this."

The way his voice trembled tore at Robert's heart. And told him far more than Jesse's words did.

He took the several steps to where Jesse leaned against the sink. "No...it doesn't have to be this way. I know I'm not perfect and I don't have a great track record. And I admit I've spent most of my life alone. But you're all I could think about for months before the weekend of the blizzard. *Months*, Jesse. You said you noticed I always went home from the bar alone. But do you know why?"

At the slight shake of Jesse's head, Robert said, "Because of you. Because no one else was *you*."

Jesse's chest heaved with deep breaths. His eyes were wide as Robert's confession sank in.

"And these past two weeks," Robert continued, "the whole time I was at meetings and haggling over contract details, I could barely concentrate because you were still all I could think about. Except it was even worse than before, because now I know your scent, the way your skin feels under my

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hands, the sound of your moans when you're about to come, and how your smile does thing to my heart I can't even explain. All I've done since that weekend is think about you and miss you."

"Robert..." It was a soft, strangled whisper.

"If you can look me in the eye and tell me you didn't miss me, too, I'll leave you alone. But you know what I think? I think you can't tell me that."

Lines creased Jesse's forehead. His eyes were awash with too many churning emotions to read.

"Tell me, Jesse. Tell me you didn't think about me. Tell me that weekend meant nothing to you. *Tell me!*"

A hot, heaving breath left Jesse's lungs and his face looked tortured. "It... It...didn't," he whispered. But once again his eyes gave him away.

Robert shook his head. "I don't believe you. You know why? Because of this." He covered Jesse's mouth with his own and kissed him, long and intimately and deeply, pouring all his feelings into it.

Jesse hesitated, his hands fisting at his sides for a moment. But then with a sob, his body melded with Robert's, his hands burrowed into Robert's hair, and he kissed back.

Relief shuddered through Robert. He hadn't wanted to believe Jesse would deny their connection, but a part of him had been scared, hell, *terrified*, he might. With Jesse in his arms again, though, he could begin to hope maybe everything might be okay between them. That maybe they had a chance.

When neither of them could breathe, they came up for air.

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"I missed you," Jesse murmured.

The admission sent tendrils of warmth around Robert's heart. He rested his forehead against Jesse's. "Let me in, Jess. Please. Whatever it is that troubles you, don't push me away. Let me help."

"You can't help. It's not a 'helping' kind of thing."

"How do you know unless you give me a chance to show you?"

"You'll judge me," he whispered. "And I couldn't stand that."

"I won't. I swear."

"Yeah, you will. And you should."

"Try me. Please. Give me a chance."

Jesse's eyes squeezed closed. Robert rubbed the nape of his neck beneath his dark hair, trying not to push too hard, but also determined not to leave this time until the truth was out. Because until Jesse talked to him, really talked to him, he was afraid they'd never be able to move forward.

But as seconds ticked by, his heart sank.

Then, in a quiet, rusty voice that sounded like it made his throat ache, Jesse said, "I killed someone."

"Wh...at?" Robert's heart pounded.

"I...I got someone killed," he clarified. "But it's the same difference. I'm responsible for someone being dead and gone forever."

Robert brushed the hair back off his face. "What happened?"

"I told you...I was a player. The sex, the recreational

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nightclub drugs, the whole deal. I was a bored teenage brat who evolved into a bored twenty-something party boy who lived for whatever thrill was out there. I had a friend, Ryan. We met at the first bar I ever worked at, we slept together a couple of times, but ended up becoming really good friends. He was into thrills, too, but I was always the instigator. He was more of a follower than a leader, and I took advantage of him because I knew I could talk him into almost everything—” His voice caught.

“Robert I can’t do this.” He tried to pull away, but Robert tugged him back.

“Yes, you can.” He returned to rubbing Jesse’s neck with one hand, while the other slid up and down his back. “Please, trust me.”

Jesse’s forehead rested against his again, head tipped down, and his eyes stayed closed, as if he couldn’t bear for Robert to see him.

“One night, I’d finished my shift and Ryan and I were cruising the bar. A guy hit on me. He was older by several years. Hot. We danced. He said he had a boat out on the bay and did I want to bring a friend and come with him and have a good time. Said he was into threesomes. It was late and I’d already had too much to drink that night, which didn’t usually make me a real clear thinking citizen. I found Ryan and tried to convince him to go. He...”

He stopped and took several breaths. Robert’s heart ached for him.

“He didn’t want to. Said he didn’t trust the guy, didn’t feel

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comfortable with him. I laughed at him and told him he was just being a dumbass. That everything'd be fine. He argued with me and I kept pushing and pushing. I knew he really didn't want to do it, but he finally gave in to me because he always did." His voice cracked. "It was like a fucking badge of honor I wore... 'Oh, I can convince my friend to do *anything*. Aren't I hot shit?'"

A sob shook his chest.

It caused Robert's eyes to burn with unshed moisture. "So you went?" he asked softly.

"Oh, yeah. We went. Got on the guy's boat—it was like a small fucking yacht. And then...I don't really..." Another choking breath. "I don't really remember much of anything until I opened my eyes and saw the boat flying over the water at like a hundred miles an hour, straight toward the dock."

"Oh, Christ," Robert whispered, suspecting what had happened.

"Yeah."

Jesse dropped his head to Robert's shoulder, his hands clutching at Robert's coat. His shoulders shook and Robert pressed a kiss against his hair and held him. "It's okay. Shhh, it's okay."

"No, it's not," Jesse said, his tone raw and hoarse. "The cops found out later that the bastard had slipped roofies in our drinks. Seems that was his MO...finding a couple of willing and wasted younger guys at clubs, inviting them to leave with him, drugging them, having a grand old time, with his victims waking up the next day none the wiser. Except this time he

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was so fucked up himself that he didn't even know what he was doing."

Robert winced. "And your friend?"

"He died. But not right away. He was still conscious when they got him to the hospital. Conscious enough to tell his family he hadn't wanted to go and I'd forced him into it. They came to see me and told me pointblank they blamed me for what happened."

"Oh, God, Jess." Robert held him tighter and rocked him. He couldn't even imagine how much that had tormented Jesse. People could be so cruel when they were hurting. "Listen to me, you have to put the blame where it belongs...on the sleaze who drugged your drinks and was driving the boat."

"I talked Ryan into it. It was my fault."

"No, damn it. Ryan was an adult, fully capable of making his own decisions. You might have pressured him, but in the end, he had a choice to walk away and he didn't. He was responsible for his own actions. And once you two were on that boat, both of you ceased being responsible because that fucking asshole committed a crime against you."

Jesse's hand clutched at the lapels of Robert's coat. "I know, but..." he whispered.

"There are no buts, Jess. The fucker who picked you up and drove the boat killed your friend. You didn't." He stroked Jesse's face. "And what about you? You were badly injured, too, weren't you?"

"I had broken bones and...a lot of internal injuries. I don't remember it, but they told me the boat's steering wheel was

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buried in me.”

Robert’s chest crushed at the thought of what Jesse had gone through. “You could have died,” he whispered. “You almost did, didn’t you?”

“I wanted to. For a long time...wished I had.”

“Jesse...” Robert tipped his face up and brushed kisses over his lips, his damp cheeks, his eyes. “Oh, babe. You have no idea how glad I am you didn’t.”

Jesse dragged a hand over his red eyes, still not looking at Robert, but not pulling away either, which Robert took as a good sign.

Robert dug into his coat pocket thinking he might have a tissue. When he pulled out his glove, Jesse stiffened in his arms.

“What? What is it?”

His gaze was focused on Robert’s hand with the glove. Robert looked down and saw the tiny little bottle of the Passion oil nestled in with the black leather.

Jesse snatched up the bottle. “What the hell is this?” His voice was choked, harsh, a tone Robert had never heard before.

Robert tried to reach for it. “It’s nothing. Just some—” Jesse pulled it out of his way. In the process it fell on the tile floor and the glass shattered.

When Jesse looked up at him, his eyes had gone dark with hurt and fury. “What the fuck were you going to do with that stuff?”

“Jess, I don’t—”

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“Get out!” He pointed a shaking finger at the stairs.

“What?” Robert’s head pounded and his heart did, too. What was happening?

“You heard me. Get out!”

“Jesse, what the hell is going on?”

“Get the fuck out, Robert. Now. Now!” His face was hard, unyielding.

Robert’s stomach churned. His chest squeezed so tight he couldn’t breathe. “I don’t understand.”

“Yeah. Right. Well, let me make it clear. I don’t *ever* want to see you again. Stay the fuck away from me!”

He pushed past Robert, went straight to the wheel where the beautiful clay piece he’d been creating sat waiting for his return. Without so much as a moment of hesitation, Jesse slammed his hand against it, sending clay flying everywhere.

Robert stood rooted to the spot in shock.

“Go!” Jesse shouted. His glare was so filled with hatred it burned straight to Robert’s soul.

Hurting in a way he hadn’t since he was eighteen, Robert turned his back on the man he’d been willing to risk everything for, and walked away.

CHAPTER 9

Jesse sat on the couch at home, in the dark, staring at nothing. He felt sick. Angry. Confused.

At the same time, he couldn't get the look of utter hurt and betrayal on Robert's face out of his mind. It was that more than anything that tore him up inside. And he didn't understand why. He owed the man nothing. *Nothing*. So why did he feel so fucking guilty for putting that look on his face?

When Leila came home, she flipped on the light switch and found him there. She took one look at him and her face fell.

"Oh, my God, Jesse...what happened?" She knelt on the floor at his feet. Her soft hand cupped his face, stroking his

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beard. "Did Robert find you?"

"He found me," he mumbled.

"Oh, shit, sweetie. What happened?"

"I told him. I told him everything."

"That's good. I'm glad you did. He cares for you."

He laughed and it was a harsh sound that grated along his raw nerve endings. "Yeah, right. He cares so much he was carrying a bottle of some kind of drug in his pocket."

"What? What kind of drug?"

"Something in a tiny little bottle. Liquid. Like the kind of stuff people could easily slip in drinks."

Leila's dark eyes grew huge in her face. "Oh, my God. That doesn't sound like him at all, though, Jesse. He's never given me that kind of vibe. And the man's completely crazy about you. Why would he want to hurt you?"

"Yeah, because we know him so well. I'm feeling real confident about your 'vibe' right now, Leila."

"Did you ask him what it was?"

He hesitated.

"Did you?"

"No."

"Then how do you know what it was? Did you catch him trying to use it on you?"

"It was in his coat pocket. It came out by accident when he pulled out his glove. And, come on, what the hell else would it be?"

"Um, I don't know...breath freshener? Cologne? Like one of those little sample bottles they give away at the department

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stores. How big was the bottle? What did it look like?"

Jesse showed her the size with his fingers. "It had a black cap. Whatever was in it was kind of gold colored."

"He opened it in front of you?"

"No! It was clear glass. You could see it was gold. Then the bottle fell on the floor and broke."

"What did he say about it?"

He winced, remembering how the scene had played out.

"Maybe you'd better tell me exactly what happened."

Fuck, he didn't want to relive it all again. He wanted to curl up on the couch and go to sleep for about a month. But every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was that god-awful look on Robert's face.

"You have to tell me everything." Leila's voice was insistent. "Jesse I mean it. You're accusing this man of something pretty awful, and if he really has threatened you in any way you know I'll have your back. But..." A frown drew her delicate eyebrows together. "But before you convict him, let's be sure we have all the facts first, okay? You have to talk to me."

Jesse let his head drop back against the couch. In a heavy voice he told her everything that had happened between him and Robert that night, all the way up to the part where the little glass vial or bottle or whatever it had been had smashed to the floor.

"And then what happened?" Leila said.

"I told him to get out. That I didn't ever want to see him again. I didn't want him to ever fucking come near me again."

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Leila blanched like maybe she thought he'd been too harsh. "Was there a label on the bottle?"

"No. Not on it. There was something tied around the lid though. It was a purple tag, maybe. With some kind of fancy gold writing on it."

"Oh, shit," she said softly.

"What?"

She stood. "Come with me."

Jesse managed to drag himself to his feet, though he wasn't sure how. His legs felt like they'd given up on him long ago.

Leila led him to her bedroom. He didn't come in it very often except to maybe lounge on her bed and talk to her from time to time when she was dressing to go somewhere or was working on her computer on the table in the corner and wanted to share something with him she'd found or read.

She stopped in front of her dresser and picked up several little bottles from the top, then held them out to him.

"Did the bottle look one of these?"

A sharp ache began to bloom in chest as he stared at the objects she held. "Yes," he whispered.

"When it broke on the floor, was it liquidy like water or like alcohol or like oil?"

"It was...oily. When I wiped it up off the floor with a paper towel before I left, it was slippery."

"Oh, Jess."

The disappointment in her tone, at him, was more than he could bear right now. "What?" His heart pounded.

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“Oily, in a bottle like this, with a purple tag with fancy gold writing on it? Sweetie, if it wasn’t some kind perfume or cologne, it was probably essential oil or aromatherapy oil.”

“Meaning...?” Oh, God, why did it feel like his chest was going to explode? And why did he keep seeing Robert’s tortured expression?”

“Oh, my God, you’re so out of touch with popular culture. Jess, these bottles I have all contain essential oils. Herbs and plant extracts. People use them for a ton of things, perfectly harmless, natural things. Like this one.” She opened the lid and held it under his nose. “Lavender. It’s supposed to be soothing. People use it in their bath water to relax or put it on their pillow at night. This one’s eucalyptus. I use it when I have a cold because it clears my sinuses. There are dozens and dozens of others.”

“But we don’t know that’s what he had?” Jesse said, defensive.

“We don’t know that it wasn’t either, because you didn’t give him a chance to say. Honey, he might have been given a perfume sample last time he was in the store and stuck it in his pocket. Or he might have picked up a bottle of oil at the health food store, or even Logan Shoemaker sells oils at his metaphysical store up by the university. Several of mine came from there. In fact...” She shook her head and she looked even more disappointed in Jesse. “When I was in there this week I remember seeing some on his counter that had purple tags.”

Jesse sank onto the edge of her bed. He pushed his hands through his hair. “Oh, God. Robert...”

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“Yeah.” She sat next to him. “From the bottom of my heart I don’t believe he would ever do anything nefarious to you, Jesse. If you could have seen his face tonight when he came into BJ’s and realized you weren’t there... He was crushed. That’s why I talked to him. You had been moping around here for the past couple of weeks, and then he came in asking for you, looking pretty much like you’ve been looking, and it was obvious to me there was something between you guys.”

Jesse fell back on the bed scrubbing at his eyes, which were burning again. “I can never make this up to him.” His voice was so gravelly he almost didn’t recognize it as his own. “I lost it, Lei. I said really horrible things to him, shouted at him. And the look on his face...” The words choked inside him.

“Yes, you can. The man’s crazy about you, Jesse.”

“Not anymore. There’s no way he is anymore.”

She clutched his hand. “Listen to me. If you care about Robert at all, you *have* to go see him. Tonight. You can’t let this fester. You have to go apologize to him and make this right.”

“He’s not going to even want to see me.”

“You have to try. And if he doesn’t want to see you tonight, then you have to keep trying.”

He squeezed his eyes between his thumb and forefinger. “Sometimes I feel so completely fucking useless in this world,” he said hoarsely. “Like I just keep screwing up and I wonder if I’m ever going to be able to get it right.”

“Well here’s your chance.”

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He swallowed hard and pulled himself up. “Why do I act like such an asshole sometimes?”

“Because you’ve been hurting for a long time, sweetie. Longer than you realize, even before Ryan. But it’s going to get better. And I truly, truly believe that there could be something good between you and Robert.”

Her words brought back a sudden memory of the conversation he’d had with Benny the night he’d taken Robert home. Benny had said Robert was hurting and probably didn’t even know why.

The thought sent a jolt of blinding guilt straight through Jesse. Because he was pretty sure he knew why Robert had been hurting for so long. And he’d just put him through the same kind of hell all over again.

“Oh, fuck. I have to go. Right now.”

* * *

Robert lay on his bed, flat on his back, dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, watching the moonlight play across the ceiling as the trees outside the window swayed, cutting its light in and out.

He was numb. Except for the black pit of tar that boiled in his chest. That, he felt every agonizing moment of.

What did you expect? You were stupid enough to fall in love and now you’ve paid the price. Just like you’ve always known. You have no one to blame but yourself.

And he did blame himself. For not being able to fight his attraction to Jesse in the first place. For not being able to let

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Jesse walk away when he'd tried two weeks ago. And especially for tonight. Jesse hadn't wanted to talk about what happened, but Robert had prodded until he did. He was the reason the man had been so on edge and emotional. And as he was driving home, it had hit him like a ton of bricks why Jesse had reacted the way he had. He'd just finished telling the story of how an older man had seduced him, drugged, him, fucked him, then ruined his life. And what did Robert do? Pulled out the little bottle of Passion oil, which he'd completely forgotten was even in there. Jesse had obviously seen it as a threat. It was probably like déjà vu for him. Older man, seduction, sex, a potential drug.

In that moment, Robert had forgiven Jesse for losing it and telling him to get the fuck out.

Not that it mattered, because he'd never get a chance now to tell him. He'd never get a chance to see the man's beautiful smile again or hear his voice or see his eyes sparkling, because he would never go back to BJ's. He'd stay away and honor Jesse's wishes. He couldn't stand to cause him any more pain. And it would be too hard for him, too.

All those years he'd avoided anything to do with the L word or relationships. He looked back on it and realized in retrospect that there were times he'd been miserably lonely. But he'd also never had to feel like this. Yet even now, even with the pain, he still wanted the man with every fiber of his being. God, what a fucking fool he was.

The door bell rang, the sound loud and harsh and unbearable. Robert closed his eyes and didn't move. The only

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person who ever rang his doorbell at night was the neighbor lady from down the road when her Husky ran away. Which seemed to happen about once a month or so. She was always apologetic, and usually Robert didn't mind talking to her. He even went out and helped her look from time to time. But he just couldn't tonight. Tonight she and Nanook of the North were on their own.

He ignored the bell the second time as well. As far as she was concerned, he wasn't home.

After a third ring, all was blessedly silent.

But then he heard a soft scraping noise that sounded like the front door sliding open over the tile entry, and for the first time in hours, he sat up, his pulse racing.

What the fuck?

He slid off the bed and reached for the heavy maple hiking stick that sat in the corner of the bedroom.

A squeak in the hallway turned his racing pulse into a heavy throb. He padded to the door in his bare feet, the stick held at the ready.

Shit. He should have called 911 first thing. He eyed the phone clear on the other side of the bed. But when he heard another squeak that was even closer, fear shot through him that he wouldn't have time to get to the phone without being seen.

This time he heard a footstep right outside his bedroom door.

Without thinking, merely reacting on instinct, Robert stepped out into the hallway and swung the stick.

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A dark form ducked and he barely missed it.

“Holy fuck!”

The deep, hoarse voice sent tingles of recognition through him.

“Jesus Christ, Jesse?” Robert lowered the stick and set it against the door frame. Then he leaned back on one wall in the hallway, while the other masculine body pressed against the other. Both of them were breathing hard.

It was dark except for the nightlight in the hallway, but it gave off enough illumination to see that Jesse was bundled up in his jacket, and that his face was tight with pain.

“I’m sorry.” Jesse’s voice was raspy. “God, I’m sorry, Robert. I didn’t mean to scare the crap out of you.”

“What the hell are you doing in the house?” Robert wasn’t sure what he felt...not anger. Mostly confusion. And a powerful awareness that rippled through his body just from being near Jesse again.

“I rang the doorbell and when you didn’t answer, I started to worry because...” His voice grew even more hoarse. “Because when you left you looked... And so I got your spare key. You showed me where it was that night we shoveled the front deck so we wouldn’t accidentally toss it out with the snow...and... Oh, fuck. I’m just going to shut up now. I have no right to be here. I know that. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay,” Robert said, his voice not in much better shape than Jesse’s. That fucking boiling tar pit inside him was really having a heyday now. He leaned his head against the wall and

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tried to breathe the pain away.

"I shouldn't have come in uninvited. It was stupid and presumptuous of me. I...I'm sure I'm the last person you want to see right now. I'm going to go. I've done enough damage for one night."

He turned to leave, then stopped, still facing away from Robert. He pulled in a deep, ragged breath. "I just wanted you to know," he said his voice painfully quiet, "that I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry for how I treated you tonight, Robert. I don't expect you to forgive me. I just...I needed you to know."

He sighed, and it was such a deep, agonized sound Robert felt it in his own body.

Jesse started walking away.

"Jesse..."

He froze, his back still to Robert.

"I'm sorry I pushed you tonight. I would *never* hurt you intentionally." Robert's chest ached. "It's the last thing I'd ever want. And the stuff in my pocket—"

"I know," he whispered. "It's okay. None of it was your fault. I overreacted and I hate that I hurt you. God, Robert, I wish..." His voice was laced with pain. And longing. He sighed and shook his head, then walked again.

Everything churning inside Robert came to a head. In several fast steps, his legs almost moving of their own will, he caught up to him and turned him around. They stood so close he could feel Jesse's breath, could almost feel his heartbeat. "What do you wish?"

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Jesse's broad chest shuddered. "I wish I could take it all back," he whispered. "Make my words disappear...and go back to the part where you were holding me." His eyes squeezed closed. "But I know I fucked up. And I—"

His heart in his throat, Robert grasped the back of Jesse's head and covered his mouth with his own, needing to show the man in the one way he could when his own words failed just how much he wanted him and needed him.

Jesse's hand slid up to cling to his back. Their bodies melted together, a perfect fit.

Robert eased his lips away from the other man's. "I don't want to lose you, Jesse. Tell me that we have a chance."

"I thought..." Jesse's voice broke. "How can you ever forgive me? I was awful to you tonight."

"You were hurting."

"So were you. *I* hurt you. I don't know how to make that up to you."

"Stay."

Jesse's chest heaved and his eyes widened. "Here? With you tonight? Do you mean that?"

"I'm in love with you, Jesse. You can stay every night if you want."

The air pulsed around them.

"Oh, God." It was a sigh filled with wonder. "Robert...I'm in love with you, too. When you left tonight because I ordered you away...I...I thought a part of me was dying. This is...it's all new to me. I've never felt this way about anyone before."

Robert drew in a slow, trembling breath and heat spread

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through him.

“Neither have I. I guess we’ll have to figure it out together.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m a lowly bartender and I have so much damned baggage.”

He cradled Jesse’s face between his hands. “You’re perfect. I wouldn’t change a single thing.”

“God, I love you,” Jesse breathed.

His warm lips found Robert’s. Their clothes disappeared in a trail leading to the bed. And as Robert felt Jesse’s hard heat pressing inside him, filling him full, he knew his long years of loneliness were over.

M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for fourteen years. 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 gay romances, 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, check out her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com. She also loves hearing from readers.

You can reach her at ML@mlrhodeswriting.com.

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**Don't miss *The Elf And Shoemaker*, by M. L. Rhodes,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Logan Shoemaker's honest, hardworking, and loves what he does. Though he never expects to get rich, he's fared well enough to stay comfortable with his quirky metaphysical store, Shoemaker's Magick Shoppe. But when the economy falls on hard times, his store pays the price. As each month passes, slow sales turn into no sales, and soon Logan's living off ramen noodles and sleeping in a freezing house during the cold winter nights as he struggles to make ends meet. His personal life isn't much better—the worse business at the store grows, the more isolated and lonely he becomes. After a string of mishaps that wipe out the last of his small savings, he finally hits rock bottom the day he discovers the disconnection notice from the electric company hanging on his door. That night, desperate and in despair, he makes a plea to the universe, asking for help.

Needless to say, he never anticipates receiving a response so quickly. Not only does he awaken the next morning to find on his kitchen table four little bottles of a special potion labeled "PASSION," but he keeps remembering the erotically charged dream he'd had during the night. A dream where a tall, gorgeous man with pointed ears comes to his bed and shows him just what kind of magick they can make together.

But was it a dream? All Logan knows is that his customers can't get enough of the special potion—an aphrodisiac—and he can't stop thinking about the sweet seduction of the nighttime visitor who made it. As he tries to sort out what's real and what's not, he discovers there's a much bigger world out there than he'd ever believed, and his true heart's desire might come in a most unexpected form...

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