

I'm Sorry



CHRISTIANE FRANCE

I'M SORRY

...Sitting beside Reese, Chad felt as wired as a teenager going to the prom, secure in the knowledge that tonight was finally the night. Under cover of the table, their legs, hips and hands touched, and everything around Chad disappeared except the need to feel, to touch, and to make Reese his in every way possible. And from the look on Reese's face, he knew Reese's thoughts mirrored his own. They didn't need to say a word or spell anything out—they both knew what they wanted, just as they knew nothing on earth would stop it from happening.

As the speeches wound down and the chatter of the guests at the nearby tables increased from a murmur to a roar, Reese smoothed his hand firmly upward from Chad's knee to his groin. Chad held his breath as Reese's hand pressed hard against his aching cock, wondering what he had in mind.

But then Reese murmured, "What say we adjourn this meeting to some place more private?"

The nearest place they were able to find was a dark, drab room in another hotel, a cheap, touristy place a few blocks away. But décor was the last thing on their minds. Before Chad had finished locking the door and putting on the safety chain, Reese had shucked his clothes and was on his knees on the bed, breathing hard, and saying, "For God's sake, man, hurry up. I'm dyin' here."

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Reese's things on the floor, and he joined Reese on the bed. With both of them on the edge of coming, they didn't bother with the usual niceties such as foreplay or condoms. Chad lathered Reese's hole with a handful of spit, refused to think about the dangers of riding bareback, and just grabbed hold of Reese's penis as he slammed into him like a runaway freight train...

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I'M SORRY

BY

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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For Roy and The Boys.

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Chad Varaday leaned against the lobby wall of the Neapolitan Hotel in Las Vegas, waiting for what seemed like forever for an elevator to take him up to his room. Finally, a car arrived. The doors opened and as the passengers exited, one of them, a dark-haired man in his late thirties, snagged Chad's attention. His heart skipped a beat.

Reese Harmer? Impossible! He watched, frowning as the man took off in the opposite direction, turned a corner and disappeared.

The guy bore a strong resemblance to a man from his past who Chad remembered all too well. But ten years was a long time, and as people got older, their looks changed and memory

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couldn't always be relied on. Chad knew he didn't look the same as he had ten years ago. He'd lost his boyish looks, along with his illusions, and each week seemed to bring a few more lines and grey hairs.

Another car arrived, closed its doors and left, but Chad continued to stare down the now empty hallway. He knew it couldn't have been Reese...yet there'd been something. Maybe it was the way the guy carried himself or something about the way he walked that reminded him of the man he'd once loved. Chad shook his head. Not Reese, but enough of a likeness to stir up a sack full of painful old memories of times and places best forgotten.

When the next car slid to a stop and opened its doors, Chad picked up his overnight bag, got on and pressed the button for his floor. Tall, slim, dark-haired handsome men were a dime a dozen in Vegas, nevertheless he'd found the likeness strong enough to be more than a little disturbing. *A ghost from the past...*

Ten years ago, Chad had had it all. As the youngest son of an influential family, and fresh out of school with his master's degree in business, he'd spent the winters in town, living the life at his own bachelor apartment in New York, and summer weekends either at his parents' place in the Hamptons, or at a friend's summer home at the Cape. He'd had everything he wanted and his future had been there before him like a bright shiny bubble.

And then he'd met Reese at a charity function. Reese had said he was married, but he and his wife were separated and

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had been for several years. They just hadn't got around to talking to a lawyer and filing for divorce. Whether Reese had married to hide the fact he was gay or in an effort to deny it, Chad had never quite figured out. And since it was none of his business, he'd never asked. But it had been pretty much love at first sight for him and Reese. They'd spent that summer and fall keeping their affair under wraps by inventing business trips and meeting in out of the way places. Until one snowy winter day when the bright shiny bubble had burst and life, as he'd known it back then, had ceased to exist.

"Can you hold the door, please!"

As Chad stuck his foot out to stop the door from closing, the same dark-haired man bounded back into the elevator.

Almost nose-to-nose, they stared at one another, and everything around Chad vanished except the here, the now, and the one face he'd never expected to see ever again.

"Chad?"

Chad held his breath. His heart was beating too fast, and his stomach was doing a great imitation of a ship on stormy seas. Ten years ago, he'd gone through all the gut-wrenching aftermath of a bad breakup. The crying jags, the inability to eat or sleep properly for weeks. The deep depression when he'd shut himself away from the world and everyone in it, including his own family.

He could not go through all that again. Maybe, if he just ignored this ghost from the past, pretended he hadn't heard...

"Hey, Chad? It's me, Reese. Reese Harmer."

The elevator stopped. Chad glanced at the indicator board,

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realized it was his floor, and with a muttered, "Excuse me, please," pushed his way past the ghost and out of the car.

He'd taken no more than two or three steps along the hallway when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Chad! Hold it! Please don't do this. I know it's you."

Chad stopped, gritted his teeth and turned. "Get your hands off me. Now!"

Reese removed his hand and took a cautious step backward. "Hey, you were the one who was supposed to call me back, remember? At least that's the way I heard it."

"Wherever you heard that, then you heard wrong."

Reese frowned. "Okay, I heard wrong. I guess my roommate must've misunderstood what you said." He paused. "I have no idea what you're so angry about. But...but whatever it is, ten years is one helluva long time. Can't we at least talk?"

"Talk about what? How you made promises you broke because you had no real intention of keeping them in the first place? How you let me build all those wonderful mind pictures of the two of us moving to the west coast where we'd start fabulous new lives and have our own fantastic business? And how, at the very last minute, you did a complete one-eighty and blew it all away without one single fucking word of apology, explanation, or even two little words like, 'I'm sorry.' That the kinda shit you want to talk about?"

Reese flinched like Chad had hit him, and, for a second, that's exactly what Chad wanted to do...grind Reese's once-beloved face into the carpet with the heel of his boot, and

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then...just walk away.

If only he could walk away.

“Hey, you can’t put all the blame on me for whatever went wrong. When you didn’t call back the night before we were supposed to leave, I didn’t know what to do. I had no idea where you were and no way of getting in touch.”

“Or was it that you were too busy elsewhere and couldn’t be bothered?” Chad sneered. “You could’ve called the office, or my parents’ house, or one of my brothers or sisters. All the Varadays’ numbers are in the book. At least one of them would’ve known how to reach me.”

“I thought about doing that, but I knew they didn’t want to know about us. I was afraid they’d hang up on me. Anyway...” Reese sighed, stuck his hands in his pockets and began to kick at the carpet with the toe of his shoe. “I was waiting for you to call me back.”

“What do mean *call you back*? Where in hell did you get the notion I was supposed to call you? You were supposed to meet me at the airport the next morning, but you never showed up.”

“I didn’t go to the airport because you’d left a message telling me not to.”

“Who told you that?”

“Al, one of my roommates. The night before I was to meet you at JFK, you phoned and asked for me. Correct?”

“Yeah, I called.”

“I was out doing a few last-minute things. When I got back, Al—he was one you spoke with—told me you’d called

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and that you had some kind of family emergency. He thought maybe there'd been an accident or something. Anyway, you told him everything was on hold temporarily and I should wait for you to call me back."

"That's total bullshit. I never said any of that."

Reese shrugged. "Sorry, but he told me you did, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. When you didn't call, I tried to find you. But you'd given up your apartment and sold your car. You said you'd be staying the night at your brother's place. I called there, but there was no answer. I called a few other people I thought might know plus several hotels, but, needless to say, no luck.

"A couple of days later, when I still hadn't heard from you, I really started to worry, so I took a chance and called your office. The receptionist said you'd left the firm and moved out west. That really threw me. I asked if she was sure because I'd heard there was a family emergency the day before you were to leave. But she said if there was she'd have known, and since she didn't, I must've been misinformed."

Reese sighed and shuffled his feet. "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about me. I didn't know what else to think. I wanted to track you down and find out for sure, except I realized there was no point. If you'd intended to call me back two days were more than enough time in which to do it. You hadn't, and I figured that said it all. You'd moved on and forgotten about me."

Chad stared at his former lover, unable to conceal his shock. "Forgotten about you? Are you crazy? I couldn't have

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done that if I'd tried. I was in love with you. You were my whole fucking life...my whole world."

A member of the cleaning staff was coming down the hallway toward them, pushing a trolley laden with cleaning supplies and fresh linens. Although one-half of Chad wanted to hear the rest of Reese's story, the other, sensible half wanted to use the interruption as a means of escape. "Look, I have to go. Things to do and people to see. I'm sure you understand."

Reese waited until the woman and her trolley had passed far enough away to be out of hearing, then he said softly, "I loved you, too. Come to that, I guess I still do." His lips twisted in a humorless smile. "I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? Tell that to someone who cares," Chad muttered as he continued on to his room, his anger coming to a boil when he realized Reese was still trailing along in his wake.

"I wish you'd just talk to me. Obviously a few wires got crossed somewhere. Please, let's try to figure out what happened. I think you owe me at least that."

Chad shoved the computer card in the slot, waited for the flickering green light to appear, and opened the door. Then he turned around and looked Reese straight in the eye. "Think what you like. I owe you nothing. And I don't want to hear any more fancy excuses or long, elaborate explanations because the truth is, I don't fucking care. Okay? Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Please."

There was something about the quietly spoken word plus

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the dejected look on Reese's face that managed to break through Chad's defenses and soften his resolve in a way he had neither expected nor been prepared for. Perhaps it was because the ten years seemed to have disappeared and he was back in the past, remembering just how much in love they'd been with one another. At least, that's what he'd thought back then. "Oh, alright. I guess you're not going to leave until you get it off your chest."

Reese followed Chad into the room and closed the door behind him.

"You're looking great. Your new life obviously suits you."

Chad dropped his bag on the floor and sat down on the end of the bed. "Do me a favor and cut the crap and the small talk. Say what you have to say, then go."

Reese rested a hip against the corner of the bureau. "I'm not even sure where you want me to begin. Obviously, something went wrong somewhere. You think it was my fault, and I've always thought it was yours."

"Why don't you start at the beginning? Tell me why you just let me go without making any real effort to track me down. You could've left a message at the airline desk. I'd have gotten it when I checked in for the flight. Oh, right." Chad smacked his forehead with the flat of his hand. "Sorry, you thought I'd cancelled. Come on, Reese, there had to be a reason why you just gave up. Did you change your mind about me? Decide you didn't love me any more? Maybe you'd met someone else? Someone you loved more. Maybe someone you found a whole lot more exciting."

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A deep red blush moved up Reese's neck and into his face, and Chad knew he'd struck a nerve.

"Don't be ridiculous. Nothing like that happened. No sudden change of mind on my part, and I didn't meet anyone else. I can't believe you'd even suggest such a horrible, hurtful thing. All I know is what Al told me."

"And that was exactly?"

"After all this time, I can't remember his exact words. But basically, that you'd called and told him there was a family emergency, which meant our plans for leaving town would have to be put on hold for now. And as soon as you had more information you'd call back and let me know the details. But you never did."

"So where were you when I called?" Chad asked, hoping he could persuade Reese to admit the real truth why Reese had failed to follow through on their plans for a new life together.

"Cleaning up a little personal business. A few days before I was to meet you at JFK, my wife called and said she'd heard I was leaving town. She'd met someone and was thinking of getting married, so she figured it was time we filed for divorce instead of just talking about it. She'd contacted a lawyer and had him draw up the papers. If I'd just drop by this guy's office and sign on the dotted line, the divorce would go through uncontested, and I could start my new life free and clear. That's where I was that last night when you phoned me—at the lawyer's office, signing the papers."

Chad looked at Reese and wondered how he could stand there and tell such outrageous lies with a such completely

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innocent look on his face. He was so damn good Chad almost believed him. But only *almost*. “Really? That was nice of her to be so thoughtful. This mean you’re officially a free man now?”

“I have been for a long time. We’d already split everything we owned down the middle, so the divorce went through uncontested.”

“Nice she decided to be so cooperative and understanding. You were lucky.”

“I guess. We both knew who I was from the word go, and we both knew we should never have married. But at the time, we had what we thought were good reasons, so we did it anyway.”

“At least she let you off easy.”

Reese shrugged. “Unfortunately, things didn’t go so well for her. I heard the guy she thought wanted to marry her just wanted her money. Once he had that, he left her in a cheap walk-up apartment with the rent and the utility bills all due and nothing but a couple of bucks in change. She had to call her parents to bail her out.”

“What happened to her after that?” Chad asked, more for something to say than actual curiosity.

“I’m not sure. The last I heard, she’d met someone else and they’d named the day.” Reese straightened and took a step toward the door. “I’m sorry. Whatever it was you told Al that night, he must have misunderstood, and I should’ve made a bigger effort to find you and sort things out. I didn’t, and for that I’m truly sorry.” He tried for a smile that failed. “I know

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what Al told me you said. But do you remember what you said to him?"

"I remember asking for you, and him telling me that you were out."

"And then you said you'd call back later?"

"No, I never said that."

"You're quite sure?"

"Positive. And I can't even begin to imagine why he would say I did."

Reese moved a little closer to the door. "I wish I could ask him, but the last I heard, he'd moved out of the apartment soon after I got back my old job and was transferred to Rochester. Anyway, I should go and leave you to get on with whatever I'm keeping you from."

"No. I...umm..." Chad got off the bed, unsure what to say or do, but reluctant to let Reese just walk away. He felt both awkward and uncomfortable.

While he couldn't stay forever hung up on something that happened ten years ago, he didn't want to start anything he might later regret. He also couldn't pretend he didn't care. He'd never stopped caring. Reese had been his whole life, his one big love. There had never been anyone else who'd even come close to what he'd felt for Reese. There had never been anyone else, period. That wasn't to say he was ready and willing to take a chance on getting together with Reese for a second time. "So...what about yourself? You here in Vegas on vacation or business?"

"Neither. I work here at The Neapolitan. I've been here

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almost two years now.”

“Still in accounting?”

“What else?” A faint smile flickered across Reese’s handsome face.

Chad could see a bunch of fine lines around the corners of Reese’s eyes and a few flecks of gray in his dark hair, making it plain the past ten years had taken their toll on his old friend, too.

“Mrs. DiMarco—she owns the Neapolitan—is a second cousin or whatever to one of the partners of the firm I worked for in New York. After her husband died, the place was closed for about a year. But then Silvia decided she wanted to re-open and run it on her own. The chief accountant who’d worked for her husband was retired, so she called Art. She said she needed someone she could trust—preferably someone who came recommended. Art knew I wanted to get out of New York, so he sent me down here for an interview. Silvia and I clicked right away, and the rest, as they say, is history. She offered me the job on the spot and told me to send for my stuff.”

“And you like it here?”

“Love it. Summers in the desert are incredibly hot, but I like the heat and I had no trouble getting used to it.” Reese had now reached the door and his hand rested on the handle. “Well, it’s been really nice seeing you again like this, but I need to get going. You here on vacation?”

“No. Just a quick, overnight business trip to meet with a client and then back to the grind.”

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“Your first time here in Vegas?”

“Actually, it is. I’ve thought about coming down here a couple of times, but never got around to it. Too busy, I guess.”

“I see.” Reese ran his fingers through his hair, and as Chad’s chest tightened, so did the area around his groin.

Even now, all these years later, the chemistry and the connection were both still there—one tentative look from Reese’s dark eyes with their long, curling lashes, and Chad had a major hard-on. And, just like before, he only had to be in the same room to know the exact state of Reese’s feeling. Right now, he knew Reese was feeling nervous and uncertain, and probably wishing he’d said a quick hi and bye and not bothered trying to bridge the ten-year gap.

But then Reese surprised him by saying, “Maybe later this evening we can get together for a drink. I mean, if you’re busy with your clients, or you just plain don’t want to, I’ll understand. But it’s been so damn long and I—”

“Certainly has,” Chad muttered, half-wishing he could throw both his dignity and caution out the window, grab Reese and the two of them could spend the afternoon fucking each other senseless. His dick and every other part of him ached for Reese’s touch. Feelings reared up that reminded Chad of all those times back east when the two of them had snuck off together, either to his apartment or some other place that was private, and spent countless hours in one other another’s arms, making love and discovering all the little things that made each of them tick. Likes and dislikes, along with stupid little phobias and hang-ups, as well as their respective tastes in

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music, books, food, and everything else that had seemed important at the time.

“So...what d’ya say?”

Chad shrugged. He knew he was probably going to be sorry about saying yes. But he wasn’t made of stone, and since he’d probably regret saying no a whole lot more... “I guess. I have a meeting scheduled for this afternoon in Henderson. I figure it’ll take a while, but I should be free around seven, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine. How about we meet at Berto’s?”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s the new bar-restaurant on the second floor. Silvia named it for her nephew, Roberto Ventura, who’s the star attraction here at the Neapolitan. It’s a great place for a quiet, relaxing drink.” Reese glanced at his watch and flashed Chad a smile. It was the same smile Chad remembered so well—the smile that never failed to squeeze the breath from his lungs and make his cock hard as a rock. “And now, I really have to go. I was supposed to be somewhere ten minutes ago.”

As Reese went out the door and closed it quietly behind him, Chad was left with an impression of wide shoulders, tight butt, and long, long legs. From the front, Reese looked a little older. From the back...he was exactly the way Chad remembered.

Dropping down on the bed, he stretched out and closed his eyes...

* * *

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The first time Chad and Reese met was at a hospital fundraiser. Chad was there because his mom was one of the organizers and she'd bullied him into going, and Reese was representing his boss who'd pleaded a pressing engagement elsewhere.

The charity event had been a formal dinner at one of New York's famous downtown hotels, and they'd found themselves seated next to one another. The other occupants of the table had been three elderly couples who'd all preferred to concentrate on the food and the speakers rather than socialize, and that had suited Chad and Reese just fine.

Chad was already at the table when Reese arrived. Reese had checked the place card in the empty spot next to Chad, given Chad a dazzling, thousand-watt smile, and said, "Ah, this is me," and sat down.

As quickly and simply as that, Chad had felt an immediate sexual connection, and he knew with absolute certainty that his life was about to change.

"You're Art Tollson of Tollson Partners?"

"Hell, no." Reese's hoot of soft laughter left Chad feeling weak at the knees. "I'm just one of the overworked, underpaid juniors who gets a free meal whenever the boss buys a ticket for something like this and then decides he'll have more fun elsewhere." He stuck out his right hand. "Reese Harmer at your service."

"Chad Varaday," Chad replied, positive he'd died and gone to heaven when his hand was enveloped in Reese's warm, dry grasp, and he found himself staring into a pair of

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black velvet eyes with the longest, curliest lashes he'd ever seen on a man.

Reese raised his eyebrows. "Varaday Financial?"

"My Dad is CEO. I'm just one of the minions."

From that moment on, Chad felt as wired as a teenager going to the prom, secure in the knowledge that tonight was finally the night. Under cover of the table, their legs, hips and hands touched, and everything around Chad disappeared except the need to feel, to touch, and to make Reese his in every way possible. And from the look on Reese's face, he knew Reese's thoughts mirrored his own. They didn't need to say a word or spell anything out—they both knew what they wanted, just as they knew nothing on earth would stop it from happening.

As the speeches wound down and the chatter of the guests at the nearby tables increased from a murmur to a roar, Reese smoothed his hand firmly upward from Chad's knee to his groin. Chad held his breath as Reese's hand pressed hard against his aching cock, wondering what he had in mind.

But then Reese murmured, "What say we adjourn this meeting to some place more private?"

The nearest place they were able to find was a dark, drab room in another hotel, a cheap, touristy place a few blocks away. But décor was the last thing on their minds. Before Chad had finished locking the door and putting on the safety chain, Reese had shucked his clothes and was on his knees on the bed, breathing hard, and saying, "For God's sake, man, hurry up. I'm dyin' here."

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Within seconds, Chad's tux and underwear were added to Reese's things on the floor, and he joined Reese on the bed. With both of them on the edge of coming, they didn't bother with the usual niceties such as foreplay or condoms. Chad lathered Reese's hole with a handful of spit, refused to think about the dangers of riding bareback, and just grabbed hold of Reese's penis as he slammed into him like a runaway freight train.

The only memorable thing about their first time was that it was over almost before it began. But once their initial needs were satisfied, Chad had felt quite certain that, at least for him, this was no one-time thing—that he'd probably never get enough of Reese. They cuddled beneath the inadequate bedcovers for a while, just long enough to catch their breath, and then, at Reese's urging, adjourned to the tiny shower cubicle that was barely big enough for one person, never mind two.

By the time they finished soaping each other's bodies and rinsing off in the tepid water, they were both fully aroused again.

As Chad stretched out on the bed and pulled Reese down beside him, he said, "Unless you have somewhere you need to be, I'd like to take it slow and easy this time."

"Sure, why not? Let's make this a night to remember."

There was something offhand and casual about the tone of Reese's voice, and it made Chad feel uncertain about what was happening between them to the point he seriously considered getting dressed and leaving. Maybe he'd misread

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Reese and this was just a spur of the moment thing after all.

He forced himself to ask the question. "There's someone else in your life?"

Reese frowned. "No. I was married for a while, but it didn't work out, and we separated about two years ago."

"And there's no one new?"

"No." Reese's frown turned to a grin. "What's with all the questions? You paranoid or simply cautious?"

Chad smiled and kissed Reese, allowing the tip of his tongue to trace the outline of Reese's firm lips. "A little of both, I guess. The connection between us feels so strong, yet..."

"Too strong? As in too much, too soon, and I don't believe this is happening?"

Chad sighed as he stroked a hand over Reese's chest and down, over his belly. "We've only just met and already I know I'm in way too deep. I suppose the truth is I'm scared."

"Scared of me or scared of your feelings?" Reese asked.

"I'm scared this is just a one-off and I'll never see you again. I couldn't take that. If it is, you'd better tell me now."

Reese stayed Chad's hand. "What are you doing for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Nothing special."

"And the next day?"

Chad relaxed a little. "Saturday nights I usually have dinner with my parents."

"In that case, except for parents and anything pre-arranged, or something you can't get out of, consider your evenings

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booked for the foreseeable future. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a great plan."

Reese chuckled softly and released Chad's hand. "In that case, where were we?"

Chad grasped Reese's aroused cock, loving the way Reese trembled as he rubbed the pad of his thumb over the tip. Changing position, Chad moved between Reese's legs and sucked him slowly into his mouth. Once he'd taken as much of him as he could accommodate, he began to suck harder and harder until he felt Reese stiffen, hesitate for a second, and then explode.

* * *

Chad opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. He remembered they'd spent the rest of that night in each other's arms, and the following morning they'd talked about moving in together. But Chad's bachelor apartment was way too small, and Reese had been sharing a loft with a couple of other guys. They'd looked around for something else, but everything was either too big, too small, too far from downtown where they both worked, or too expensive. And that was when they'd come up with the brilliant idea of leaving New York and moving to the west coast.

Every spare minute from then on they'd spent together, either making love or making plans. And even now, the slightly bitter, salty taste of Reese's cum lingered on Chad's tongue.

But that was then and this was now, Chad reminded

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himself.

Reese had made his choice and remained back east, while Chad had finally settled in San Francisco, where he now owned a successful hotel and restaurant equipment and supply company. Except for Christmas and birthday cards and the odd phone call, Chad no longer had much contact with his family or any of the people he'd known in New York. He was happy in his new life. He had plenty of friends, he made a good living, and he couldn't ask for more than that.

He'd have a drink with Reese and reminisce about old times for an hour or two, but that would be the extent of it. He didn't like liars, and the sad fact was he knew Reese's excuse why he'd failed to show up at JFK that long-ago morning had been one big, fat lie.

As excuses went, it had sounded really good, believable even, and Reese had had the past ten years in which to perfect it. But then Reese didn't know what Chad knew.

That last night Chad was supposed to stay at his brother's place, while Reese had made arrangements to sleep on the sofa at the loft he'd shared with several other guys. At the last minute, however, Chad's brother had been called out of town, and, rather than get into some complicated arrangement over a key to get into his condo, Chad had simplified matters by opting to stay at a motel near the airport. When he'd tried to call Reese to let him know about the change in plans and suggest Reese join him, one of Reese's roommates had answered the phone.

Chad could recall every last word of that conversation as if

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it had just happened yesterday.

The man who answered said Reese wasn't there, but he knew Reese had been trying to call Chad all evening. And, since he hadn't been able to contact him, he'd gone out. Where, he didn't know, but perhaps he'd gone to check a few places where he thought Chad might be.

The man had identified himself as one of Reese's longtime friends, so Chad had asked him if he knew what Reese wanted.

The friend had made it clear he knew, and he'd seemed to welcome the opportunity to share his knowledge with Chad. Except it had been a whole different tale from the one he'd heard from Reese a few minutes ago.

The so-called friend had started off by saying he was sorry to be the one to tell Chad the bad news, but Reese had changed his mind about going out west. In fact, Reese had been bending his ear the whole day, agonizing about what he should do. Apparently, Reese had met someone else, and while he knew he had to tell Chad, he didn't quite know how.

The man then went on to say he'd told Reese just to get in touch with Chad and tell him the truth straight out, and until Chad called, he'd thought that was what Reese had done. But as that hadn't happened, he could only conclude Reese had chickened out. He'd agreed this was something Reese should have done face-to-face like a man. Still, better Chad heard about it now from a friend before he left town, right? At least this way, when Reese didn't show up at the airport tomorrow, Chad wouldn't have to sit around and wonder. The friend had

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finished by saying he hoped Chad understood Reese's new relationship was serious, and for that reason he trusted Chad would respect the information he'd just been given and not try to contact Reese again.

Or had Reese's friend been the liar?

Chad had never met the man, and Reese had never said much about his roommates, other than the fact they'd all been in school together, so at the time he'd taken every word the man had said as gospel. But now, in light of what Reese had just said, for all Chad knew, the so-called friend had grabbed the opportunity and Reese's absence to cause a little mayhem. Maybe he was one of those sick individuals who found it amusing to screw up other people's lives, or maybe he'd been pissed off at Reese over something and that had been his bizarre idea of revenge. Then again, maybe he'd told the truth, and Reese had found someone else. Or maybe the guy only thought Reese had found someone else. Or...

"Whatever!" Chad muttered as he grabbed the keys to his rental car, picked up his laptop and made for the door. It no longer mattered which story was true, the one Reese told, or the one Chad had heard firsthand from the so-called friend. It had all happened so long ago and in another lifetime.

Yes, he still loved Reese. But enough to turn back the clock and forgive Reese for not having the guts to come to the airport and tell him face to face? Chad doubted he was capable of that much forgiveness. In any event, he had more important things to think about right now.

He had an appointment at a hotel in Henderson with a

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representative from the renovations and refurbishment division of the Trenton Corporation, and he didn't want to blow his chances and put the guy off by arriving late. Trenton specialized in buying up failing business operations, putting them back in the black, and selling them on, and Chad was eager to add Trenton to his customer list. From what the rep had told him on the phone, Trenton wasn't happy with the equipment supplier they'd been using. However, they'd heard good things about Varaday, so he wanted Chad to come down to Vegas right away and quote on a couple of jobs they had lined up.

Chad wanted to expand his product line and relocate to somewhere better than the old warehouse where his company was currently based—maybe also open a branch office in L.A. or even Vegas, and Trenton was exactly the kind of continuing customer he needed to do it—a large, well known company that operated coast-to-coast as well as internationally and always had their next project lined up.

He knew he was jumping ahead. Like he'd heard someone say recently on TV, he was selling the bearskin before he'd shot the bear. Maybe Trenton would turn him down in favor of someone local, but in his view, it never hurt to dream big. If he got the job and Trenton was happy with what he did for them here in Vegas, there was a good chance they would use him for other projects elsewhere.

Pushing Reese and the past from his mind, he took the elevator down to the garage, got into his rental car and headed for the town of Henderson, a few miles south of Vegas.

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* * *

When Chad returned to his room at the Neapolitan, it was a little after six, and he was floating. Not only had Trenton's rep given him a firm order on the smaller of the two jobs—supplying and installing the new bathroom fixtures in a thirty-six room motel, if Chad completed the work on schedule and within his projected cost estimate, the other job would be his, too.

The other job was a small, once-luxurious apartment hotel that had been standing empty for more than a year and needed everything from new kitchens and bathrooms, to new linens, chinaware, cutlery and everything else a guest expected to find in that kind of upscale furnished accommodation.

Chad couldn't wait to get started. He pulled out his cell and called his office. First he spoke to his middle-aged secretary, Milly, whom he'd inherited when he bought the business from the previous owner, and told her the good news. Then he had Milly put him through to Ray McNee, who was a licensed plumber and in charge of all their plumbing installations.

"It's your average, everyday tourist motel, but I didn't know how much they intend to upgrade or what they had in mind for the fixtures, so I quoted Trenton's rep two prices," he told Ray. "The cheapest we can supply a basic toilet, sink and bath or shower combination, and also what they'd be looking at if they wanted to go all out and install top of the line items like whirlpool baths, automatic toilets, and fancy hardware."

Ray chuckled. "And what do they want?"

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“Something in the middle range they can count on to last for a while, but nothing too fancy. I said you’d be in touch with a couple of options, and once we had their decision, we’d put in the order, ask for express delivery, and you’d be down there with a crew. Sound good?”

“Sounds better than. Now we’ve finished that job in Sausalito, I was starting to think we might have to lay off a few of our guys for a while, and now we won’t have to.”

Chad then went on to tell Ray about the other, even more lucrative job he’d been promised if everything went well with the motel. By the time he finished the call, the digital clock on the nightstand showed a few minutes short of seven. For a brief instant, he considered forgetting about his date with Reese. He could call the hotel operator and have them relay a message that something had come up.

But... But having a drink with an old friend committed him to nothing, he told himself as he took a quick shower and exchanged his business suit and white shirt for a pair of casual slacks, a light cotton sweater and his favorite, well-worn sneakers. Even now, he still felt a tiny residue of hurt about Reese standing him up all those years ago, but if he failed to show tonight, Reese might see it as a form of petty revenge or payback, and he didn’t want that to happen. Whether he wanted to or not, he still cared for Reese. Deeply.

When Chad located Berto’s on the second floor, it was exactly seven-fifteen, and Reese was sitting at the elegant mirrored, black marble-and-brushed steel bar, talking to the barman. The bar area was well lit, but the rest of the room was

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in semi-darkness, and Chad paused in the doorway to give his eyes a moment to adjust.

As soon as Reese caught sight of him, he waved Chad over. "Hey, man. Tell me what you'd like to drink, then we'll get ourselves a table."

"What are you having?"

Reese shrugged and indicated his still full glass. "A light beer."

"That sounds good. I'll have the same."

The lighting was so low that, at first, Chad thought the place was empty except for himself and Reese. But as the *maitre d'* lead the way to an alcove at the back of the room and he heard the murmur of voices, he quickly realized *empty* was merely an illusion. Most of the tables were occupied. However, they were all set some distance apart from each other and, while the heavily shaded lamps allowed the customers to see what they were eating or drinking, the people were little more than shadowy outlines.

"What is this place, the ultimate in privacy?" Chad asked as he and Reese placed their drinks on the table.

"Do you like it?"

"It's okay." The curved and padded bench that served as seating had obviously been designed with "up close and cozy" in mind. And as they sat down and their bodies touched briefly, Chad froze. He could feel Reese's heat and smell his scent. Suddenly, the wanting filled his mind, and he knew coming here had been a mistake.

He and Reese locked together in the most intimate of

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embraces was all he could think of, all he wanted to think of. But since it couldn't happen, he forced the thought from his mind and tried to concentrate on the present. *If it wasn't so damn dark in here...* If he could just find something to snag his attention for a moment. But all he could see was his drink. Picking up the glass, he took a small sip and said the first thing that came into his mind. "Why does it have to be so freakin' dark? There could be anyone in here, and I wouldn't even know."

"You can see me."

"Just." *Just enough to know I want you so damn bad it's making my fucking teeth ache.*

"Give yourself a few minutes. Once your eyes get adjusted, there could be one or two people you recognize. But privacy is the whole point. A lot of famous people come to Vegas, and since this hotel was upgraded and the top two floors turned into luxury suites, we get our fair share of celebrities. There are dozens of expensive restaurants where they can go if they want to be seen but not mobbed by the average tourist. But there aren't many where they can find this degree of privacy for just a few drinks or a complete meal, and that's why Dani suggested putting it in. It cost a fortune, but it's turning out to be a very successful investment."

Chad's nerves tightened and he felt a swift surge of...*jealousy*? "Who's he?"

"Dani's a she not a he. And she's the brains in charge of the renovation division of Trenton Corporation. Trenton specializes in buying up failing companies and turning them

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around.”

Chad’s nerves relaxed a little, but he couldn’t stop himself from wondering...ten years was a long time. There had been no one special for him in all that time, but that didn’t mean Reese hadn’t found someone. For all Chad knew, the someone in New York hadn’t worked out, and there had been several someones since. And maybe there was someone Reese was involved with right now. However, he knew wondering wouldn’t provide the answers he wanted, so he tried to concentrate on what Reese was saying. “You’re saying Trenton bought the Neapolitan?”

“No. When Silvia decided to reopen, Dani did the upgrade as a special favor. Trenton doesn’t usually take on outside jobs. But Dani and Silvia’s nephew, Roberto Ventura, apparently knew each other as kids. And since Dani’s father is one of the owners of Trenton and spent his honeymoon here... Like they say, *who* you know is sometimes more important than *what*.”

“That the same Roberto Ventura I saw on the billboards when I was coming in from the airport? Vegas’ latest singing sensation?”

“That’s him. A few months ago, he and Dani got married. Trenton didn’t want to lose her, so they transferred their reno division here to the Neapolitan, so now she works out of Vegas.” Reese drank a little of his beer and put down the glass. “You said you were down here on business. What kind of business are you in?”

Chad’s eyes had adjusted to the semi-darkness and, as he

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allowed his gaze to wander, a little distance away he noticed someone he could swear he'd just seen in a new movie. "I own a hotel and restaurant equipment and supply company up in San Francisco. Everything from kitchen and bathroom fixtures through furniture, kitchen equipment, pots and pans, dishes, whatever the customer needs. As a matter of fact, I had a meeting with one of Trenton's reps this afternoon. They're upgrading a motel they bought out in Henderson."

"Did you get the job?"

Chad smiled. "Sure did."

"Good for you. Like I said, Trenton has an office right here in the hotel, and from everything I've seen and heard, they have a great reputation. Their employees have nothing but nice things to say about them."

"No dissatisfied customers you've heard about?"

"Not that I've heard of." Reese shook his head. "However, I did overhear Dani talking to Silvia the other day. She said she wished head office would quit acquiring so many needy projects and maybe then she'd have a chance to catch up. Sounded to me like they have a whole backlog of projects."

"Here in Vegas?"

"Not just here. All over the world from what I understand. Of course, the reason they have the office here is for Dani's convenience now that she's married to Roberto."

"And what about you?" Chad inquired, determined to keep his mind on small talk. "From what you said earlier, I gather you talked Art into giving you back your old job in New York."

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“Yeah. After you left, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I thought about going to a dozen different places, but before I could decide on anything, I heard about Candace being ripped off by her new beau. I thought I should stay put until the divorce went through in case she got any ideas about contesting the settlement.”

“Did she?”

“No. She stayed with what we’d agreed. But about the time the divorce was made final, I heard about a vacancy in the Rochester office and asked to be transferred. It was a promotion, and I stayed there until this job came up.”

“You forgot all about faraway places and exotic new life styles?”

“All I really needed was a fresh start someplace where I didn’t know anyone and no one knew me.”

A waiter came by with a plate of *hors d’oeuvres* and placed it on the table.

“Help yourself,” Reese invited. “Unless, of course, you’ve already eaten.”

“I didn’t get back from my meeting until late, so there wasn’t enough time,” Chad said, helping himself to a spicy shrimp.

“Any plans for later?”

“No.” Chad took a deep breath and released it slowly as he pressed a hand against his aroused cock. He still felt so damn uptight and needy, and Reese’s laid back, relaxed attitude was driving him nuts. He wanted to forget food, small talk, and all the other shit that catching up with the past entailed. He

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wanted to catch up in a whole different way—he wanted to go somewhere private where they could touch and feel, and get to know one another again in the only way that truly mattered.

But first, he wanted to feel a little clearer in his mind about what had really happened that last night because right now he still didn't know who'd told the truth and who'd lied. A lot of things didn't add up or make sense and, even if it was a long time ago, he still wanted to know.

He ate a second shrimp and a couple of the stuffed mushrooms, and as he reached for his drink, he said, "Can I ask you a question? I warn you, it's personal, and if you decide not to answer, I'll try not to feel offended."

"Ask me whatever you want." Reese scooped up one of the shrimp and popped it into his mouth. "I have nothing to hide. No deep, dark secrets. Nothing at all."

"You sure about that?"

Reese frowned. "Positive. Why? What's the question?"

"Is the real reason you've never bothered to try and find me because you got into something real hot and heavy with another dude back in New York?"

"What?"

Reese appeared more than a little surprised by the question, but Chad needed to hear the answer. "You heard."

"Hell, no way, man. Wherever did you get a crazy idea like that?"

Chad was fairly certain Reese surprise was real and not manufactured. At least he hoped it was. "And that's the truth?"

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"Of course, it's the truth. Why would I lie to you of all people about a thing like that? It's like I told you earlier. I was at the lawyer's office signing divorce papers when you tried to reach me. When I got back to the apartment, Al told me you'd phoned and said you had some kind of family problem, and that you'd call back. He didn't say when, and I didn't ask if you'd mentioned a time. I'm sorry. That's all I know. Except, of course, that you never did call back."

"That's not what your good friend Al told me."

"And what did Al tell you?" Reese's forehead furrowed in a frown. "Other, of course, than the fact I was out. I hadn't told him where I was going or why. It was none of his business."

"When I asked for you, he wanted to know who I was, and when I gave my name, he said you'd been trying to reach me all evening. That you didn't know where I might be, so you'd gone out looking for me."

"That's crazy. Why would he say a stupid thing like that?"

"Don't ask me. He was, and maybe still is, your friend. I understood those guys you shared the apartment with were all guys you'd gone to school with."

"Originally, they were. Al took over when one of them moved onward and upward. At the time I was planning to move out west with you, he'd only been there a few weeks, a month at most. To be honest, I barely knew the man."

"Really. He knew a helluva lot about you."

"That's impossible. I think the most words we ever exchanged was the night he said you'd called. As I was going

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out, he asked me to pick up milk on my way back or there'd be none for breakfast."

"To hear him tell it, the two of you were best buds. Confidants, in fact."

Reese's expression turned skeptical. "Now I know you're putting me on. What exactly did that jerk say to you?"

"Basically, that he was sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you'd changed your mind about moving out west with me. That you had met someone else. He finished by saying..." Chad fisted his hands under cover of the table in an attempt to get his emotions in check. "That...that..."

"Come on. Spit it out. What on earth did he say?"

"That he hoped I understood this new relationship of yours was serious, and for that reason he trusted me to respect the information I'd been given and not try to contact you again."

"He did what? I don't believe this."

"You think I made it up?"

"No. But obviously you believed everything he said."

"Of course, I fucking believed him," Chad said in a low, furious voice, his long suppressed anger suddenly resurfacing out of nowhere. "I didn't want to. But he was your friend, at least I thought he was. I thought about calling back. I even thought about returning to the city and confronting you. But when you failed to show the next morning and you hadn't bothered to get in touch or send even a single word of explanation, what the hell was I supposed to believe? We hadn't known one another that long...six months. I knew you were married, but you'd never talked about it except to say

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you didn't live together. You hadn't said why you'd separated, and I didn't care. People marry and separate all the time. It makes no difference whether they're gay or straight—things don't work out for whatever reason, or they change their minds, or they meet someone else. But you never mentioned another man. How long had you been seeing him? Had you just met? What?"

"For God's sake, Chad, stop it! There was no other guy."

"Then why did your buddy who answered the phone that night say there was? He seemed very sure of his facts."

"He wasn't my buddy. And I have no idea, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"On a couple of occasions, he said a few weird things to me...you know, the kind of subtle remarks I could've taken as a come on, or he could've dismissed as a joke if I'd taken offense. He was gay, too, but a real creep, so rather than make a fuss, I just ignored him. Later though, after you left, he stopped being subtle and got downright pushy. Started asking me to sleep with him, along with all this innuendo about how good we'd be together and what a great time we'd have. It got so bad that's the main reason I took the transfer to Rochester." Reese hesitated, frowning. "You don't suppose that—"

"When I called he grabbed the opportunity to break us up and offer himself as the consolation prize?"

Reese looked sick. "You think?"

"Sounds very possible. If he had that big a crush on you, who knows what he might have done?"

"I can't think of any other reason why he told you what he

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did. There was no else, I swear. Other my wife, and I'd told you about her."

Chad took a sip of his beer. "When we first met and you said you were married, I didn't ask questions because according to you it was over, and anyway it was none of my business. But as you didn't go into details, I have to admit I did wonder if you swung both ways."

"I did for a while."

"You did what? Swing both ways?"

"Sort of. At least that's what I let people think. But then I met you and finally got my head straight." Reese sighed, picked up his glass and downed the contents. "I grew up in a family where the word 'sex' was never mentioned. If you wanted a baby, you spent a couple of days at the hospital and they gave you one to take home. By the time I was maybe eight or so, I'd found out what passed for the truth back then and realized my parents must have done the nasty at least once to get me. I spent the next few years giggling about it with the other kids at school, but all the while believing it was wrong because my mom said it was. Something dirty and disgusting men had to do to women in order to get kids, or sometimes they did it because they couldn't help themselves."

"How long before you found out the truth?"

Reese grinned. "My sixteenth birthday. There was this woman who lived in our apartment building on the floor above us. She was about thirty, and my dad thought she was pretty neat, but my mom said she was no better than she ought to be—whatever that meant. Anyway, I was home with a cold

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and both my parents were at work. I went out into the hall for something—probably to take out the trash or fetch the mail, I forget. Anyway, Rita was coming up the stairs. She asked me why I wasn't in school, so I told her, then I said it was a miserable way to spend my sixteenth birthday.

“Anyway, she took off, and I went back inside our apartment. But then about half an hour later there was a knock on our door. It was Rita. She said she had a gift for me, and I should come upstairs with her to get it.”

Chad laughed. “Some gift.”

“What I remember most is that she smelled of fish, cheap perfume and perspiration. She kept talking to my dick like it was another person and embarrassed the hell out of me.”

“And that put you off sex?”

“Hell, no. I wanted it, but not with her. Soon after that, a new guy started at my school, and for me to say it was love at first sight sounds pretty dumb, but I guess that's what happened. Although *lust* is probably a more accurate description. But I'd been so damn brainwashed, I truly believed what we were doing was the devil's work. That if I kept it up my dick would fall off and I'd go to hell when I died. And I knew I'd be going there real fast if my parents found out what I was doing.”

“So you went back to the girls?”

“Officially, yes. I'd invite a girl to the house, or I'd take a girl to the movies, and my parents were delighted. Their boy was finally growing up. Unofficially, I was jerking off in the bathroom and seeing another guy I'd met on the side. As soon

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as I turned twenty-one, my parents decided it was time I started thinking about getting married. As you've probably gathered by now, they were beyond old-fashioned. In their view, married guys paid attention to their jobs, saved their money for their kids' college educations and plodded slowly up the ladder of success. Unmarried guys spent their money on fast living and ended up broke and lonely.

"When they started inviting girls to Sunday dinner, I didn't know what to do—until one day the light went on and I realized they were handing me the perfect solution. Once I was married and in my own place, I could live my own life and do whatever I wanted. So I married the first girl who said yes. She had pretty much the same reasons as me for wanting to get out from under such as overly strict, old-fashioned parents."

Reese paused to sip his beer. Chad was almost overcome by the urge to reach out and touch Reese's hand, but his next words prevented Chad's movement.

"Of course, it was never a real marriage," Reese continued. "Still, it suited our purpose. It was the one and only way we could get out of what had become uncomfortable home situations. And it worked okay for a while. But I couldn't keep up the double life for long. I had a demanding job, and Candace wasn't interested in behaving like a married woman. She wanted to party all the time. Then she started staying out nights. She wasn't happy and neither was I, so we figured the best thing for both of us was to separate. Even if we'd both been straight, the marriage wouldn't have lasted. We were too

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different, and we wanted different things.

“About a year after we separated, I met you, and that’s when I knew what I really wanted out of life.” He shrugged and pushed his empty glass to one side. “I have no idea why Al pulled such a stupid trick and told you all that nonsense. Maybe it was revenge because I wouldn’t fall for his charms. And maybe he thought if you were out of the picture, he could catch me on the rebound. I’m sorry, Chad. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

Instead of mouthing the usual platitudes, Chad continued sipping his beer and tried to imagine what life must have been like for Reese, trying to fit into a world where he didn’t belong. He doubted his own family had been thrilled when they discovered he lived a completely different lifestyle to the one they enjoyed. But at least they’d kept their opinions to themselves. And the fact they’d drifted apart since he moved to San Francisco was entirely his fault, not theirs. He really needed to do something about that, and soon.

But right now, Reese’s needs came first. The room’s dim lighting hadn’t prevented Chad from seeing the way Reese’s shoulders slumped, or the dejected expression on his face. Chad desperately wanted to hold him and love him. It would be difficult, trying to pick up where they left off ten years ago, but maybe they could start being friends again and see where it took them.

Reese suddenly stood up. “Okay, so you don’t buy that what Al told you was just a bunch of lies. That’s fine. Whatever. I can’t make you believe what you don’t want to

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and I'm not about to start to begging."

He made as if to go, but Chad grabbed his arm. "Hey, hold it. I believe you, I really do. I was just thinking. So much has happened, things I either had no idea about or plain didn't realize."

Reese hesitated, then, with a sigh, he sat down again. "You'd better not just be saying that."

"I'm not. If I didn't believe you, I'd say so. But you've told me more about yourself in the past ten minutes than you ever said before. I was just trying to get my head around all the crap you've been through."

"So now you're feeling sorry for me?"

"Absolutely not. No way."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Anyway, I'm partly to blame for some of it."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I shouldn't have just swallowed everything your roommate said as the whole truth and nothing but. I should've insisted on talking to you. But I was so damn upset after that phone call, I couldn't even think straight. In the space of a couple of minutes, my whole world had been ripped apart. I couldn't go back because I'd quit my job and given up my apartment, and without you, I'd lost interest in going forward. Like I said, I believed him when he said you'd decided your plan to move out west with me was a mistake and that your relationship with this other guy was what you really wanted. Okay, so this other guy was something Al made up. But he

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sounded so sincere, I respected his request and backed off.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t do the right thing either. When you didn’t call back, I should’ve kept looking until I found you. I could’ve hired a private detective, or I could’ve called your parents, or written you a letter and asked them to forward it on. If I had, things might’ve been a whole lot different.” Reese wrapped his fingers around Chad’s hand and gave it a brief squeeze. “I can’t believe I just sat around and did nothing. But when you didn’t call back, I was convinced you were the one who’d changed his mind and dumped me.”

“No different than me believing that guy when he said you’d met someone else and it was serious. I should’ve insisted on hearing it from you.”

“So, we’ve made a few mistakes. But we can’t change what’s happened. And it’s unlikely we’ll ever find out exactly what did...so, what say we get out of here? I think you mentioned this is your first time in Vegas. Right?”

“Yeah. But...” As Reese went to release his hand, Chad held firm. “To be honest, I guess I’m more interested in spending some quality time with you than I am in doing the town.”

“I know and I understand. But...” Reese twisted his lips in what passed for a humorless smile. “It would be a lie if I said I’ve stopped loving you. And an even bigger lie if I said I don’t want you. It’s just that...”

“It’s been a long time, so you figure we ought to act like mature adults and not rush into anything.” Chad smiled in an effort to cover his disappointment.

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"That, too. But it's a whole bunch of little things. Mostly it's just...I don't know. Running into each other again after all these years is beyond amazing. At least it is for me." Reese hesitated and gave Chad a wry grin. "I'm having a little trouble believing it's you and not an illusion. I keep thinking any moment now, I'll wake up and find it was only a dream."

"That's not going to happen."

"Maybe not. For years I've been doing my thing, trying to forget about the past, but it's always been there in the back of my mind. I've wondered where you were, what you were doing. Not that I ever expected to find out, of course."

"And now that I'm here?"

"I need a little time to get my head around the reality."

"It's okay. Take all the time you need," Chad said, wondering what in hell was going on. He hadn't spent the past ten years living a life of chastity, and he doubted Reese had either. But while he hadn't met anyone important, perhaps Reese had. Whatever the case, he doubted Reese had spent the past ten years living like a monk and hoping for a miracle.

Reese eased his way out from behind the table and stood up. "In that case, why don't we go check out the town? Maybe stop for dinner somewhere? Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Anywhere special you'd like to start?"

Chad hadn't taken any time off since he started the business and, despite his almost thirty-nine years, he suddenly felt as light-hearted and excited as a teenager on his first vacation, and just as eager to see all the sights. "Maybe

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Caesar's? Coming down on the plane, the guy sitting next to me said Caesar's had what he figured was about the biggest gaming area in town. And I want to see the water show at Bellagio, and the volcano at the Mirage. He also said I should be sure to check out the Venetian, and some other place where they do a pirate show in front of the hotel."

"That would be Treasure Island."

"Right. And the Flamingo, too. He said I shouldn't miss the Flamingo because it's part of the original Vegas. Isn't that where that old time gangster, Bugsy Siegel, used to hang out?"

"So they say. I imagine it looks a bit different now to the way it did back then, but there's a memorial plaque about ol' Bugsy in there somewhere. I think it's by the wedding chapel."

* * *

In what seemed like no time at all, they'd worked their way down the Strip as far as Treasure Island, then back up the other side until they were only a block or so from where they'd started. Chad had seen all the sights the guy on the plane had told him to watch out for, plus a whole bunch of other things Reese insisted he shouldn't miss, such as the laser light show in the shopping area at the back of Caesar's, and the boats on the replica of Venice's Grand Canal in the Venetian. The roll of quarters he'd bought at Caesar's was gone, but then he bought a second roll and won a jackpot at the Mirage that started him on a lucky streak. By the time they were ready to leave the Flamingo, he figured he was around

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five hundred dollars up. He was also hungry.

"I thought you were going to buy me dinner," he said as they headed for the exit door. "Anywhere good around here?"

Reese smiled at the question. "Only just about every place there is on the Strip. And there's everything from coffee shops right through family dining, to ethnic, to topnotch gourmet with all the trimmings. There's also the usual fast food places if that's your thing. How hungry are you?"

"Ravenous. I just realized I haven't eaten since I got into town just before noon. Except for a couple of those appetizers back at the hotel."

"Anything special you fancy?"

Chad sighed. "How about a big, juicy steak, baked potato with all the fixings, maybe a side of mushrooms, and a salad. And then apple pie and ice cream. What about you?"

"Sounds great. And it just so happens there's a little place I know about a block from here. The steaks are to die for."

Even though it was late in the year, it was a beautiful clear, warm night and the sidewalks were jammed with tourists, making any kind of progress virtually impossible.

After unsuccessfully trying to push their way through the crush of people, Reese grabbed Chad's arm and urged him into the next hotel they came to. "Come on. We'll cut off the corner by going through here and then out the side door."

But they'd taken no more than two or three steps inside the casino than the lounge act in the far corner of the casino started up with the old Van Morrison hit, "Have I Told You Lately."

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Chad froze. His eyes burned and his chest felt tight, while raw emotion clawed at everything within him. He hadn't heard the song in years, and, for a moment, he wanted to grab Reese, and run away with him to some place where he'd never have to let go. This had been his and Reese's song...would always be *their* song. If he'd had any doubts at all about his feelings for Reese, he only had to hear first line to blow the doubt away.

The first time he'd really listened to the song was about a week or so after he and Reese met, and Reese spent a night at Chad's apartment in New York. The next morning while they were having breakfast, they'd heard Rod Stewart singing it on the kitchen radio. They'd both realized the lyrics were so perfect, so apt, and summed up exactly how thing were between them. They'd both been sad, dissatisfied and troubled by the half-lives they'd been leading, and finding each other at the fundraiser had changed all that. They'd fallen in love, and suddenly the sadness was gone. Just being together had turned their lives right around, filling them with laughter and gladness, and unlimited promise for a future together...right up until that last night when he'd called to ask Reese to join him at the motel, and Reese's roommate had picked up the phone and destroyed it with a few cruel words.

Reese wrapped an arm around Chad's shoulders and gave him a brief hug as he urged him forward. "Memory's a bitch, huh?"

"Sure is." Chad swallowed hard, doing his desperate best to blank out the memories and deny himself the luxury of

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tears. If only, instead of believing the words of a man he'd never even met, he'd gone back into the city and asked Reese face-to-face if what he'd been told was true. If Reese really had found someone he loved more and if being with this new guy was truly what Reese wanted. If he had, he'd have saved the two of them a whole lot of heartache. But he hadn't and, like Reese had said earlier, he couldn't change history. "You ever think about the old days back in New York?"

"I try not to." Reese shrugged. "But sometimes, especially late at night..." They reached the exit and Reese preceded Chad through the door.

"You were saying?" Chad prompted, as he joined Reese on the sidewalk and they continued walking.

"You wanna eat, or you want to reminisce about stuff we can't change?"

Chad frowned. "That song was a big chunk of our past. It caught me by surprise. And yes, it brought back a whole ton of memories."

"I know. But that was then and this is now."

"And today is the first day of the rest of our lives?"

"I don't know." Reese gave an offhand shrug. "Maybe it is, and maybe not. Ten years is a long time, and we've both changed. Probably a whole lot more than we realize."

"Ah. But the more things change—"

"The more they stay the same," Reed finished.

"Do you still hog all the blankets?"

Reese grinned. "Of course. Do you still eat cold toast?"

"Absolutely." Chad laughed, feeling his tense nerves start

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to relax a tad. "And what about your coffee? Do you still put the cream in first?"

"That's the only way to get it exactly right. And I bet, whenever you order salad, you still ask for the dressing on the side."

"And you'll only eat steak if it's well done."

"And yours has to be medium. Right?"

"Right." Chad reached for Reese's hand and held on tight. "Bet you still love me."

"Only if you still love me back."

"You have to ask?"

Reese squeezed Chad's hand. "Guess not."

They'd reached the intersection and, since the light was against them and there were no other pedestrians in sight, Chad pulled Reese back into the dark doorway of a deserted building. Wrapping their arms around each other, they melted into the shadows where there was nothing to see and all they could hear was the sound of each other's breathing. Then their mouths touched. Chad could smell Reese's scent and feel his heat, and his imagination went into overdrive. He pressed a hand against the front of Reese's pants, thrilled to find he was every bit as aroused as he was himself. "I want to fuck you so bad, babe, I could do it right here and now. But I'm not looking to get arrested for something dumb like indecent exposure."

"Me either. I could lose my job."

The sound of approaching footsteps made them break the embrace, and as a man and woman reached the corner, the two

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of them stepped apart. The lights were now in their favor, and they followed the couple to the other side of the street.

"The restaurant I mentioned is right there," Reese said, pointing down the side street to where flashing lights and a huge billboard advertised the best steaks in town.

Chad hesitated. "I'd rather go somewhere private. My room at the hotel, maybe? We could order room service."

"Bad idea. I work there, remember?" Reese glanced down at the sidewalk. "Why don't we eat first? I don't know about you, but I'm starving. And after all that walking, I'd like to sit down and relax for a bit."

"Sure. If that's what you want..."

Reese started off in the direction of the restaurant, and Chad hurried to catch up, confused why Reese seemed to be suddenly backing away. After the way Reese had reacted to his kiss a moment ago, Chad figured he was as eager as he was to find someplace where they could be alone and make up for a little of what they'd missed out on over the past ten years.

Was it something he'd said? Something he'd done? One minute, everything between them was fine, almost back to the way it had been years ago. The next, it had all turned sour.

He searched his mind for a reason. Suggesting they go to his room at the Neapolitan when he knew Reese worked there probably hadn't been very smart. But the Neapolitan wasn't the only hotel in town. There were plenty of other places full of empty, anonymous rooms where they could hide away for a few hours without anyone but themselves knowing.

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Then again, maybe Reese was having second thoughts. Maybe he figured the past was best left in the past.

And just maybe the man was really hungry and needed to eat.

Whatever the case, Reese had always been the cautious one, and Chad couldn't fault him for hesitating now. They were no longer kids, able to indulge in whatever came their way and not waste time on regrets if things didn't work out. In fact, much as he hated to admit it, if there was ever a time in his own life he needed to stop and think about what he thought he wanted, it was now.

Hell! There was nothing for him to think about. He knew exactly what he wanted.

And if it turns out I'm wrong?

Then he'd have to deal with it.

"Hey, Reese. Wait up."

The restaurant where they went for dinner was the complete opposite of Berto's. It was well lighted, more family-oriented, and a whole lot noisier because of the loud country music filling the room via the sound system. The décor was straight out of a western movie, complete with rustic, varnished log furniture, swinging doors into the dining room and the kitchen, and Native American artifacts decorating the walls.

However, despite Reese's assertion that he was hungry, he did little more than pick at his food. And all Chad's attempts at light conversation in the hope Reese would lighten up got him nowhere.

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By the time they reached the coffee stage, Chad had had enough.

“Want to tell me what the problem is?” Chad asked quietly after the waitress had filled their mugs and moved on to the next table. “And please don’t say I’m imagining things. You’ve barely said a word since we got here.”

A faint smile flitted across Reese’s expressive face and disappeared. “I know. And I’m sorry. It’s just that...”

“Just what?”

“I guess the truth is I’m scared. Things were always pretty intense between the two of us, and I don’t know if it’s still there. It might be different if you lived here. If we could take time to get to know each other again. Ten years is a long time. People change. I know I have. I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

Chad’s throat tightened. “Will you quit saying sorry?” he said gruffly. “Meeting you again like this has been so great and so unexpected. And, to be honest, I haven’t thought beyond that, except to realize how much I still want to...you know. I thought you felt the same way.”

“I do. At least I did until we kissed. I wanted you more than I wanted my next breath, but then I remembered you’re only here for the one night. What if we’re wrong about the way we think we feel? Whether we like it or not—”

“People change and ten years is a lifetime. I know. But if what we had together was just one of those good-while-it lasted things, don’t you think you’d have realized it by now? I know I would. I’d have wondered what I saw in you in the

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first place, and I'd have been mad at myself for hanging onto an illusion instead of moving on." Chad hesitated for a moment and then he reached across the table and grasped Reese's hand. "I also know if I'd had thoughts like that I wouldn't be here with you now. I'd have invented an excuse to cut the evening short."

"And I'd have done the same. No question in my mind about that." Reese picked up a breadcrumb with his free hand and dropped it on his plate. "But they say it's a mistake to try going back."

"They also say true love never dies."

Reese's hand suddenly tightened around Chad's, and Chad felt a tiny rush of hope—enough to add, "I know we can't pretend like nothing's happened and simply pick up where we left off, but what's to stop us from starting over?"

"What if we do and it turns out to be a huge mistake?"

"Wouldn't that be better than all this wishing and wondering? At least then we'd know for sure."

"I guess." Reese sighed and pushed back his chair. "Ready to go?"

Chad insisted on paying the check on the way out, but when they reached the sidewalk, Reese paused, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Where to now?" Reese asked.

In view of Reese's misgivings, Chad was about to suggest they call it a night. He'd give Reese some space to think things over, and the next time Chad was in town, he'd call Reese and see—

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No!

"Your call," Chad said quietly.

"I had a feeling you were going to say that." Reese gave a nervous chuckle.

"And?"

Reese rested one hand on Chad's shoulder and used the other to point to an apartment building occupying most of the next block. "That's where I live right now. The top floor. Great view at night when all the lights are on. And in the morning, when the sun's coming up and it catches the snow on the mountains, it's really something else. Want to come check it out?"

"The night view or the dawn spectacular?"

"Either. Both. Whatever you want."

"No more second thoughts?"

Reese pressed his head against Chad's for a moment. "My grandma used to say it's better to be sorry you did rather than waste time wishing you had. And I think maybe she knew what she was talking about. After all, you're only here for the one night."

"Nothing to stop me coming back. Or you coming up to Frisco, for that matter."

* * *

As Chad had expected, Reese's top-floor apartment, with its restful, uncluttered look, reflected Reese's orderly accountant mind. The décor was a combination of charcoal and ivory with a few muted splashes of color in the way of

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paintings, cushions and a few ornaments. The only thing out of place that he noticed as Reese showed him around was a few dirty dishes in the kitchen sink.

"Feel like something to drink?" Reese asked as they returned to the living room and Chad sat down on the overstuffed sofa. "I have a bottle of very old, incredibly expensive cognac I've been saving for a special occasion. Or there's beer, pop, coffee, whatever you want."

"The cognac sounds perfect."

Reese placed two balloon glasses on the coffee table and filled each with about an inch and a half of the pale gold liquid. Handing one of the glasses to Chad, he took the other for himself.

"Here's to us and taking chances," he said, clicking his glass against Chad's.

"And to this moment. May it last forever," Chad said softly, catching sight of the glint of moisture in Reese's eyes. He took a sip of the cognac, loving the fire and the velvet on his tongue, the warmth as it slid down his throat, and then the delicious kick as it landed in his stomach. "Why don't you put on some music?"

"Good idea." Reese selected a couple of CDs from a caddy and placed them in a combination unit that looked to Chad like it played everything from tapes through CDs to vinyl, along with a built-in radio. "I've been thinking about getting a really good sound system, but there's so much to choose from these days I can't make up my mind. And so long as this old thing keeps going, I guess don't have to."

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Chad laughed. “Still the same old Reese. Never spend money where you don’t have to, huh?”

“That comes of having an Italian grandmother who grew up back in the thirties during the Great Depression,” Reese said, joining in Chad’s laughter as he stretched out on the sofa and rested his head in Chad’s lap. “That woman could stretch a dollar like you would not believe. I swear if push came to shove, my *nonna* could’ve made a banquet out of most people’s trash.”

The CD Reese had chosen was a soft, seductive instrumental—first, a wailing saxophone that reminded Chad of smoky bars and a hot, humid summer weekend he and Reese had once spent in New Orleans. The next track was another sax solo with a background of waves breaking on some far distant beach.

Chad closed his eyes, allowing the music wash over him while he gave everything within him the opportunity to relax and rearrange itself. He’d talked a great game about new beginnings as if it was no big deal. But it was a big deal. Deep down, he’d had all the same fears and insecurities as Reese, and he’d known he needed a moment like this—a moment in which to let go of the past and all the bad stuff before he could move forward into the future, whatever that future might hold.

Gradually, the lies and the misunderstandings that had darkened his life for so long, even his resentment in thinking Reese had chosen someone else over him, slipped away along with the last notes of the music, leaving him filled with hope that maybe he and Reese could start over.

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He stroked Reese's short, dark hair, relishing both the closeness they shared and the weight of Reese's head resting against his cock. If he could just convince Reese to turn his head a little...

But just like always, Reese had guessed what Chad was thinking, and now he was pressing hot kisses through the fabric of Chad's pants and sending his blood pressure rocketing upward into the danger zone.

Chad kept his eyes closed and held his breath, waiting for the next move that he knew would come as surely as day follows night.

There was a tiny moment of hesitation. Then Reese gave a soft groan and, as the weight in Chad's lap lifted, Reese slid off the sofa and positioned himself on the floor between Chad's knees.

He felt Reese undo his belt and unfasten his pants, then he lifted his butt slightly to allow Reese to pull off his pants and his boxers and let his aching prick spring free.

"Do I need a condom?" Reese asked in a husky, emotion-laced voice as he pushed up Chad's sweater and began to kiss and stroke Chad's firm belly.

"No, but it's your call. I haven't been with anyone in months. Even so, I'm always super-careful. I don't believe in taking chances. What about you?"

"Same here. But I take the test anyway, just in case."

"In case of what?" Chad wanted to know.

Reese lifted his head and shot Chad a cheeky grin. "In case my grandmother was right about public washrooms, door

knobs, and—”

“What do door knobs have to do with anything?”

“According to Grandma, more germs get transferred from touching door knobs than they do from any other single source. It’s a bit scary when you think about it.”

Chad reached down and ruffled Reese’s hair. “Okay, so go get the condoms...just in case.”

Reese disappeared for a moment and returned with several small foil packets that he dropped on the table. Resuming his position between Chad’s legs, he picked up one of the packets and tore it open with his teeth.

Closing his eyes, Chad leaned back, loving Reese’s gentle touch as he fitted one of the condoms over his erection and followed it with his mouth. Reese’s mouth was hot and the touch of his agile tongue seductive, and it took every ounce of Chad’s self-control to keep still rather than give in to the urge to move things along a little. But then Reese decided to start fondling his balls. Chad sucked in a breath and held it, willing himself to keep control, but every movement of Reese’s mouth and hands lowered his chances on that score.

Reese suddenly changed his tactics completely. Releasing Chad’s penis, he wrapped his arms around Chad’s body and laid his head against his chest. “Love you,” he whispered, a slight break in his voice.

Chad’s chest and throat were tight with emotion, but he managed to mutter, “Love you, too. I just can’t believe you’re here. It feels like I’m dreaming or hallucinating.”

“I know. I missed you so damn much there were times

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when I thought the same thing, so I'd...umm..."

"When you what?"

Reese gave low, husky chuckle. "I'm almost too embarrassed to admit this, but some nights, when I can't sleep, I cuddle one of the pillows and pretend it's you."

Chad wasn't about to admit he'd been known to do the same thing—maybe he'd tell Reese one day, but not now. "Did it work?"

"Not really." Again, Reese changed position, his lips moving slowly up Chad's neck until they reached his mouth. "Fact is, there's nothing like the real thing, baby. I love being with you, and I love the closeness. I'd like for us to just take our time and make this moment last as long as possible. Okay?"

Chad felt the tip of Reese's tongue touch the corners of his mouth, then slip inside to stroke and tease and tangle in a delicious game they'd played many times before—a well-remembered game of anticipation that would hold them on the edge until they were ready to move things up a notch.

Leaving Chad's mouth, Reese nibbled his way around to Chad's left ear. "There was a time when I could do this for hours. But now..." Reese paused and rimmed Chad's ear with his tongue. "I must be out of practice 'cuz I'm just about ready to go off like a rocket." Reese got off the sofa and, taking both Chad's hands in his, pulled Chad to his feet. "I think it's time we adjourned this meeting to some place more comfortable. Yes?"

Chad smiled and hugged Reese close. "I thought you'd

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never ask.”

Reese had always liked making love in the bathroom, so Chad wasn't surprised when Reese lead him there now—a big, tiled bathroom complete with a whirlpool bath and a large shower cubicle.

After turning on the water and adjusting the temperature, they soaped each other and stood for a moment or two under the stinging spray.

“Feels good, huh?” Reese said above the sound of the water. “Fills me with positive energy and makes me think I can fly.”

“Yeah? Well, I can think of something that'll make both of us feel like that,” Chad said as he turned off the shower and reached for one of the foil packages he'd noticed sitting in the wall caddy. After opening the package and slipping the condom over his erection, he moved Reese around so his back was toward him. Telling Reese to bend over, he picked up the tube of lubricant he found next to the shampoo, squeezed a liberal amount into his hand and slathered it down Reese's crack. “Better hold onto that rail,” he cautioned as he spread Reese's ass cheeks and inserted the head of his cock. “Because I think you and me are in for one crazy ride.

Once Chad had pushed in as far as he could go, he wrapped both arms around Reese and began to stroke his dick. “Feel good?”

“Even better than I remember. But please, don't make me wait. Just fuck me good and hard, okay?”

Chad wanted to start slowly and really build up the

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tension, but it had been too damn long and he didn't have the patience to savor the moment. He began pumping into Reese hard and fast. He needed to get off, and he needed to do it now. He'd barely completed the thought when he climaxed like a bomb going off, and then he heard Reese shout as his juice burst forth and covered Chad's hands.

For a moment, they remained locked together, Reese hanging on to the rail for support, and both of them having trouble catching their breaths.

But then the moment passed. Chad withdrew and Reese turned around, and they wrapped their arms around one another.

"Shit, man. I'd forgotten it could be that good. That was totally fantastic."

"I seem to recall it was always like that with us."

"I don't remember it being that good."

"Making up for lost time, maybe?"

"Could be. But it's going to take more than once." A shiver raked Reese's slim body. He released Chad and turned the shower back on. "Remind me to turn the air down when we get out of here. I have a cleaning woman who thinks fifty is perfect."

"Want to stay here tonight?" Reese asked as they dried off and got dressed. "I have an extra toothbrush and you can borrow my razor."

"I'd like that," Chad replied, glad the past and all the misunderstandings were behind them. He and Reese still loved one another and that was all really that mattered.

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After they were tucked up in Reese's king-size bed and the light had been switched off, Reese asked the question that had been sitting at the forefront of Chad's mind for the past half-hour. "Think we could make this work?"

"I don't see why not. Although I think it might be wise if we took a bit more time to make absolutely certain."

Reese chuckled. "How much time? Days? Weeks? Years?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of me calling the airline to change my flight so I can stay for another night. And you taking a vacation day tomorrow, or maybe calling in sick."

"So we can spend the whole day here making out?"

Chad laughed and tightened his hold on Reese's body. "You have a better idea, babe?"

"And what about after that? Bearing in mind we have a distance problem."

"I guess one of us will have to move," Chad said with a sigh. "But let's not ruin tonight with insignificant technicalities."

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys—two black and white Persian cats.

* * *

**Don't miss *This Time For Keeps*, by Christiane France,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Josh and Pete were always breaking up and getting back together. The last time it happened, they swore their ten-year affair was over for good. Pete moved out, and Josh took a job overseas, but Josh figured it was simply a matter of waiting to see who would give in first—the same routine they'd gone through a dozen times before.

Except this time, Pete doesn't call, and when Josh tries to contact him, it turns out both of his numbers are disconnected. Josh tries to convince himself that Pete doesn't love him any more, that Pete has found someone new and moved on. But ten years is a long time—too long to dismiss like it had been

nothing. If Pete no longer loves him, then Josh needs to hear that from the man in person.

Determined to find out the reason for Pete's silence, Josh returns home to the mind-numbing news that Pete is dead—he was killed two months earlier when he tried to stop thieves from stealing his car. But during his shock and grief, Josh also comes to the realization that death doesn't always break the bond between two lovers destined to be together forever...

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