

M. L. RHODES

SATISFACTION

## SATISFACTION

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He walked—stumbled—backward toward the office door. Backward because he couldn't tear his gaze from Robert's. He felt the wooden door against his back. His hand closed around the doorknob, turned it, and then he was in the room lit only by the green-shaded banker's light on the broad desk.

Robert was just feet away now. His short, spiky, light brown hair that was just beginning to gray at the temples looked deliciously tousled. His square, chiseled jaw bore a sexy five-o'clock shadow. His full lips begged to be kissed. And those eyes...they had the power to see all the way through to Jesse's soul, and he found himself a willing and open window for them.

Robert slipped through the door, shut it, and locked it behind him. In a swift move, he grabbed Jesse by the shoulders, pushed him back against the wall, and claimed his mouth in a hungry crush.

Jesse's hands came up to burrow in Robert's hair, pulling his face closer, feeling the scrape of Robert's stubble against

his lips. The man tasted like cinnamon, along with healthy doses of comfort and sin—a strange combination maybe, yet it was familiar, arousing, and uniquely him. Nothing had ever tasted so good. Their tongues lashed in an erotic fucking, sliding and thrusting with abandon, while Robert's groin ground against Jesse's in slow, lascivious circles...

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BY

M. L. RHODES

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SATISFACTION  
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# CHAPTER 1

The sound of “Dream On” playing somewhere nearby startled Jesse McIntyre awake.

He blinked in the muted, late morning light creeping in around the edge of the window blinds, trying to place why Steven Tyler would be wailing at him. But as the last gauzy fingers of sleep faded and he came back to full awareness, the reason for the blaring Aerosmith tune clicked.

He rolled over in bed and reached for his cell phone—the source of the music—on the nightstand. The number displayed sent a rush of anticipation through him. *Robert.*

“Hi, you,” Jesse said, still groggy but a smile automatically curving his lips.

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“Hey. I woke you up again, didn’t I?”

The low masculine voice on the other end of the line was the best thing Jesse had heard in hours. He looked at the clock and saw it was 9:50 A.M. “I would have been getting up soon anyway.”

“I’m sorry. I always hate to wake you.”

Jesse stretched out on his back in the big bed that, for the past week and a half, had been too damned lonely. “How many times have I told you to call me whenever you can? You can call in the middle of the damn night if you want. I’m just glad to hear your voice.”

“I feel bad, though, because you get home from work so late.”

“Robert, you’re gone so much, in what reality would I rather sleep than spend whatever time I can with you?”

A beat of silence followed his words, and he winced as he realized how he’d probably sounded. He hadn’t meant to let the hint of bitterness creep into his voice, but the long separations when Robert traveled for business were tough, and getting tougher with every trip. Sometimes it seemed like he heard Robert’s voice more often through the phone than he did in person.

“Nine days, four hours, thirty-nine minutes and counting,” Robert said softly. “I know this has been a long one. If I could have planned it differently I would have. I’m sorry, Jesse.”

The genuine apology in his voice caused a twinge of guilt in Jesse. Robert’s business, Bauer MicroSystems, had become one of the preeminent microelectronics firms in the country

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simply because Robert had devoted so much time and energy into it. And now, he was doing his damndest to keep it on firm financial ground in spite of the rotten economy. That meant he spent a good chunk of his time flying around the country to acquire new clients and schmooze the old. He worked hard, and Jesse knew he was only trying to do what was best for his company and employees. A fact Jesse attempted to remind himself of whenever he felt his own frustration and loneliness start to get the best of him.

"I know you'd be here if you could," he conceded. "You will still be home tonight, though, right?"

"Absolutely. I land at nine-fifteen."

"Are you coming to the bar?"

"Of course. I miss you like hell. I want to see you as soon as I can."

The edge of desperation in his tone brought a smile to Jesse's face and wiped away the remainder of his earlier irritation. "Miss me that much, huh?"

"More than you know. Since you'll be working, I'll try to restrain myself. But once we get home and I have you in bed, all bets are off. I'm keeping you there naked and writhing until you either beg me to stop or we pass out from exhaustion."

Robert's words caused a thrilling ripple of heat to course through him, setting his nerve endings aflame, making his belly tighten in anticipation, and his balls ache with desire.

"What if I tell you I don't want you to restrain yourself at the bar? What if I want to be greedy and have you there and at home?"

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“God, don’t tempt me unless you mean it. I want you too much.”

“I do mean it. I dare you to walk into the pub and claim me.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Yes,” Jesse said. He wasn’t sure what had made him say it except that maybe he needed some reassurance Robert really did miss him as much as he missed Robert during these damned trips.

“Do you have any idea what you’re getting yourself into?”

“Do you?”

“I can tell you exactly what I’ll be into. You. Hard and deep, Jesse, buried to the balls in your sexy ass.” Robert’s voice was low, husky.

Jesse shuddered in need, his dick so stiff beneath the sheet it ached. “Bring it on, baby.”

“Oh, I will.”

“Are you hard right now?” Jesse asked.

“Like fucking granite. You?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

Robert’s laugh sent a new round of desire rushing through Jesse’s veins. “At least you’ve got privacy to deal with it. I have a meeting that starts in like two minutes and I’m going to be late for it because I’ve got a very obvious X-rated bulge in my pants, thank you very much.”

Jesse grinned at the thought of Robert, probably standing in a corridor of whatever office building he was in, trying to look like the cool professional he was, while he quietly talked

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dirty to his lover on the phone and sported a boner.

"If you were here, I'd take care of that for you, and send you to your meeting with a smile on your face."

Robert groaned, a soft, hoarse sound. "Christ, Jess...you're not helping things here."

"Want to find a quiet bathroom stall and let me make you feel good?"

"Yes. And no."

"Yes and no?"

"Hell yes, I want that. Badly. But as sexy as your voice is and as hard as I am, I'd rather wait until tonight and have the real deal. You and me, skin to skin, with no rush."

"Ah, so we're going for anticipation rather than instant gratification? Damn. That's going to make for a long day."

"Yeah, but think of how good the payoff will be. Promise me you won't get yourself off either, that you'll wait for me?"

Robert's tone was filled with an intensity that made Jesse's blood boil. He slid a hand down his abs beneath the sheet and curled his fingers around his erection. He gave it a squeeze, drew in a slow breath, then released it.

"Promise me," Robert coaxed. "We both wait until tonight. I'll make it worth your while."

Jesse smiled. "You always do. Yeah, I promise."

"Good. You won't regret it. Crap...I'd better go. I'm running late, and I still have to make myself presentable. How many times do you suppose I'll have to run through the states and capitals in my mind or do my times tables or think about soggy spinach before I can walk again?"

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Jesse laughed. "You can't say I didn't offer to take care of that not-so-little problem."

"Smart ass. You're making it worse because now all I can think about is how damned good it's going to feel to be holding you close and sinking my *problem* inside you."

Another pulse of need shot through Jesse and his ass clenched. "Fuck."

"Exactly my thought," Robert said softly. "Tonight can't come soon enough."

"No, it really can't. How the hell am I supposed to function the rest of the day now that you've got me wound up so tight?"

"You think it's going to be any easier for me? Whose brilliant idea was this waiting thing?"

Jesse grinned. "Yeah, whose? It's not too late to change your mind."

"No way in hell. We're waiting so we can do this right. Even if it fucking kills me in the meantime," he added, under his breath. Jesse could almost see the sexy grimace of pleasure and pain on his face. "Have a good day, okay? I'll be thinking about you."

"You, too."

"I really love you, Jesse."

The words, softly spoken, flooded his chest with a squeezing warmth that stole his breath. "I love you, too."

After they'd hung up, Jesse lingered, unable to drag himself out of bed just yet. He should get up, maybe go for a run and take a shower since he was teaching a class at the art

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center at one, then would have a couple of hours to kill before he had to be at the bar to start his shift at five o'clock.

But Robert's call had left him aroused and lonely all at the same time. Damn he missed the man. The temptation to take his hard-on in hand and find some relief was a powerful lure, but he'd keep his promise. There was something to be said for anticipation, and Jesse knew from experience Robert was right...when they did see each other tonight, it would be explosive. It always was when they'd been apart. Hell, it always was period.

It had been five months since they'd been snowed in together back in January and had finally given in to their long repressed desire for one another. Five months since the wealthy, well-educated, sexy as sin businessman who, by all rights, shouldn't have been attracted to a former bad-boy bartender who could barely make ends meet had rocked Jesse's world and stolen his battered heart. And during that time, even the days, and sometimes weeks, apart because of Robert's traveling hadn't muted the physical need that was a constant, raging fire between them.

Or maybe part of it was because Robert *was* gone so much, so they had to cram in as much closeness as they could during the few days a month they were together. Although, even if he could see Robert every day, Jesse couldn't imagine that he'd ever want him any less...because it wasn't just about the physical. He was in love with the man. So much so that three months ago, he'd done something he'd never even considered before with any other lover—he'd moved in with Robert.

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*Our* house, Robert had called it from the very beginning, accepting Jesse, his belongings, his habits, and his work schedule that had him sleeping and coming and going at odd hours, with open arms into his life. Jesse felt more comfortable and at home here in this rambling house nestled against the foothills of the mountains than he ever had anywhere. When he'd moved to Colorado three years ago and up until recently, he'd shared a place with his friend Leila, but in his mind, it had always been her house. He wasn't sure why...it certainly wasn't because she hadn't wanted him there or hadn't given him free run of the place. Maybe it was just because he'd always known it was temporary—that at some point she'd settle down with someone or he would. Even growing up he'd never really felt like he had a "home." After his parents had divorced and quickly remarried other people when he was thirteen, they'd shared custody of him. So he'd been dragged back and forth between their respective houses and had never felt truly comfortable at either, especially when his parents had begun having other children with their new spouses.

But here, it was different. This felt like home. The only thing that kept it from being perfect, was that even living in the same house, it seemed like he and Robert barely saw each other. And he hated that.

He'd known about Robert's travel schedule from the start of their relationship, and couldn't deny he'd had concerns about it even back then. But when they'd moved in together, he'd assumed that meant they both wanted to take their

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relationship to the next level of commitment, had assumed Robert would make an effort to be gone less.

Instead, Jesse found himself home alone far too often, and as incredible as their reunions were, he craved more.

He dragged his hands through his hair, then rolled onto his side, bunching the pillow beneath his head, and stretched a hand out across the empty expanse of Robert's side of the bed.

"Miss you, damn it," he mumbled. "I hate sleeping alone."

And he did. Now that he'd had a chance to experience what it felt like to really love someone and crave them twenty-four/seven.

Odd that a guy like him, who'd spent his teens and twenties living on the edge, always on the go, always seeking the next big thrill, the next party, would yearn for domestic bliss. And yet, strangely enough, he did. That out of control, sowing-his-wild-oats phase of his life was over and he had no desire to go back to it. He wanted to be able to wake up next to Robert every morning instead of hearing his voice on the phone. Wanted to come home from work late at night and slide between the sheets against the warm heat of his lover's body instead of into an empty bed. He wanted to be able to enjoy his days off with the man he loved, not by himself with yet another phone call or text conversation to tide him over. Spending time together was already complicated enough even when Robert was home because Robert worked during the day and Jesse the evenings. So the business trips added a whole new level of salt to what was becoming, for Jesse, an increasingly painful wound.

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He'd brought up his concerns with Robert in roundabout ways like what had just happened on the phone earlier, where his frustration had slipped out without him intending it to. Each time Robert had been apologetic, Jesse had ended up feeling guilty for mentioning it, and then the topic would quickly shift to something else. It seemed to Jesse that they were both dancing around the issue because neither of them really wanted to get into it and risk having a fight over it. The last thing, in fact, he wanted to do was pick a fight, or push Robert when Robert was already under pressure to keep his company above water during tough financial times. Jesse wanted to be supportive because wasn't that what having a real relationship was about?

Yet he couldn't seem to shake the worry that maybe Robert's absences and his driven devotion to his company was a problem that ran deeper than just the current state of the economy.

He didn't doubt Robert loved him. He heard it in his voice, saw it in his eyes when they were together. Yet, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get out of his mind the fact that Robert, at forty years old, had never committed himself to a long-term relationship until Jesse because he'd been married to his work. He'd put everything—all his time and energy—into it, and there'd been nothing leftover to share with anyone else. Robert had told him so himself.

Jesse's fear was that even though they were together now, maybe nothing had really changed. Maybe nothing ever would, and Robert's business would always come first over

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Jesse.

The thought caused an aching tightness in his chest, and he wondered, not for the first time, if their relationship could survive if Robert continued to travel so much. Jesse wanted to hope so, but the realist in him wasn't sure it was possible. How did two people make a relationship work if one of them wasn't present most of the time?

"Jesus. Enough!" he muttered, reining in his quickly spiraling thoughts that were leading to nowhere good.

*Give it time. This relationship is new for both of you. It's not like you've ever been the rock in any relationship either, so who are you to judge?*

The thought made him wince. He didn't have a stellar history himself. Though he'd had a couple of relationships that had lasted a few months at a time, and one that had even hung together for almost a year, none of them had ever been particularly stable thanks to the thrill-seeking lifestyle he and most of his friends and lovers had lived. But damn it, he wasn't the same person now that he'd been back then. He'd turned his back on everything he'd been in his twenties, had started over in a new state, with a new life that had led him to a steady job, a chance to finish the college degree he'd bailed on years ago...and to Robert.

He just wanted to love Robert and be with him. Except how could he be with him if Robert was never home?

Jesse sighed. His arousal had faded and now he was just plain lonely again. It really was going to be a long day.

His phone beeped, indicating he'd just received a text

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message. He picked it up and looked.

*See you soon. Need you so damned much.*

The words burrowed into his heart, causing a flare of hope that maybe everything could be okay. He smiled and typed...

*Need U 2. I'll be waiting.*

...and hit the send button.

Then he sobered once again. *Waiting*. It seemed to be what he did best these days.

As he threw off the sheet and slid out of the bed, he knew he and Robert were going to have to talk all this over, and soon. Maybe, once Robert was back from this trip, they could sit down and have a heart to heart. Then maybe Jesse would be able to put his fears to rest once and for all.

\* \* \*

BJ's Pub was crazy busy—not unusual for a Friday night.

Jesse didn't mind. He always preferred busy to slow. Especially tonight, when he was about to crawl out of his skin with anticipation.

Robert had texted him several times throughout the day...sometimes only a word or two, or a short but vivid sentence meant to stir his arousal. The man had clearly become an expert at stealthily texting sex talk to Jesse while he was in the middle of meetings. Who knew his classy,

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upstanding lover was such a devious pervert, Jesse thought with a grin.

The slow, teasing build had worked all too well, and had left him with a perpetually half-hard dick all day and an edgy buzz that had made it tough to concentrate. He'd taught his class at the art center on autopilot. Then he'd met his friend Eric at a new coffee house downtown, and couldn't even count the times Eric had laughed and given him shit for being off in la-la land. Same thing when Leila had called him this afternoon. She was in Paris for six months on an art fellowship, but although she'd told him all about the new project she was working on, he couldn't have repeated back a single thing she'd said. Then tonight at the bar, though he'd smiled and nodded appropriately, he'd only been half listening as customers talked to him about their days, their woes, their troubled love lives.

When they finally hit a lull in business, Benny, one of BJ's owners, a bearded, ponytailed, gray-haired man in his fifties, dressed in faded jeans, a splashy blue and red tropical print shirt, and flip-flops, came around behind the bar with Jesse. He often helped tend bar on busy nights, but at the moment he didn't look like that's what he had in mind. He leaned against the back counter, crossed muscular arms over his chest, and eyeballed Jesse with a grin and a humorous glint in his eyes.

"Havin' a good night?" he asked, the grin growing wider.

Jesse felt a smile twitch at his own lips as he leaned a hip against the bar. He and Benny had quickly become friends when Jesse came to work here at the pub a couple of years

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ago. He could tell from Benny's expression the man was about to give him crap over something. "Yeah. What're you getting at?"

"Just wonderin'."

"Uh-huh."

Benny's gaze dropped briefly to Jesse's groin, then slid back up. "So, are you...um...happy to see *me*? Or is that for someone else?"

Jesse let his own grin slip free. "Been practicing that line all evening, haven't you?"

Benny laughed, a deep, jovial sound that drew the looks of several customers in the bar and brought smiles to their faces even though they had no way of knowing what was so funny. Benny had that effect on people. "Damn, and here I thought I was being so subtle."

"Subtlety...not so much your strong point, Benny."

That elicited another laugh, even as his eyes dropped to Jesse's groin again. "Not so much yours either, apparently. Let me guess...your man's coming home from one of his trips tonight and you're jonesing for him real bad."

Jesse continued to smile, but didn't shift his position, try to adjust himself, or otherwise fall for Benny's teasing. He'd been on the hairy edge of turn-on all day, no doubt, but he knew damn good and well that even at half-mast it wasn't as obvious as Benny was trying to make it sound. It was more likely his boss had noticed Jesse's distracted conversations with customers, or the way he kept checking the clock above the bar rather than measuring with any true accuracy the size

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of his package.

"Does John know you're checking out other men's equipment when he's not around? Wonder what he'd say about that?" Jesse arched an eyebrow in humorous challenge. John was the other owner of BJ's Pub, and Benny's lover and partner of thirty years.

"Oh, so you're going to play dirty, eh? Well, for your information, John and I have been checking out men's *equipment* as you call it, since before you were even a gleam in your mother's eye, boy-o. I think John would agree that I have particularly good taste and a keen eye for detail."

"Yes, he does agree," John said, exiting the office door next to the bar and joining them. Clean shaven, with short, neatly trimmed gray hair, and dressed tonight in pressed gray slacks, an immaculate striped dress shirt, and a purple silk tie, he was the antithesis of Benny. He was also shorter than Benny, and lean compared to Benny's muscular bulk. And his soft, cultured voice was nothing like Benny's boisterous tone. Yet Jesse had never known a more loving, committed couple in spite of the fact the two men were total opposites.

"You see!" Benny said with a smirk. "I rest my case."

"Just so I know what the conversation is about, what is it I'm agreeing you have good taste and a discerning eye for?" John asked, glancing at his lover with a fond smile, then winking at Jesse.

"We were discussing Jesse's current state of distraction."

"Ah, you mean the hard-on he's been sporting all night," John said. "It's a very fine one, indeed."

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“Oh, come on,” Jesse said, laughing. “It’s not that obvious!”

“Maybe only to a couple of old leches like us who’ve been around a block or two,” Benny said, grinning.

“And to Jesse’s handsome lover, no doubt,” John added. “I’m certain an intelligent man like Robert Bauer is fully aware of what’s waiting for him at the end of a long business trip and can’t wait to indulge.”

“Mmm. I agree. Come to think of it, I think our Jesse and his man are nicely matched in the attributes department, wouldn’t you say?” Benny asked his lover, as if Jesse weren’t standing right there.

“Oh, undoubtedly. Very well matched. Can you imagine how they must look together, all that hard heat at once? What would you say? Eight inches, both of them?”

“At least.”

“You two are bad. Evil. I can’t believe I work for you.” Jesse was still laughing.

“Should we tell him?”

“I don’t know...I’m sort of enjoying the fact he hasn’t realized it yet.”

“Realized what?” Jesse demanded.

“That the object of your desire just walked in the door, and he’s as hard for you as you are for him,” Benny said.

Jesse, who’d had his back to the door, spun around. Like a homing beacon, his gaze locked with Robert’s deep-blue one, and his heart began to pound. And this time, there was no denying his cock’s instant reaction—it swelled to full, painful

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stiffness in the tight confines of his jeans.

Everything around him ceased to exist and all he saw, all he felt, was the man he loved striding toward him, looking spectacularly sexy in all black tonight—expensive black dress slacks and a long-sleeved shirt, his top button undone exposing the lickable column of his neck. His eyes glistened with an intense desire that slammed into Jesse, sapping his ability to think and stealing his breath.

“I’m taking my break now,” he managed to mumble to Benny and John.

“Use the office,” John said with a knowing smile. “We’ll make sure you’re not interrupted.”

Jesse wasn’t sure if he said thanks or not. He was already too busy walking—stumbling—backward toward the office door. Backward because he couldn’t tear his gaze from Robert’s. He felt the wooden door against his back. His hand closed around the doorknob, turned it, and then he was in the room lit only by the green-shaded banker’s lamp on the broad desk.

Robert was just feet away now. His short, spiky, light brown hair that was just beginning to get a few strands of gray at the temples looked deliciously tousled. His square, chiseled jaw bore a sexy five-o’clock shadow. His full lips begged to be kissed. And those eyes...they had the power to see all the way through to Jesse’s soul, and he found himself a willing and open window for them.

Robert slipped through the door, shut it, and locked it behind him. Then, in a swift move, he grabbed Jesse by the

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shoulders, pushed him back against the wall, and claimed his mouth in a hungry crush.

Jesse's hands came up to burrow in Robert's hair, pulling his face closer, feeling the scrape of Robert's stubble against his lips. The man tasted like cinnamon, along with healthy doses of comfort and sin—a strange combination maybe, yet it was familiar, arousing, and uniquely him. Nothing had ever tasted so good. Their tongues lashed in an erotic fucking, sliding and thrusting with abandon, while Robert's groin ground against Jesse's in slow, lascivious circles.

At six-foot-two Jesse was a tall man, but Robert was nearly six feet himself with a lean, toned physique that put many younger men to shame. As always, tonight their bodies fit together like the perfectly matched pieces of a puzzle, notched and curved in all the right places. And, God, he smelled good. He always did...like expensive, exotic spice. His scent alone made Jesse crazy.

"I'm going to make you mine all over again," Robert growled, his breath hot against Jesse's lips. His hands were already working at Jesse's T-shirt, tugging it free from the waistband of his jeans, pushing it up, pulling it over his head, and tossing it to the floor. The moment it was out of the way, his mouth closed over one of Jesse's pierced nipples and he flicked it with his tongue, sucking at it and the silver ring until the nub was stiff and aching and Jesse was writhing against him. His nipples were ultra-sensitive, a fact Robert always took singular delight in exploiting.

"So fucking sexy," Robert murmured as he moved to the

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other nipple. “All day long, as those stuffy, old-school, conservative government suits I was trapped with were droning on and on, I kept wondering what they’d think if I told them I was a gay man who had the sexiest lover on the planet and I couldn’t wait to get home so I could suck him, lick every tattoo on his body, and fuck him until neither of us could walk.”

Jesse let out a shaky laugh that turned into a moan when Robert’s teeth bit down on his tit. “That would have won you a lot of contracts and made you popular I’m sure. I hope you behaved.”

“I did. But don’t worry...” His hands were unbuckling Jesse’s belt and unzipping his jeans. “I saved all that repressed sexual frustration for you, baby.” Warm fingers delved into his briefs and found his dick. He bit Jesse’s nipple again, then tugged on it, even as his hand wrapped around his cock. “And I have every intention of making you scream before the night’s over.”

“Jesus, Robert.” Jesse thrust his groin against Robert’s hand. He clung to his lover’s shoulders, his fingers digging into them. Between the mouth on his tit, and the hand squeezing his aching cock, he was already aroused beyond measure. His head fell back against the wall, his eyes closed, and it was all he could do to drag panting breaths into his lungs.

And then Robert was yanking his jeans and boxer-briefs down his hips and thighs, not even trying to be gentle. Jesse didn’t want him to be. He just wanted Robert touching him

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again. Robert didn't disappoint him. He dropped to his knees in front of Jesse and, fisting his dick at the base with one hand and squeezing his balls in a tight grip with the other, licked over Jesse's cockhead in slow, hot, damp strokes.

"Oh, God..."

When Robert sucked his crown into his mouth, then took him deeper still, Jesse shuddered. He rested a hand on Robert's head, his fingers curling against his scalp, guiding his motions, though it wasn't necessary. Robert knew him so well, knew exactly how he liked it and how to play him like a virtuoso. The wet heat surrounding his shaft was so fucking amazing, Jesse quickly found himself on the edge of coming. Robert knew it, because he pulled off and sucked his balls instead. Jesse moaned and murmured hoarse pleas.

Finally, with heavy-lidded eyes and a sexy smile, Robert returned his attention to his dick, bringing Jesse right back to the peak in just a few sucks.

"God, you're too fucking good at this."

Still looking up at him, his lips wrapped around Jesse's shaft, his mouth and tongue working him over, Robert's midnight blue eyes glistened. The sight caused an ache in Jesse's chest that rivaled the one building in his balls.

He wasn't going to last. He'd been wound up too tight all day.

Fire spread low in his groin. His balls drew up against his body. Robert sucked him hard and deep, his tongue swirling around and around the head, up and down his length, and returning to the crown again until Jesse was holding Robert's

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head and fucking his mouth with hard thrusts, his control gone.

With a powerful explosion, he went over the edge, shooting cum over Robert's tongue and down his throat.

Robert took it all, lapping up every drop until Jesse was spent. Then he kissed his way up his abs to his chest, to his neck, to his chin, and finally sought his lips again in a kiss that left Jesse's already trembling body clinging to him.

"Need you," Robert breathed against Jesse's mouth.

"I know." Jesse's still-shaking fingers found Robert's belt, the button and zipper on his slacks. When they were unfastened, he pushed them down and over Robert's stiff cock, which stood out between his shirttails. He squeezed the hot length in one hand and reached around to squeeze Robert's ass with the other as they continued kissing. Then Jesse eased his mouth free and turned around to face the wall, planting his hands against it, and jutting his ass out in invitation.

Robert's appreciative hiss and the warm hands rubbing over Jesse's butt caused a new shudder to pass through Jesse. He closed his eyes, savoring it, trembling in anticipation. Movement and a rustle sounded behind him, and then his cheeks were spread and he felt the cool touch of something slippery at his hole. God, how much did he love this man? Robert had obviously picked up some lube on his way here.

"Do you want me to stretch you?"

"No, I just want you in me." Jesse's voice shook. His ass clenched. "Been thinking about it all day..."

Robert's hand slid up and down his back in a motion that

## *SATISFACTION*

was part erotic as hell, part soothing. The thick head of his cock pressed against the tight ring of muscle and, in a slow, steady push, breached it.

“Fuck,” Jesse moaned. “Oh, Jesus...”

Robert pressed in farther, withdrew an inch or so, then pressed again, stretching Jesse’s passage with a tingling burn and a sensation of fullness. He slipped out partway and thrust in again, this time with less caution and more intensity.

“Oh, yeah...like that,” Jesse gasped.

One of Robert’s hands splayed against his abdomen and the other curled around his hip, anchoring him as Robert withdrew, drove in again, then began long, steady, hard strokes.

Pulsing contractions of pleasure radiated through Jesse’s ass, and spread down into his legs, up his back, around to his dick, which shouldn’t, by all rights, be capable of getting hard again so soon, and yet it was twitching and making a damned fair attempt at it.

He thrust back against Robert on each plunge, wanting him as deep as possible. The sounds of their grunts and soft moans filled the air around them, along with the musky scent of their desire. Their bodies, already slick with sweat in the early June night, in spite of the air conditioning, slammed together with ever increasing furor.

It was a fierce joining, raw and hungry, yet somehow Robert still managed to make it lovemaking rather than fucking. Maybe it was the constant string of hoarsely whispered endearments—“That’s it, love, feel me inside you?”

## SATISFACTION

Take it all, babe, let me make you feel good.”—or the damp kisses Robert pressed against his shoulder and neck, but it touched Jesse to the core.

He wondered if he'd even be able to walk after this, but before the thought was fully formed, he knew he didn't care if he couldn't. All he cared about was that Robert was with him, filling him, claiming him. Nine days had been too fucking long to be apart. Too. Fucking. Long.

Robert's hand slid down to cup his balls and roll them between his fingers, and then he grasped Jesse's half-erect prick and began stripping it in a slow, sensual motion that sent sensation rocketing through it, from base to tip, filling it with blood.

*Jesus Christ.* He actually was getting hard again.

“Rob...Robert...” he panted. It shocked him to realize not only was he hard, he was once again hovering at the edge of orgasm.

Robert's motions grew even more intense, focused. “I love you, Jesse.” And then he was coming, driving into Jesse in several final, deep plunges, his body tense and shuddering. His hand tightened around Jesse's cock, jerking it harder, and with a hoarse cry, Jesse lost it, too, his seed dripping hot and sticky into Robert's hand.

He wasn't sure how long they stayed pressed together, breathing hard, neither of them in a hurry to separate. One of Robert's hands slid up and down Jesse's back in a tender touch that made Jesse's heart ache. He turned his head, reached back with one arm, and pulled Robert into a lingering

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kiss.

"I love you, too," he murmured against Robert's lips. "I missed you so damned much."

"Me, too. I hate being away from you."

"You do?"

Lines creased Robert's forehead. "God, of course I do. Why would you even ask that, Jess?"

The words and Jesse's fears were on the tip of his tongue, waiting to spill out, but he swallowed them. He'd just gotten Robert back not even a half-hour ago, and didn't want to ruin the closeness between them with a list of complaints right off the bat. There'd be time later to talk about it. Right now, he just wanted to savor having his lover home.

He kissed Robert again, then smiled. "Just checking."

But his smile and attempt to keep it light didn't make Robert's worry lines disappear. "You don't have to check. I miss you like hell when I'm gone, and all I can ever think about is coming home to you."

As he pulled off the condom he was wearing and tossed it in the trashcan by the door, Jesse turned to face him. He leaned against the wall, strangely exhausted. Or maybe not strangely since he'd come twice so close together. He wasn't a horny teenager anymore.

Robert pulled up his pants and fastened them, more to keep them from falling around his ankles and tripping him Jesse suspected than because he was in a hurry to get dressed.

Jesse didn't bother with his yet, a fact Robert didn't seem to mind in the least since he gave Jesse's body a steamy

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perusal. When his gaze finally landed back on Jesse's face, his eyes blazed with love. "How the hell did I ever get so lucky?" He cupped Jesse's bearded cheek in his hand and kissed him again.

Jesse wrapped his arms around Robert's waist and leaned into him. "I'm glad you're home," he whispered. "Please tell me you're staying for a while this time."

## CHAPTER 2

Robert pressed another kiss against Jesse's mouth, this one slower, savoring the heat, his taste, the closeness, the way Jesse's warm, heavy body felt leaning against his...and trying very hard to ignore the invisible band squeezing his chest.

He reached up to gently push a long lock of dark hair away from over one of Jesse's eyes—eyes as blue as the summer sky—before kissing him again.

In all his life, he'd never found the kind of peace and contentment with anyone or anything that he felt when he was with Jesse. The man had burrowed under his skin and into his heart. He still had rippling moments of shock that Jesse, who was eight years younger than he, sexy as hell, and could have

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any man he wanted, had chosen him.

And yet...there were nights, as he lay alone in empty hotel rooms thousands of miles away with far too much time to think, when he felt a nearly crippling fear that he didn't have what it took to satisfy and keep a man like Jesse McIntyre. They'd only been together five months, and he already felt tension brewing between them. He heard the loneliness and frustration in Jesse's tone when they talked on the phone, felt it in the desperation of their lovemaking each time he came home from a business trip. And tonight, the uncertainty in Jesse's voice when he'd asked if Robert really did hate being away from him was all too painfully real, as was Jesse's plea for him to stay home for a while.

Robert knew he should respond, wanted to give him the reassurance he sought, but the only response he had to offer wasn't the one Jesse wanted to hear. So instead, he sidetracked him with kisses. He couldn't bear to hurt Jess tonight and see his disappointment after being apart from him for the past week and a half. His stall tactic was only delaying the inevitable, though. The hard truth was, his traveling was causing problems between them, and every time he left, it seemed to be getting worse.

Hell, he didn't want them to be apart any more than Jesse did. But he'd spent fifteen years building his company from a mere idea into a multimillion dollar corporation. He'd given up everything to make it what it was today, and he'd done it with his own hands, his own sweat and tears, and sometimes, especially in the early days, by giving up his own pay to make

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sure his employees always received theirs. Now, with the economy so bad, and businesses crashing and burning around him, he felt like he had to work harder than ever to make sure he didn't have to turn away a single employee from his or her job, to make sure they continued to receive competitive salaries so they could put their kids through college and not have to default on any mortgages. Which meant he had to spend more time than ever guaranteeing Bauer MicroSystems had plenty of contracts and wouldn't end up short at the end of the year.

So it left him horribly torn. He loved Jess so damned much he'd give the man the world if he thought Jesse would accept it. Yet the one thing Jesse seemed to want—him home and not traveling—was the one thing Robert didn't know how to give him. Because he owed his loyalty to his company as well, with hundreds of employees depending on him to be their anchor in the storm.

He wasn't sure how to balance the two any better than he was already doing. He'd hoped when they moved in together it would show Jesse just how committed he was to him, how much he needed and wanted him. But each time he left on a trip, he could almost feel another stone slipping in the foundation of their relationship. He worried how much damage was being done and how he could fix it. He wanted to go back to the way it had been those first weeks after Jesse had moved in with him, when everything had been amazing and this tense undercurrent and nagging worry hadn't invaded everything. Yet he didn't know how to get back there.

## SATISFACTION

*The first three weeks you lived together, you only went on one trip and it was two days long. You and Jesse were close because you were here to be close.*

Robert winced.

If he could just get Bauer MicroSystems through the economic crisis, things would be better, he promised himself.

Jesse pulled back and gazed at him, lines creasing his forehead. "You okay?"

Robert forced a smile on his face that he hoped looked sincere. "Yeah, I'm good. Just wishing I didn't have to let you go back to work in a few minutes. Wishing I could keep you here like this, or better yet, take you home right now."

The smile that curved Jesse's lips, seductive and full of promise, sent fire blazing along Robert's nerve endings.

"Weren't you the one earlier today," Jesse said, "who was all about anticipation and delayed gratification? Surely you got enough in the last few minutes to tide you over for just a few more hours?" he teased.

Robert settled a hand against Jesse's lower back and pulled him close again. "I won't ever be able to get enough of you if I live to be a hundred."

He kissed Jesse again, trying to pour all his emotion into it, to show him what he couldn't seem to convey well enough with words. Just a little while longer, he promised himself again. Once he was sure his company's bottom line was firmly in the black for the year, then he'd try to stay home more.

*And in the meantime, what are you going to do if Jesse gets sick of being alone all the damned time and looks*

## SATISFACTION

*elsewhere for comfort?*

A sick knot settled in the pit of his stomach.

*No.* Robert didn't want to go there. The thought had been toying at the edge of his mind for a while now, but up to this point he'd been able to chase it away before it was fully formed. Tonight, however, it planted itself, and he suddenly found he couldn't shake it free.

Jesse was only thirty-two, and it hadn't been that long since he'd been cruising gay clubs on a nightly basis and never lacking for men who wanted to sleep with him and vice versa. Hell, half the customers who came into BJ's Pub lusted after him. The only thing that held most of them at bay was Jesse's personal rule not to flirt with or interact socially with customers, which led many of the gay male crowd to believe he was straight and keep their distance from him. But if Jesse ever decided to lower the protective wall he kept up, he'd have men crawling out of the woodwork coming on to him.

*That doesn't mean Jesse would be interested in them.*

*If you're gone most of the time, the nagging voice countered, it doesn't mean eventually he might not be, either.*

God, what would he do if he came home from a trip to find Jesse'd had enough and had moved out of the house or had found someone else who *would* be here for him all the time?

He eased his lips away from Jesse's and gazed at the man, his insides churning.

"What is it?" Jesse asked, his dark brows drawn together and his eyes troubled. "You're not yourself tonight. You're a million miles from here."

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“Sorry, I don’t mean to be.” It was a struggle to keep his voice steady and not give himself away.

“Come on, talk to me. What’s on your mind? Did you have problems at your meeting today?”

“No, it was fine. I don’t want to talk about work right now. I spend enough time on that. Right now I just want to concentrate on us.”

*So I can show you just how damned important you are to me and you won’t have any reason to look elsewhere.*

God, he had to stop this line of thought.

“Fair enough.” Jesse smiled, seeming to take his response in stride. “But, unfortunately, I should probably get dressed and get back to *my* work before Benny and John come banging on the door. They’re in fine form tonight and I wouldn’t put it past them to give us shit for hiding in here, even though it was John’s idea. Benny’s probably taking bets right now on how long before we come out.”

Robert forced another smile past the sudden aching disappointment that Jesse had to go back to work just when he needed him most and wanted him to stay.

Was this what Jesse felt like when Robert left to do his job?

*Except probably way worse because instead of being tied up for a few hours, you’re unavailable for days at a time.*

Ouch.

Jesse must have seen Robert’s grimace and misunderstood it. His eyes glinted with mischief. “Don’t worry...it’s already eleven-thirty and I’m off at two. The moment we get home,

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I'm holding you to your promise earlier."

"My promise?"

"Home. Bed. Moaning and writhing until we pass out from exhaustion. It'll have to be exhaustion, because I'm sure as hell not going to beg you to stop."

A real smile curved Robert's lips now as he remembered their phone conversation this morning.

"Or maybe," Jesse continued, "you'll be the one begging." Like lightning, he had Robert's pants unfastened again and they and his briefs were down around his knees. Jesse sucked a finger into his mouth, withdrew it, wet and glistening, and with unerring accuracy, probed between Robert's ass cheeks and pushed it home inside him.

Robert bucked against him, savoring the sudden stinging pressure. "Oh, fuck."

"Yeah." Jesse's voice rumbled through him, deep and low and filled with promise. "This time it'll be my turn."

He wiggled his finger and rubbed it over Robert's prostate, causing Robert to buck again and let out a soft whimper.

"That's right," Jesse murmured against his lips, millimeters from kissing him, but holding off, and teasing him with his closeness instead. "I'm *so* going to make you beg. I know just what you like, babe."

His finger moved again, pressing in exactly the right spot to send deep, thrilling jolts of electricity through Robert's groin. Robert moaned and his hands clutched at Jesse's hips, clenching and unclenching. His dick thickened in response, rising up to brush against Jesse's.

## *SATISFACTION*

Jesse felt it because he smiled, his mouth still so very close to Robert's. "Getting hard again, aren't you?" His breath was warm and smelled minty.

"Yes, damn it."

"Mmm..." With a wicked grin, he pulled his finger free, gave Robert's cock a slow, seductive stroke, then unhanded him and stepped back.

Robert moaned in protest when Jesse reached down and pulled Robert's pants and briefs back up, tucked his stiff, thrumming erection away, and zipped it in place.

"What the hell?" he managed to gasp, wincing at the pressure against his sensitive shaft.

"Now you get to feel exactly what I did all day after all your naughty text messages—hard and desperate for relief."

Robert groaned, even as shivers of need swept through him. "That's cruel."

"No, that's anticipation," Jesse whispered, before pressing his lips against Robert's in a kiss that left Robert breathless.

When Jesse pulled away, his eyes glinted with love and barely banked lust. "By the time we get home, you're definitely going to be pleading with me to make it all better."

Before Robert could retaliate, Jesse leaned down and tugged up his own jeans. Robert watched with hunger as Jesse's spectacular cock, even at rest, disappeared from his sight. He reached to stop it, but Jesse took another step back, pulling out of his reach.

"Uh-un-uh. Good things come to boys who wait."

"What about horny grown men?"

## *SATISFACTION*

Jesse's low rumble of laughter slid through Robert's veins like warm quicksilver. "Them, too." He grabbed Robert's hand and pulled him against him, until they were chest to chest, groin to groin.

Robert's arms came up automatically to curve around Jesse bare torso. "You planning to go back out there shirtless?" Robert asked. "If so, I'm going to need some kind of weapon to fight off all the men who're going be launching themselves over the bar to devour you."

"Robert Bauer...is that jealousy I hear in your voice?"

The question caused a stab in his heart. He knew Jesse was teasing—it was clear from the glint in his eyes—but, damn, it hit home just a little too hard after his thoughts earlier.

"Maybe," he said hoarsely. "I know better than anyone just how fucking sexy you are."

One hand slid around to stroke the green Chinese dragon tattoo on Jesse's right bicep, then moved to his sculpted and lightly furred chest, circling his nipples and the sexy silver rings, over the tattoo across one pec that said, in fancy script, "Because I live," to another on his ribs—a single word, "Remember" that Jesse had had done after his best friend had died three years ago in a tragic accident Jesse had blamed himself for. Robert traced the dark line of hair that disappeared into his lover's low-cut jeans that clung almost indecently to the bulge of his cock and barely hid the tribal tattoo that decorated the muscular plane between his navel and his groin. One of his favorite pastimes was following that tattoo with his tongue before he went down on Jesse. He

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would have done it earlier if he hadn't been in such a frenzy to have Jesse's cock down his throat.

A man like Jesse was meant to be savored, not rushed over. He was hot as hell on the outside with a gentle soul on the inside. And there wasn't a man out in the bar who wouldn't want him if they saw him like Robert saw him, if they knew him like Robert knew him.

"Hey." Jesse cupped the back of Robert's head. "You know you're the only man I want. The only man I need."

His mouth crushed against Robert's in a hungry kiss that quickly had them both trembling and groping at each other. But once again, much to Robert's disappointment, Jesse was the one to pull away first. He did it with a sultry smile, though. "You going to kiss me like that when we get home?"

"I could keep doing it right here."

"To the tune of Benny and John banging down the door in about two minutes, telling me to get my ass back out there and earn my keep? Uh-uh. I'd rather hold onto the thought of having you all to myself later with no interruptions."

"Yeah, yeah," Robert teased. "You choose tonight to go all responsible citizen on me."

Jesse flashed him a white-toothed grin as he bent over and picked up his T-shirt from the floor. "Hey, I have to make a living, too. But you can hang out with me until I'm off if you want. I'm not going to say no to having a sexy hunk keeping one of my barstools warm."

"All the better to keep an eye on your admirers and make sure none of them make a pass at you."

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Jesse pushed his arms into the sleeves and tugged the black cotton down over his head. Robert almost sighed as the buff, tanned expanse of mouthwatering skin disappeared.

Then Jesse brushed a brief kiss over his lips and smiled. "You're pretty damn cute when you're jealous."

Robert snorted, but couldn't stop his lips from curving. "I just want to hang onto what's mine."

And odd glimmer of something Robert didn't recognize flickered in Jesse's gaze, and his tone, when he spoke, was low and had a hint of his earlier loneliness in it that wrenched Robert's heart. "So do I," he whispered.

Then, as if it hadn't occurred, Jesse smiled again.

It *had* happened, though, and another sliver of guilt worked its way into an already painful spot inside Robert. He might have forestalled the topic of his traveling and its effect on their relationship, but it wasn't going to go away. And sooner, rather than later, they were going to have to work through it. Robert just hoped he wouldn't be too late.

\* \* \*

They emerged from the pub's office forty-five minutes after they'd entered it.

Benny, in the middle of mixing a margarita, and John, leaning against the counter next to him, gave them knowing grins.

Robert had no doubt that in spite of the fact they'd done a decent job of pulling themselves back together, had even cleaned up in the private bathroom attached to the office, he

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and Jesse *looked* like they'd just had fucking fantastic sex.

"Must have been a helluva break," Benny said, waggling his eyebrows.

John held out a hand, still smiling. "Robert. Welcome back. Nice to see you looking so... *satisfied*."

"Benny. John." Robert shook John's hand with a grin.

Jesse rolled his eyes and muttered, "Oh, for God's sake...here were go. Don't start again, you two," he told the older men.

John just chuckled, as did Benny, and Robert edged out another customer gunning for the stool at the end of the bar.

The customer, a cocky, pretty-boy, twenty-something who clearly thought he was all that, scowled at Robert, then leaned over him to get to the bar, and whined, "Can I *please* get a couple of cosmopolitans?" like he'd been waiting all night instead of just walking up.

"Sure," Jesse told him. "Where are you sitting and I'll have someone bring them to you."

"I'll wait," he said in a snippy tone.

"Okay, suit yourself."

The moment the man turned his back, however, to scan the rest of the pub, Jesse looked at Robert and they shared a grin. And then, in a gesture that went straight to Robert's heart, Jesse pulled out a glass, set it in front of Robert on the bar, and poured out two fingers of Scotch for him instead of rushing to help the customer.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

## *SATISFACTION*

Robert took a sip, but even the burn of the alcohol sliding down his throat couldn't compare to the heat in Jesse's gaze and the way it made him feel.

For the next hour he sat back on his stool, nursed his drink, and watched the comings and goings in the pub. But mostly he watched Jesse...how he moved with fluid grace and skill as he mixed drinks, never getting irritated or flustered no matter how busy he was or how demanding the customers, how utterly sexy he looked with his shoulder-length hair, beard, and those blue, blue eyes a man could drown in, how damned well he filled out his faded blue jeans and that tight black T-shirt. In truth, Robert could barely take his eyes off him.

But when he was able to pull his gaze away and check out the crowd, he discovered something that didn't surprise him, but also gave him more pause than it ever had before—a significant number of men in the mostly LGBT establishment seemed to find Jesse as fascinating as he did. Robert would swear that several men came up to the bar to order rather than telling their wait-person what they wanted just so they could talk to Jesse. Or maybe it was his imagination. But, no, he didn't think so. They looked at him when he wasn't looking, and sometimes even when he was, like they wanted to eat him up.

True to form, though, Jesse ignored it all. He smiled, was always pleasant and helpful, but never did anything to acknowledge the attention or encourage it. Which was the way he'd always been, even before he and Robert had become a couple. Robert knew...because he'd spent months coming in

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here and ogling Jesse himself, making himself downright crazy with longing for something he'd never dreamed he could have because he'd thought Jesse was straight. And then that fateful night in January he'd discovered, much to his shock, that Jesse was been just as interested in him. It had taken a shove from Mother Nature—a huge winter storm that had left them stranded together for a weekend—before they'd finally acted on their long-building attraction.

Now, Robert had never been more glad for Jesse's personal space rule. Not that he thought Jesse would have done anything to compromise their relationship, but some men didn't have any qualms about flirting, even when they were in a relationship. And right now, watching how many customers watched *his* man, Robert was pretty sure he would have made himself insane with jealousy if Jesse had been a flirt.

But it also reminded him all over again just how easy it would be for Jesse to find someone else if he got tired of putting up with Robert's frequent absences.

*Ugh.* The twisting in his gut returned with a vengeance.

Damn it. He needed to stop this. Needed to stop it right now.

A squeezing hand settled on his shoulder, startling him from his thoughts. "Robert! Hey! It's nice to run into you."

Robert turned on the stool only to come face to face with someone he hadn't seen in months. His pulse skipped a beat, not in pleasure but in a dreaded *oh no*. It was Andy, the immaculately dressed, preppie, blond attorney who'd tried to start something intimate with Robert and had invited Robert

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home with him the night of the storm back in January. Robert had turned him down because he'd only had eyes for Jesse, but looking at him now, he remembered all over again just how clingy the man had been that night.

"Andy. It's good to see you." He held out a hand, but rather than shake it, Andy wrapped his fingers around Robert's and squeezed.

To Robert's utter frustration, the two women who'd been sitting next to him at the bar chose that exact moment to get up and leave, and, naturally, Andy sank onto the stool immediately to his left.

In all fairness, Andy was a nice guy, intelligent, a good conversationalist, and back in the days before Robert had become so infatuated with Jesse, he was exactly the type of man Robert would have gladly hooked up with for a night of no-strings-attached sex.

But that was then. This was now. And all he could think about was how quickly he could tear himself away from the man's hand, which now rested on Robert's forearm, and from his too-warm gaze, which was scoping Robert out like he was Andy's long-lost lover.

*Oh, hell.*

He tried to move his arm and tactfully shake the man's hand loose, but the attorney was oblivious.

"I've missed seeing you," Andy was saying.

"I've been around." When he was home, he often came by the pub and hung out with Jesse for an hour or two in the evenings while he worked.

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“Oh, I didn’t mean *you* hadn’t been here. I haven’t. I’ve actually been out of town for the past several months.”

“Really? On business?”

Another shift of his arm, but the hand still wouldn’t be dislodged, and in the cramped space, with the stools so close together, there was no easy way to escape without standing and...well...escaping. Which would probably be a little too rude to do so soon after Andy had initiated the conversation.

“No. I was gone for personal reasons.” Andy sighed, and it sounded so heartfelt and pained, Robert decided to ignore the man’s clinging for the moment when he got the sense something serious had happened.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“My father passed away in early February and I had to go back to Boston to sort out his estate and business affairs.”

“Oh, man.” Now he definitely couldn’t be rude. “I’m sorry to hear about your dad,” he said. And he genuinely was. Clearly Andy had been close to his dad, as evidenced by the sadness in his tone. It made Robert think of his own father, whom he hadn’t seen in over twenty years.

“Thanks. It was kind of a mess. It was unexpected—a heart attack. It pretty much tore my mom up. My dad was an attorney also, so you’d think he would have had everything squared away, but I discovered he’d made some bad business decisions over the last few years, and it left his estate and the law firm he ran in hot water. I ended up taking an extended leave of absence here so I could stay there and get everything straightened out. I just got back last week.”

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"I'm sure everyone there appreciated your help."

"Yeah, I think so. In fact, his partners want me to move back there and join the firm. So does my mother."

"Sounds intriguing. Are you going to?"

Andy laughed softly. "I told them I'd have to think on it. It's tempting, but, I don't know. It's tough to be away and live your own life, and then go back to the town and people where you grew up and get sucked back into same old crap that you couldn't wait to escape from when you were young. You know?"

"Yeah," Robert said softly, thinking of his own upbringing and the shitty way he'd been forced to leave his hometown in Indiana. His parents had kicked him out and disowned him his senior year of high school when they found out he was gay. "I do know."

"So..." Andy squeezed Robert's arm, making Robert aware all over again how much he really didn't want that physical connection with the man. He was nice enough, but the touch was too intimate.

"So?"

"So, enough about me. What have you been up to? How's business?" He leaned in closer. "How's your love life?"

*Oh. Fucking. Hell.* Enough was enough.

"Business is okay. And, actually, Andy...I'm with someone now."

The man's eyes widened. "Oh." Finally, *finally*, his hand slipped away and came to rest on the bar. He smiled, but it looked a little pained around the edges. "I leave town for a

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while, and someone else sneaks in and grabs the great guy. I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"Sorry." Robert didn't have the heart to tell him that there'd been no sneaking involved—Jesse had held his heart for months before Andy had ever entered the picture.

"It's okay. He's a lucky man. Anyone I might know?"

"Actually..." Robert's gaze tracked to Jesse, and discovered he was only a few feet away and moving toward him. The half smile on Jesse's face was tinged with humor, but the look in his eyes was purely possessive. It stole Robert's breath and instantly made him want to be home with Jesse, nude and tangled together in a hot, sinfully erotic clench.

"The bartender?" he heard Andy say in a shocked tone from somewhere next to him. "But... I thought he was straight?"

Robert hardly heard him, too fixated on the man he loved, who'd come around the end of the bar to stand next to him, so close his body heat sent another jolt of need radiating through him. He turned on his stool to face him, giving Jesse room to stand between his parted legs.

"Benny's going to hold down the fort until closing. Want to get out of here and go home?" Jesse said, his deep voice and the intensity of his gaze doing things to Robert's insides that were a hundred percent indecent.

"God, yes."

He rose, and Jesse instantly grasped the back of his head and planted a blistering kiss on him that made his toes curl and

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his dick ache. Jesse pressed so close Robert felt his dick as well, where it strained hard and full against the front of his jeans. One of his big hands cupped Robert's ass, dragging him closer still.

"Wow. Clearly not straight," Andy murmured behind him sounding more than a little breathless.

It brought Robert back to the here and now enough to remember where they were and that he couldn't tear off Jesse's clothes just yet. But not enough to make him pull away. Not nearly enough for that. Jesse wasn't usually big on public displays of affection at his place of business. He was just fine with the fact customers thought he was straight so they'd leave him alone. So to have him do this, in not just a regular public display, but in one that was so steamy it would probably be talked about long after they were gone tonight, and to be the one his powerful and passionate attention was focused on, was heady stuff. Jesse was making it clear to Andy and anyone else who watched that he and Robert were a couple and anyone who wanted to show Robert any interest needed to be forewarned that he was off limits.

When he finally eased his mouth off Robert's, Robert gazed into those amazing eyes and couldn't stop the grin that tugged at his lips. "I really, *really* love you," he whispered just loud enough for Jesse to hear but no one else.

Jesse grinned, too. "I know," he whispered back. "You can thank me when we get home."

"With pleasure."

Andy cleared his throat behind him, and Robert and Jesse

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stepped apart.

Robert turned to face the slender blond man, who seemed almost frail in comparison to Jesse's solid form, even when he stood up from his stool.

"Jesse McIntyre, this is Andy..." He paused. "I'm sorry, I don't remember your last name."

Andy huffed out a soft breath that sounded a bit like a disappointed laugh. "It's Harrison. Andy Harrison." He stuck out a hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"You, too." Jesse shook it, and Robert noticed there was no intimate touching or squeezing from Andy like he'd done with Robert.

The moment their hands parted, Robert wrapped an arm around Jesse's waist. "You ready to go home?"

"Oh, yeah."

"So you two are living together?"

Robert met the man's gaze squarely. "Yes. Have a good weekend, Andy. Maybe we'll see you around sometime. And I am sorry about your dad."

Andy looked subdued. "Thanks." Then he waved a hand. "I won't hold you up anymore. You two go on. Have a good night."

Robert didn't hesitate. If he hadn't been half crazy with need already after the way Jesse had teased him in the office, the possessive, full-body kiss would have done him in all on its own. He didn't even feel bad about leaving Andy at the bar staring after them. All he wanted was to feel Jesse's lips on his again and his hands roaming Robert's body and making good

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on his promises of earlier. If Jesse wanted him to beg...he'd do it gladly. Especially if it meant he could keep that passionately intense look on Jesse's face for a while longer.

Because he knew the moment he told Jesse he had to leave again, it would be gone.

## CHAPTER 3

Robert pulled his silver Jaguar XKR into the three car garage next to his ancient Jeep Grand Wagoneer. Jesse, who'd followed him up the driveway, eased his older Blazer in next to Robert on the other side. Jesse always laughed and called the garage configuration a Jag sandwich with "stale old bread on either side, and caviar in the middle."

The thought made Robert smile as he shut off the engine and pressed the garage door remote.

He had to admit, he did love his Jag. He kept the Wagoneer for sentimental reasons—it had been his first vehicle when he moved to Colorado—and because it came in handy when the weather was bad in the winter and when he

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wanted to tool around in the mountains. But his Jaguar held a special place in his heart. To say he loved the way it looked and loved the way it drove would be an understatement. He'd bought it as a fortieth birthday present for himself last fall. It was sleek and powerful and, hell, it was just damned hot. But what got him even hotter was Jesse driving it, flying along the highway, and Robert sitting next to him, feeling him up.

"You know...if I didn't know it was an inanimate object, I'd probably be seriously jealous of this thing. Given the frequent orgasmic look on your face when you're sitting in it."

Robert glanced up to find Jesse leaning with one hand against the open window, a smile curving his full lips.

"Did it ever occur to you it's not just the car I'm thinking about when I have that look?"

Jesse cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"It's a fantasy about you. In the car. And me doing unspeakable things to you while you drive. Too fucking hot for words. It almost gets me off just thinking about it."

Jesse's eyes flared with heat. He opened the door and pulled Robert out and up against him, spearing a hand in his hair, and gripping his ass with the other. His mouth closed over Robert's in a hard kiss, his tongue invading to twist and twine with Robert's.

When they came up for air, Jesse's groin dug into Robert's in blatant come-on. "And in this fantasy of yours," he said, his voice low and hoarse, "what happens if *I'm* the one doing unspeakable things to *you*?"

Robert's breath came out in stuttered rasps that matched

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the rhythm of his suddenly pounding pulse. “That fantasy’s still waiting to be played out,” he whispered, struggling to breathe with Jesse so close, so damned hot, and so intense.

“Do you trust me?” Jesse rasped. The look on his face said that whatever he had in mind was new territory, someplace or something they hadn’t shared before.

A shudder ran through Robert...the kind that made his skin tingle, his heart throb even faster, and a deep ache pull at his groin. “Yes,” he breathed.

Jesse took a step back. “Take off your clothes.”

Robert gulped, his heart running a damned marathon now. “Everything?” His fingers were already working at the buttons of his shirt.

“Everything. I don’t want anything in my way. I want to see every inch of you. Feel every inch of you.”

The light from the garage door opener flickered out, but Jesse had obviously turned on the main lights after he got out of his Blazer because the long fluorescent bulbs overhead shone down on them like it was daylight and glinted off the hood of the Jag.

Robert peeled off his shirt and started on his pants, toeing off his shoes at the same time.

Jesse closed the distance between them again. “Let me help you with those.” His hands covered Robert’s at his zipper, pushing them out of the way and caressing them all at the same time before taking over the chore himself. His lips hovered near Robert’s, but didn’t kiss him. Instead, he held Robert’s gaze with that same fierce possessiveness he’d

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shown earlier. A look that said, “You’re mine and I’m going to make damn sure you don’t forget it.”

It caused another trembling quake to rock through Robert.

In seconds Robert’s pants had flared open, and they and his briefs were being pushed down over his ass and stiff dick, which bobbed upward when it was freed. Jesse slid the pants down his legs, then knelt, his face now only millimeters from Robert’s cock, and had Robert step out of them. His socks came off as well, leaving him completely bare-assed naked, standing on the cool cement floor, and leaning back against the still-warm front fender of the sports car. Jesse’s mouth was soooo close to his shaft, close enough just the faintest movement would put them in contact and he’d be able to feel the welcome damp suction surrounding his cockhead. His erection twitched, begging for it.

But rather than take the temptation being offered, Jesse rose and left it wanting. Robert hissed in protest and disappointment. He reached for Jesse, but Jesse captured his hands and pulled them behind Robert’s back, holding them there tightly but not enough to hurt. Just enough to send another shimmering wave of heat through him at being restrained. He struggled to free himself anyway out of the simple, raw need to touch Jesse.

Jesse’s grip tightened and wouldn’t let him loose. A smile turned up a corner of his mouth and one dark eyebrow arched. “You said you trusted me.”

“I do. But, God, I want you.”

Jesse’s lips teased over his. Then in a wicked whisper he

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said against Robert's ear, "Anticipation, babe. Remember?"

Robert groaned. "Is this payback for the way I teased you all day?"

"Not payback. Pleasure."

He turned Robert around to face the car, still holding his arms behind his back, but now imprisoned by just one of Jesse's strong hands. Robert could pull free if he wanted. But he didn't. Jesse pushed his torso down onto the hood of the Jag until the warm silver made contact with virtually every part of the front of his body—his cheek, his chest, his abs, his groin.

"J-Jess..." He was suddenly so fucking aroused at the feel of the hard sleekness beneath him he was afraid, genuinely afraid, if he didn't keep a rein on his body he could come just from the sensuality of knowing he was so exposed and vulnerable with a powerful car pressed to one side of him, and a powerful, sexy man pressed to the other. Still fully clothed, his jeans chafing the backs of Robert's bare thighs and ass, Jesse pushed Robert more firmly into the car and rolled his groin against him in a libidinous motion that had Robert moaning.

When Jesse stepped back, Robert moaned again...in protest.

"I'm going to let go of your hands, but don't move. You understand?"

Robert nodded.

When Jesse released him, he continued to keep his hands where they were, fisted against the small of his back.

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Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Jesse lean into the still open door of the Jag and grab something. When he rose and was once again behind Robert, Robert felt the slippery touch of silk on his skin. His tie. The tie he'd pulled off, along with his suit coat, when he'd gotten in the car in the parking garage at the airport. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was black silk—it was Jesse's favorite that he wore. He'd chosen it specifically today, knowing he was coming home, and wanting to feel close to Jess. Jesse teased the end of it up and down the crease of Robert's ass, over each cheek, down the backs of his thighs, and then slowly up along his crack, making him crazy with desire. When Jesse began wrapping the silk around his wrists, pulling it tight...tighter...Robert shuddered and almost humped the car as his arousal took another, sharper spike.

Jesse leaned down over his back and said gruffly in Robert's ear. "Don't you dare come."

Robert shuddered and moaned.

"You hear me?"

"Yes," he panted. "I won't." Though he didn't know how in holy hell he was going to stop it from happening. He was pretty damned sure he'd *never* been this sexually on edge before.

Jesse stroked a palm, warm and callused, down his spine, over his hands, over each globe of his ass. "Jesus, you're beautiful like this. Do you have any idea what a fucking turn-on it is to see you nude and bound and bent over your sexy car?"

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His deep voice was a rumbling purr that Robert felt in every nerve ending of his body. He groaned and shifted around, trying to find a spot for his dick, where it was compressed against the warm metal, that didn't make it ache too badly and that wouldn't cause him to inadvertently shoot off. But there was no relief.

"I told you...no coming," Jesse said.

Robert groaned, then shifted again. "I'm trying *not* to."

"Then be still and quit wiggling your ass around." He swatted Robert on the butt, the sound ringing in the high-ceilinged garage.

The shock of the contact made him jerk, and liquid heat flooded through him, surging straight to his cock. "Christ," he gasped.

Jesse leaned in close. "Quit wiggling or I'll give you a real reason to squirm," he warned.

He didn't know what possessed him to do it, but Robert shifted again, this time grinding against Jesse in invitation.

Without warning, Jesse stepped back, and his palm connected with Robert's bare flesh again. This time on the other cheek and a little harder than before.

Once more, fiery heat rushed through Robert, making his hard-on harder and his ass quiver in anticipation of more. He moaned softly. Then moved again.

"So that's the way it is, huh?" Jesse's voice had an undercurrent of humor, yet was also thick with desire. He swatted Robert again. Then again.

It stung in exactly the right way, making him needier than

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ever.

Another blow landed, a bit more firmly still. *Oh, fuck.*

“Do you want me to stop?” Jesse’s voice was sexy as hell.

“No,” Robert moaned, shocked at just how much he really didn’t.

Jesse took him at his word, and began a series of steady smacks, each one slightly more forceful than the last.

Robert moaned and whimpered steadily now at the fire blooming in his ass and spreading deep into his groin. His cock ached like a sonofabitch, and it took immense concentration not to get himself off when his body was demanding relief.

He closed his eyes, wanting to make this last. Wanting to float on the strange high that had taken him over and left him quivering, wound tight with sensual tension and yet so fluid he felt like he might melt right into the Jag. And every second he was supremely aware of Jesse looming behind him, forging a deeper and deeper erotic and emotional bond between them with each crack of his hand against Robert’s flesh. And even more aware of him when he paused every few strokes to gently caress Robert’s tender ass and murmur softly to him...words of love, words of lust, asking him if he wanted more, praising and encouraging him when he said he did, until it all swirled together in a kaleidoscope of sound and sensation.

Robert’s arousal climbed to a level he’d never experienced before, not even in his most secret fantasies. It transcended the physical. Jesse’s firm but gentle domination opened Robert’s

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body and mind in a way he'd never imagined, not tearing away in one fell devastating swoop the control he hadn't until now realized he held so tightly, but rather easing it away bit by bit with a velvet hand, until it was gone and he was left flying free, open and aching and waiting to be filled with something *more*. Something profound.

Jesse leaned down over him, and it startled him to realize Jesse was now nude as well. He had no idea when that had happened. The heat of his body seeped into Robert, surrounded him.

"I love you, Robert."

The words, pure and full of laid-bare emotion, flowed into him, reaching into every part of his being, and filling him in all those newly opened spaces.

Moisture stung Robert's eyes. He blinked them open to see Jesse's beloved face, just inches away.

Jesse smiled and brushed a kiss against his lips. Then he kissed the nape of Robert's neck, and began a slow, damp path down his spine. His short, neatly trimmed beard tickled against Robert's skin. When he reached his hands, still bound behind his back, he spread each one open and kissed the palms, which, for some reason, only brought more tears to Robert's eyes. Robert heard and felt Jesse kneel behind him. He trailed the gentlest of all kisses over the burning flesh of Robert's backside, then traced his tongue along his crack.

Still so far gone with need he couldn't even speak, Robert trembled and let out another soft whimper.

"Spread your legs apart for me and pull your groin away

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from the car a little,” Jesse murmured. “I’m going to make you feel good, baby. Very, very good.”

With a tender touch, vastly different and yet just as inflaming as the firm spanking he’d delivered only moments ago, he spread Robert’s buttocks apart. When his tongue flicked over his exposed opening, around it, into it, and around it again, a keening sob escaped Robert.

Jesse knew him so well, knew how intensely Robert responded to any kind of ass play, and he used that knowledge now to lure him with his hot mouth and probing, masterful fingers to the brink of orgasm. Robert no longer floated in a haze above his body. Now, his entire existence centered around a spot deep and low inside him that was hardwired to his throbbing cock and balls, and to the tongue and fingers buried in his channel.

Jesse reached between his legs and eased his shaft downward. Robert moaned and thrust back against his hand as Jesse stroked him lightly. If he’d squeezed even a tiny bit harder, Robert would have shot in his hand. But Jesse seemed to know that, and kept his touch gentle. Which wasn’t what Robert craved right now. His body and emotions were stretched thin and barely hanging on.

“God, please,” he pleaded, finding his voice, though it came out strained. “Please, Jess...I...I can’t take anymore.” The last was nearly a sob, gasped out in the agony of his body’s frustration.

“Tell me what you want, sweetheart. Say the words.” Jesse’s voice almost did him in, low and firm, his breath

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caressing Robert's ass.

Robert's hands clenched into fists against his back. "God, please. Fuck me. Love me!"

The wet, slippery fingers inside him swirled once more and withdrew. Then Jesse was standing, soothing his hands over Robert's back, his throbbing ass.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"No, I mean do you *really* trust me, Robert?"

Something in Jesse's voice caused Robert's chest to hitch. He opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder at him. Jesse was holding his own cock. He skimmed the tip of it over Robert's opening in a slow, breath-stealing sweep.

What Jesse was asking suddenly sank in. "Bareback?" Robert whispered.

Jesse nodded.

Robert's heart pounded and his ass clenched in longing at the thought of having Jesse inside him with nothing to separate them.

"Will you let me?" Jesse said it quietly, and yet the question, the real meaning behind the question and in Jesse's gaze was, *Will you trust me completely? Unequivocally? In the most intimate way?*

Robert knew they were both clean, but old habits had died hard for both of them...each of them had had more than their fair share of hook-ups and one-night stands over the years, and protection had been essential. Robert had never been with *anyone* without it. Had never trusted anyone enough. But as he

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gazed into Jesse's eyes, he felt all over again that soaring sensation he'd had earlier, of being laid bare and awakened to something bigger, deeper than anything he'd ever experienced before.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" Was Jesse's voice shaking?

"I'm sure. I'm very sure. Need you, Jesse." *In every way.*

He slid a finger back into Robert's ass and twisted it around, making Robert writhe. "Where's the lube you had earlier, babe?"

"Front seat. Bag." It was the best Robert could gasp out in response.

Jesse bent back into the Jag. Robert heard the crackling of a bag, and knew Jess was retrieving one of the little tubes of lubrication, and within seconds, he was behind Robert again. He twisted off the top, slid the tip of the applicator into Robert, and squeezed. Robert heard a faint plastic *thunk* as the applicator fell to the garage floor, and then Jesse was right where he wanted him, grasping Robert's hip with one hand, and guiding the head of his slick, hot, bare cock to press against his entrance. He didn't mess around, didn't belabor it or coddle Robert. He pushed straight in, his thick shaft stretching Robert's passage, all the way to the hilt. They both moaned when he bottomed out.

But just as he had when he entered, Jesse didn't delay now either. He slid out partway, then thrust back in. Deeper.

"Oh, God!" Robert cried. His body shuddered and clenched around the hard and oh-so-welcome invader.

## SATISFACTION

Jesse's fingers were at his wrists, tugging at the silk, loosening it...and then it was gone and his hands were free. Robert groaned softly as he moved his arms, stiff from being behind him for so long. He pulled them up and anchored his hands, palms flat against the hood of the car, on either side of his head.

Jesse leaned over him and rested his hands atop them, his long fingers stroking, then twining through Robert's. At the same time, he eased out of Robert's ass, then slammed back into him. *Out. In. Out. In.*

Each thrust, deep and hard and unapologetic, made Robert's ass ache in exquisite, pleasurable pain. Again, he wanted it to last.

His body had reached its limit, though. In far too short a time, his cock pulsed and his balls tightened. He tried to breathe through it, tried to will away the fire that built at the base of his spine.

"Jess...God! Please! I can't...can't..."

When Jesse slid out of him suddenly, Robert sobbed in frustration. But then Jesse was pulling him up, turning him around, grasping his ass in firm hands and lifting him. His slick, turgid shaft jutted upward, and he impaled Robert on it again.

Robert shook with relief. He wrapped his legs around Jesse's waist and clung to his shoulders. He had no idea how in the hell Jesse could hold his weight, but he did. Jesse kissed him, taking Robert's mouth with the same fervent passion as he'd taken his ass when he'd entered it.

## *SATISFACTION*

And then Jesse was striding across the garage, his lips never leaving Robert's. When they reached the door that led into the house, Jesse pressed him back against it as if he couldn't wait another second, letting it help support Robert's weight, and began thrusting into him again in smooth strokes. One hand eased away from where it anchored him and curled around Robert's prick. He swallowed Robert's grateful moan, and began jerking his cock in counterpoint to his thrusts.

All the stimulation quickly pushed Robert to the breaking point. He jerked his mouth away from Jesse's, tilted his head back against the door, and shouted as release washed over him in shuddering swells.

Jesse's thrusts grew more forceful...and then he was coming, too, his face buried against Robert's neck, his hands digging into his buttocks.

Though both of them were breathing hard and shaking, Jesse continued to hold him for the longest time, pressing tender kisses against his neck, lips, eyes, stroking his hair.

Robert felt drained, exhausted, and yet replete in a way he'd never known before.

Jesse looked into his eyes, his gaze delving deep, like he was searching for something. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Always." He wasn't sure if it was what Jesse had been looking for or not, but Robert meant it with every fiber of his being.

Jesse kissed him, then took a step back and slowly lowered Robert to his feet. "Let's get out of the garage and find somewhere more comfortable."

## *SATISFACTION*

Robert smiled, though it felt strange for some reason...maybe because all of the intense emotions and sexual frustration over the past half hour had kept him so tight and on edge, the simple act of smiling felt almost too easy. "I don't know about you, but I don't have a clue where my house keys are."

Jesse's low chuckle was a balm to his over-stimulated senses. He looked down at their nudity, then back up at Robert. "What, no pockets in your birthday suit?"

"No, I guess I bought the cheap suit this time." Jesse always teased him, though with an appreciative gleam in his eyes, about Robert's preference for pricey designer suits and dress clothes. Though his attention was always just as appreciative when Robert wore faded Levi's and sweatshirts.

Jesse kissed him again. "Don't move," he murmured, before he turned away and crossed back through the garage to sort through their clothes strewn over the garage floor.

He was back in moments, his keys in hand. He unlocked the door, and they entered the house. The garage entrance put them into the laundry room. Jesse shut and locked the door, tossed his keys onto the washing machine, then grabbed Robert's hand and led him through the house directly to the master bathroom, where he turned on the shower, stepped into it, and drew Robert in with him.

Jesse was so loving and attentive, it made Robert's chest ache. There was a closeness between them that hadn't ever been there before. As if sharing the depth of intimacy they had tonight had broken down the last barriers between them. They

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soaped each other, Jesse being eggshell gentle with Robert's tender backside, rinsed, dried off with the fluffy towels hanging on the rack, and crawled into bed in their darkened bedroom.

"You okay?" Jesse asked, pulling Robert against his chest.

"Yeah, I am. I may not be able to sit down for a couple of days, but I'm not complaining." At all. It had been amazing.

Jesse tilted up his chin so they were face to face. "No regrets?"

Robert stroked his cheek, loving, as he always did, how Jesse's beard felt against his palm. How had he ever gotten so lucky to find this man? "No. No regrets."

Jesse's smile went straight to his heart.

He rested his head against Jesse's chest and brushed his fingers in slow circles around one of his nipples. Jesse's arms tightened around him in a hug.

Robert grew blissfully warm and relaxed. His breathing slowed, as did Jesse's.

He was hovering on that fuzzy brink at the edge of sleep when he felt Jesse's chest rise and fall in a sigh. And then, in a whisper, almost prayer-like, he heard Jesse murmur, "Please let him stay home now."

*Oh, God.*

Pain, hot and sharp, sliced right into Robert's gut.

Jesse obviously thought he was asleep. He sounded almost asleep himself, and when Jesse gave another shuddering sigh, then grew still, Robert knew he'd slipped off.

But that luxury no longer offered itself to Robert. With one

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quietly spoken, innocent sentence from Jesse, Robert found himself right back in the same knotted and fraught-with-worry state he'd been struggling with for weeks.

The deeper closeness he'd felt between him and Jesse that had comforted him earlier, suddenly scared the living hell out of him.

## CHAPTER 4

Jesse came awake in a slow stretch, feeling more rested than he had in a long while. He lay still for a few seconds, not yet opening his eyes, savoring the sensation, and wondering why he felt so good. He wasn't a morning person, and most mornings were more beast than beauty for him.

And then he realized...no phone call to wake him this morning, no crushing sense of loneliness.

He opened his eyes and smiled as he recognized the warm weight of one of Robert's thighs wedged between his. Robert lay on his side facing Jesse, the sheet tangled around his waist, an arm tucked under his head, and his free hand resting on Jesse's hip. His face in sleep made him seem younger than he

## *SATISFACTION*

was. Aside from the few strands of gray that were just beginning to highlight his temples amidst the light brown, and the faint crow's feet around his eyes that added a sexy ruggedness to his appearance, Robert looked like he could easily still be in his mid-thirties. But peaceful sleep stole a couple more years off even that.

As Jesse watched, though, a frown suddenly furrowed Robert's brow and he let out a soft, stuttered sigh that sounded part exhausted and part emotionally raw.

What was that about? Jesse wondered if maybe Robert was having a bad dream...except now that he looked more closely, dark smudges marred the skin under his eyes. And his breathing sounded light and troubled as if he hadn't been asleep long, or had been sleeping restlessly.

Jesse hated the idea that something might have been bothering Robert and Robert had suffered through it alone without waking him. But then memories of last night came back in a rush—the sights, sounds, and intensity of the emotions—and a sudden jolt of worry hit him that Robert's angst could have sprung from what had happened between them. God, maybe Robert was regretting it, in spite of his words to the contrary.

The thought made Jesse's heart falter. He didn't want Robert to regret it. Any of it. He wanted them both to be able to hold that experience close and savor it, wanted them to be able to walk through the door it had opened to a closer and stronger relationship.

The events in the garage and everything that followed had

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been mind-blowing for Jesse. He'd thought it had been for Robert as well. The way Robert had responded to him, stripped bare of inhibitions, letting Jesse see him at his most vulnerable, trusting him in ways Jesse had never dreamed he might. For the first time since Jesse had known him, it felt like Robert had allowed him to get truly close to him, the real him, buried under the layers of business-like control and professional charm he presented to the world. Jesse's eyes had been opened to the fact that the Robert he'd come to know on an intimate level—the gentle, giving lover—was only the outer surface. Buried deep within him lay much more complexity than he'd ever imagined. A man with an immense well of emotion that until last night, he'd successfully kept walled off from Jesse.

It had been a revelation.

But maybe that was the problem. Maybe after Jesse had gone to sleep, Robert had rethought it all and been sorry he'd shared that part of himself with Jesse. Maybe he was angry or embarrassed by what happened.

That caused a flare of hurt in Jesse that he couldn't even explain.

*Don't jump to conclusions. Maybe the poor man was just too exhausted to sleep well. You know how that goes—too keyed up and over-stimulated. He worked a full eight hours yesterday, flew clear across the country, drove over an hour from the airport, then, at the end of a very long day for him, you put him through the ringer physically and emotionally. You forced him to bare everything to you when he was already*

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*vulnerable and tired.*

No...there'd been no force involved. Jesse would *never* have forced him to do anything. He'd made certain everything that happened was what Robert wanted to happen. Each time he'd asked if he'd had enough, Robert had begged him to continue. *Begged*. In a voice raw with longing and emotion. *"Don't stop, Jesse. More...I want more."*

Jesse's breath caught and he grew hard all over again at the memory. At the sight of Robert trembling in the throes of erotic nirvana, his lean, athletic body stretched taut over the silver Jaguar, his hands bound behind his back, his pale, perfect ass blooming red with Jesse's marks. At the scent of masculine arousal swirling with the faint aroma of Robert's spicy cologne, and the even fainter hint of warm car engines and cool cement. And especially at the sound of the man he loved moaning and pleading in pleasure. *"God, please don't stop."*

Everything about it had been right and good.

Robert sighed again in his sleep, and Jesse gently brushed a hand over his cheek. "What's troubling you, love?" he whispered so quietly he barely heard it himself.

But Robert must have been sleeping more lightly and restlessly than he'd thought, because his eyes fluttered open.

His sweet, sleepy, sexy smile when his gaze lit on Jesse went straight to Jesse's heart, and relief flooded through him. Maybe everything was okay after all.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Jesse said. And he hadn't. He would have been glad for him to sleep for several

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more hours if it meant it would erase those dark circles beneath his eyes.

“That’s my line, isn’t it?” Robert asked, his voice deliciously rumbly from sleep.

Jesse smiled. It was almost always the first thing Robert said to him when he called in the mornings when he traveled.

“Yeah, well this morning I guess it’s mine.” He skimmed a fingertip over Robert’s lips. “And I am sorry. Did you sleep all right?”

He watched Robert’s face carefully, hoping his earlier worry had been for nothing.

Much to his dismay, he saw Robert wince. And when Robert said, “Yeah, fine,” Jesse’s heart sank because he knew his lover’s expressions so well, and there was no doubt in his mind that Robert was lying to him. He *had* had difficulty sleeping, and the fact he was lying about it meant the reason for his unrest was something he didn’t want to share with Jesse. And after last night, after the closeness that had sprung up between them, Robert holding out on him now for even something as simple as the fact he hadn’t been able to sleep, weighed on him.

Jesse cradled his cheek in his palm. “Robert, you’d talk to me if something was bothering you, wouldn’t you?”

Robert’s face tightened almost imperceptibly, and again Jesse knew him well enough to recognize it as another sign there was something going on.

“Everything’s fine. I’m fine.” Then his brows drew together in what looked like a moment of panic. “What time is

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it? We didn't sleep too late, did we?"

He seemed oddly concerned about it. Surely he wouldn't have scheduled anything for a Saturday, especially since he'd just gotten home.

Jesse sighed, deciding for the moment not to push the man any harder about what was bothering him, but hating the fact Robert was holding back. He looked over Robert's shoulder at the clock on the bedside table. "It's a little after nine. Why? Did you have something planned?"

"I really love you, Jess. You know that, don't you?"

Sliding his gaze back to meet Robert's, Jesse was shocked by the sudden about-face, and even more shocked to see a hint of the vulnerability from last night shimmering in his eyes. It wrenched at his heart. What was going on in Robert's mind right now to cause his mood to shift so fast?

"Of course I know. I love you, too, Robert." His hand stroked up and down Robert's side. "What's on your mind, babe?"

"I just..." Robert's voice caught. "I don't want you to ever doubt how I feel about you."

Before Jesse could respond, Robert curled his fingers around the back of Jesse's head and pulled him in for a delving, emotional kiss that caused all of the feelings they'd shared last night to surge anew, yet answered none of the questions Jesse had.

But when Robert deepened the kiss, and their bodies instinctively sought each other out, everything else slid away except the here and now and being close to the man he loved.

## *SATISFACTION*

Their hands stroking and exploring, they kissed for a long time, slowly, deeply, sensuously. So deeply and sensuously, a languid but powerful heat began to twine through Jesse, spreading in a flushed tingle over his skin, searing through his veins like liquid fire, turning his muscles to tight, quivering bunches, and settling with a steady, delicious ache in his groin.

The ache built. He reached around to knead Robert's ass and pull him closer, until the sleek, hot skin of Robert's dick brushed against his own. Caught between their bodies, their erections pulsed together in a provocative dance that was just enough to keep them eagerly seeking climax, but not quite enough to get them to it. They hung in that blissful, almost-there state for several minutes.

Jesse rolled Robert onto his back and lay between his legs. He captured Robert's mouth again, possessively, wanting to imprint his claim on the man all over again. Robert spread his legs and clung to Jesse's back as Jesse rocked against him, their cocks once more sliding together in the warm crush between their abdomens. Their leaking pre-cum slicked their skin, and that, coupled with their perspiration, gave their dicks just a hint of lubrication to keep the friction from being too much.

Robert moaned into Jesse's mouth. His hands slid up and down Jesse's back, over the curve of his ass, back up, and down again. His hips rose, as he tried to get even closer.

"I want you in me, Jess," he gasped, his voice hoarse with what almost sounded like desperation. "Please. I need you to fill me up again. Fill all the empty spaces."

## SATISFACTION

*Empty spaces. Oh, God...* This was the Robert from last night, his defenses down, his heart unguarded.

A hot lump formed in Jesse's throat at the ragged plea. "No more empty spaces," he promised. "Not as long as I'm around."

Jesse rose to his knees on the bed and grabbed the bottle of lube off the nightstand where they kept it. He slathered his cock, then poured more into his hand. Robert was already pulling his knees back against his chest, spreading himself open for Jesse. Jesse's breath hitched at the sight and the realization of just how damned beautiful the man truly was. Robert's gaze was hot and needy, feverish almost.

When Jesse eased two slicked fingers into his ass, Robert's eyes fluttered closed in a look of utter ecstasy, then opened again as if he couldn't bear not to be watching Jesse.

"Feel good?"

"Yes. God, Jesse..."

"What, babe?"

"I...I don't know what you do to me."

"What do you mean?" He turned his fingers inside Robert, coaxing relaxation from the tight rings of muscle, and promising even better things to come.

"You're everything good in my world and I don't..." His voice choked off.

"Don't what?"

Robert's eyes squeezed closed. Opened again. He swallowed hard and shook his head. "Please...need you," he whispered.

## SATISFACTION

“I’m here. I’m right here.” He angled the head of his shaft against Robert’s opening, and with slow, steady pressure, pushed inside.

The heat sans a condom was so intense it stole Jesse’s breath. Jesus...how much did he love being inside Robert with no barriers between them? He could feel *everything*. When Robert clenched his muscles around him, Jesse fought the urge to shoot off right then and there it was so damned good. But this wasn’t about getting them both off quickly. This was about giving Robert what he needed right now, which wasn’t exactly counterproductive to what Jesse wanted also.

He bent over Robert and reclaimed his lips in a sensual kiss as he stroked deeper and deeper into him. Robert cried out against Jesse’s mouth with each thrust. His hands clutched at Jesse’s back, his fingers digging furrows into it. Jesse relished the dull ache, loving that he had the power to push Robert to a place where he let go his control and just *felt* without worrying about the consequences. It made him wonder if Robert had ever truly let himself lose control in *any* aspect of his life before last night? A flash of insight told him probably not. Which made this closeness even more special to Jesse.

The world focused in to just the two of them, joined so tightly and perfectly together. Jesse plunged into Robert over and over, sometimes hard and fast, sometimes slowly and tenderly, wanting to give this man he loved the deepest fulfillment possible. They surged together, skin to skin, heart to heart, their hands clutching sweat-slicked flesh, their mouths tangling, until they were both trembling and moaning.

## *SATISFACTION*

“Love you,” Robert murmured. “So much.”

Their orgasms hit almost simultaneously—Robert’s cock spilling its seed between the hot, slippery skin of their abdomens, and Jesse’s deep inside Robert’s body.

They clung together long after the last spasms had rippled through them and Jesse had eased out of Robert.

Jesse slid a hand through Robert’s hair, letting the soft, spiky strands sift through his fingers. “I was thinking,” he said softly.

“About what?” Robert’s eyes were closed and his voice was low and muffled against Jesse’s neck where he had his face pressed. His palm idly stroked Jesse’s back.

“That since tomorrow’s my day off, maybe we could go do something.” He rose up on his arms and brushed a kiss over Robert’s lips and another against his neck, savoring his scent that always made him a little dizzy with need. “Maybe we could go to the mountains, hike, find a sunny, secluded meadow somewhere and have a picnic that might or might not involve clothes, the sun on bare skin”—he sucked gently on Robert’s earlobe—“and finding out how sexy you look stretched out like this on green grass under the blue summer sky.”

Was it his imagination or did Robert’s breath catch? No, not his imagination because Robert’s muscles had suddenly stiffened as well. And not in a good way.

A heavy gray cloud scudded over his fantasy, and he knew what was coming even before Robert spoke. With a tight band squeezing around his chest, Jesse slid off Robert and lay on

## SATISFACTION

his side.

Robert opened his eyes and rolled onto his side as well, facing Jesse, his face pinched with apology.

*No. No, not again. Not after last night and this morning. Don't tear all that apart so soon.*

"Please don't say what I think you're going to say." Jesse's voice came out sounding hoarse, which he damn well hated. It was bad enough Robert's reaction had caught him off guard when, by all rights, it shouldn't have, but he didn't want Robert to hear just how much it had affected him.

"I have to be in Buffalo next week to meet with the owners of NYMS Technologies," Robert said quietly. "We have several meetings scheduled, including a lunch they've asked me to attend tomorrow afternoon to get to know some of their top people."

"Tomorrow afternoon?" he said, barely able to wrap his mouth around the words. "When exactly were you planning on telling me this? How long have you known?"

Robert sighed and looked genuinely pained. "A few days. They called me late this past week while I was in DC. I'd already been gone so long that I didn't want to hit you with news about another trip before I even got home from the one I was on. They actually wanted me to go straight there from Washington, but I told them there was no way. Because I wanted to come home and see you."

Jesse didn't trust himself to speak without saying something he'd regret.

"I know it's crappy timing," Robert continued, looking

## SATISFACTION

like he wished he could take it all back, but forging ahead anyway. “This is an important trip, though. Right now NYMS is handling a major government contract, but they’re short on staff because they’ve had to let people go. They’re looking for another company to help carry the load and finish the project. Bauer MicroSystems is in their top tier of possibilities, and if I can snag this contract, it’ll not only be potentially lucrative on its own, it’ll give us an in with this particular government organization in the future.”

“Okay...” Jesse dragged in a breath, not even sure how he was managing that much.

“My flight leaves from Denver at two this afternoon.”

A blow to the stomach couldn’t have hit Jesse any harder. And he’d thought it couldn’t get any worse...he was such a stupid ass sometimes. “You’re leaving *today*?”

Robert nodded. “I don’t have any choice. Even the earliest flight in the morning wouldn’t get me to Buffalo in time. As it is, because it was booked last minute and I have a layover, I won’t get in until late tonight.”

“Jesus, Robert...you haven’t even been home twenty-four hours.”

“Jesse, I’m sorry. I hate this, too. But there was no way out of this one.”

“Are there ever ways out?”

Robert winced at the dig. “Listen...why don’t...why don’t you come with me?”

He didn’t know why, but Robert’s question scraped over what already felt like a raw wound. Maybe because it was the

## *SATISFACTION*

first time Robert had ever asked him to go with him when he traveled, but instead of talking to Jesse about it ahead of time and acting like it was something he really wanted, it had come up now as an afterthought. Which stung.

Jesse tried to tell himself it didn't matter because he couldn't go anyway. "You know I can't. I have to work."

"What about just a few days? I bet Benny and John wouldn't mind. You could come back Tuesday or Wednesday."

"It's not just the pub, Robert. It's the summer program at the art center, remember? I'm teaching a wheel-throwing class to a dozen twelve- through sixteen-year-olds starting Monday morning and it runs every day until the end of the week. All the other instructors are busy teaching their own courses. I can't just take off or they'd have to cancel the whole class." He knew he'd told Robert about this commitment. They'd talked about it at length, in fact, a month or so ago, and then again as recently as this past week on the phone.

"Oh. I'd forgotten about that."

For a split second, Jesse wondered if Robert really had forgotten or if he'd remembered just fine and that's why he asked Jesse to come with him...because he already knew he couldn't.

Damn, that was a cynical thought on his part. Robert wasn't like that. At least he hoped not.

"Okay, but I'll find a way to make this up to you Jesse. Maybe next weekend we can do something. As long as everything in Buffalo goes well, I should be home."

## SATISFACTION

*Should* be home. Not “*I will for sure, I promise,*” but “*I should be,*” meaning as long as nothing better or more important came up. And the way things had been for months now, it was almost a guarantee *something* would end up requiring Robert’s immediate attention.

Jesse rolled onto his back and rested an arm over his eyes that were suddenly burning. “Don’t worry about it.”

Robert tugged Jesse’s arm away from his face. “I’m sorry.” He sighed. “I know I haven’t been here as much as I should. I feel so damned torn all the time between my business obligations and wanting to spend time with you. I wish I didn’t have to keep leaving.”

Jesse turned his head to look at him, feeling the weeks of frustration boil up inside his chest like hot bubbling tar. “Then don’t. Find someone else to go for you.”

The lines around Robert’s eyes creased deeper. “It’s my company. My responsibility.”

“Yeah, a company with hundreds of employees. I know you have vice presidents and managers and assistants, and I’ve no doubt each and every one of them is highly educated and skilled because they wouldn’t be working for you otherwise. Surely you have people qualified to make presentations and represent Bauer MicroSystems on your behalf.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not? Don’t you trust your own employees?”

“Of course I trust them. They do their jobs brilliantly and handle whatever needs to be done here while I’m away. But the traveling, setting up the contracts, being the public face of

## SATISFACTION

the company is *my* job and no one else should have to carry that burden on their shoulders. I'm trying to secure as much business as I can so we can weather this recession without anyone having to worry about losing their jobs or their houses. I hired these people. Some of them have been with me for almost as long as Bauer MS has been in business. Their retirements, their kids' college educations, everything is tied up in their jobs. They and their families are my responsibility, and I can't expect anyone to share that."

"I'm sure none of them expects you to work yourself to death for them or give up having a personal life so they can."

"You don't understand, Jesse."

"You're right. I don't. I'm trying really hard to, Robert, but I don't. I totally respect your commitment to your employees, and I'm sure they do, too. But you are not so all powerful that you and only you are capable of acquiring every contract and you have to do it in person. I'm sure you have people who'd be glad to help if you'd just let them."

"If this is about spending more time together, I know I've dropped the ball. Over and over. But until the economy improves, I'm just trying to do the best I can. Maybe..."

Jesse's heart ached. This was going nowhere. Just as he'd known would be the case, which was probably why he'd avoided bringing it up for so long. "Maybe what?"

"Maybe...you could switch to days at the bar. Then we'd be more on the same schedule when I am home."

Jesse sighed. "We've talked about this before. I make twice as much money on the night shift. The bar's busier and

## SATISFACTION

the tips are way better. If I move to days, I won't have enough money to pay for classes when school starts again in the fall, and I might not even have enough to pay my share of expenses here."

"Damn it, Jesse, I've told you...you don't have to pay any expenses living here! I have plenty of money. I'll gladly pay for you to finish your degree. You don't have to worry about that."

"And I've told you that I *will* pull my weight. I won't live here and be a kept man."

"You wouldn't be—"

"Yes, I would be exactly that. In all my years living in the thick of the party scene in L.A. I never once stooped to being a couch surfer like so many of my friends were, mooching off family and pals, or even strangers when they were desperate enough, crashing at the houses of whoever was willing to put up with them, eating someone else's food and drink so they didn't have to buy their own. No matter how many waves I chased or how many thrills I sought, I always, *always* had a job and paid my own way. I didn't move in with you so I could hang out like a bum while you pay for everything."

"I know that. I wasn't implying anything like that. I meant we're a couple now, and couples share. Christ, Jesse, I love you. What's mine is yours."

*Except your time. That you don't seem to want to share with me.* Fuck, he hated this.

"Besides, Robert...even if we put the money issue aside, you're gone so damn much, working nights makes it easier."

## SATISFACTION

Robert looked surprised. "In what way?"

The hurt poured out in a rush now, and Jesse couldn't have stopped it he'd tried. "Because when I work nights I can come home at two-thirty or three in the morning and fall into bed dead exhausted without having to think too hard about how damned empty the bed is and how fucking miserable it is to sleep alone!"

He threw off the covers, stood, and paced over to the window, where they hadn't bothered to close the blinds last night.

Behind him he heard Robert rise also. And then he felt strong arms curve around his waist.

"I'm sorry, Jess. I didn't realize..."

"Didn't realize what? That it sucks here when you're gone? That you asked me to move in with you, but I spend more time alone now than I ever did before?" His chest hitched with a sob he refused let out. "At least before, when I was living with Leila, I had someone to talk to, someone to do things with, or, hell, even just to watch TV with. Did I sleep alone all the time back in those days? Yeah, I did. But at least I *knew* that's the way it was going to be, and it was my choice."

He grimaced and shook his head. "Now, after knowing what's it like to share a bed with you, to share a life with you, it's torture to have you home for a day or two, or three if I'm really lucky, because it's just long enough to tease me with how damned good we are together, and then you're gone again. And I'm stuck here having to relearn every time how

## SATISFACTION

shitty it is to be away from you and be by myself.” He closed his eyes against the pain. “It’s like a fucking roller coaster ride where I’m tired and queasy and want to get off, but it just won’t end,” he whispered.

All was silent for several seconds as Jesse stared, unseeing, out at the ponderosa pines that surrounded the house.

And then, in a quiet, choked voice Robert said, “Do you want to get off?”

Jesse sighed so deeply it made his chest hurt. Or maybe his chest was hurting already anyway and the sigh just made it worse. “Yes. No. *Fuck!* I don’t know. I just...” He swallowed around the damned aching knot his throat. “I’m tired of missing you all the time. I’m tired of how much it hurts every time you leave. I love you. I want to be with you. But I don’t know how to do that when you’re gone far more than you’re here.”

Robert’s face pressed against the back of his neck, and Jesse felt what he thought might be the damp heat of tears. It caused moisture to well in his own eyes.

“I love you, too.” Robert’s voice was muted. “I don’t mean to hurt you, Jess. I’ve never wanted that.”

“I know,” he conceded with a sigh. “I know you don’t do it on purpose. But, Robert, we can’t go on like this.”

The words hung between them for so long Jesse’s heart sank.

“Please don’t give up on me,” Robert finally whispered. “Give me a chance to do better. Once the economy’s stronger, I won’t have to be gone as much.”

## *SATISFACTION*

Jesse turned in his arms. “This isn’t about the economy. I know times are hard for a lot of people and a lot of businesses right now, and I know you want to do what’s best for your company. But let’s be brutally honest here for a minute, okay? No bullshit.”

Deep lines creased Robert’s forehead, but he nodded.

“You told me yourself the first weekend we slept together that you were always too busy to have a real relationship with anyone because you were too dedicated to your company and you were gone so much of the time. You’ve also told me that you’ve never gotten a pet, even though you’d like one, because you’ve always been gone too much. You don’t have any close friends outside of the people you see at work. Why? Because you’ve always been gone so much. So let’s not kid ourselves, okay? You’ve spent the better part of the last fifteen years living out suitcases in hotel rooms.”

Robert’s shoulders slumped. “I have responsibilities. I have people’s livelihoods to look out for.”

Jesse’s heart raced, and his throat felt dry. “No. It’s more than that. There’s more going on here than you needing to be the great caretaker of your flock. I know you’re a good man and you do want to look after them, but it’s also a convenient excuse.”

Robert started to protest, but Jesse cut him off.

“It’s an excuse that allows you to keep running from whatever it is you’re running from. What are you scared of, Robert? What are you so damned scared of that you can’t sleep more than a few nights in your own house? That you

## SATISFACTION

can't establish long-term relationships with anyone? And even now, with me, I think you *do* want a long-term relationship, but you still aren't willing to stay home long enough to let me really know you, so you're dooming us before we've hardly started. Why are you so fucking afraid to let me in?"

Robert's face expression was desolate. "Jesse..."

When he didn't continue, Jesse did. "Last night, for the first time in the five months we've been together, you finally lowered your walls. This morning, while we were making love, you did it again. And it was good, Robert. We were so damned close. I know you felt it, too."

"I did," he whispered.

"But the moment the conversation turned to you leaving on yet another trip, the moment I asked you why it had to always be that way, you slammed the walls back up so fast it made my head spin. And instead of the open and trusting Robert I want so desperately to know, I get the one who closes himself off from any real intimacy and can only talk about professional responsibility."

"I do have responsibilities, Jess. I can't just turn my back on them."

"And I'm not asking you to. All I'm asking," Jesse said, his voice gravelly, pleading, "is for you to let me in. To trust me. Really trust me, all the way, all the time. I'm asking for you to be *present* in this relationship, Robert. Because I'm afraid if you aren't, we're not going to make it."

Robert's chest heaved in a silent shudder. "You're asking me to choose between you and my company."

## SATISFACTION

“No! I’m not saying that at all.” Jesse shook his head as waves of sadness twisted together with frustration inside him. He’d given it his best shot, had done his damndest, but even though Robert was listening, he wasn’t really *hearing* what Jesse was saying. Jesse didn’t know any other way to make the man understand.

His heart aching, he opened the dresser, pulled out a pair of briefs, shorts, socks, and a T-shirt, and turned to leave the bedroom.

“Where are you going?” Robert’s voice was hoarse.

Jesse stepped into the underwear and shorts and yanked them up. “For a run. I need to get out of here for a while. Clear my head.”

“Are you coming back?”

Though the question was spoken in a ragged whisper, it reverberated through Jesse as if Robert had shouted it. He knew Robert wasn’t just talking about his run. But he couldn’t deal with that bigger question right now.

Without turning around, he swallowed hard, finding it difficult to get words past that damned hateful tightness in his throat. “Do you mean before you have to leave for the airport? Probably not. I don’t think I can deal with a long good-bye at the moment. Besides, there’s not really anything left to say, is there?”

He exited the bedroom without looking back, found his running shoes in the hall closet, pulled his socks and shoes on, yanked the tee over his head, and left the house through the front door.

## SATISFACTION

Robert didn't try to chase after him or call him back. Jesse told himself he wouldn't have gone back if he had.

This was better. Easier than sticking around to watch Robert pack yet again, than having to listen to him apologize yet again, to know how damned close they'd been last night and this morning, only to have it all shot to hell *yet again*.

He was two miles up the winding, gravel mountain road, sweating and breathing hard from the overly fast pace he'd set and the elevation of the climb, before he realized he hadn't told Robert he loved him.

He'd never, *ever* let Robert go off on a trip before without saying the words.

His steps stuttered to a halt and a wave of misery churned through him. His heart pounded and his legs suddenly felt numb and incapable of holding him up. He staggered off the road, sank into a crouch, his back against one of the tall aspen trees scattered in amongst the pines, and finally gave in to his agony.

## CHAPTER 5

Robert had a strong sense of déjà vu as he left the airport and covered the miles between Denver and home in record time thanks to his lead foot on the Jaguar's gas pedal and the State Patrol's lack of presence. Five months ago, in January, he'd made the same trip with the same pressing urgency driving him—to get back to Jesse and fix what was broken between them. But there were differences. The last time he'd been in his Wagoneer because the Jag had still been in the body shop after some idiot had slid into it during the snowstorm. The last time the road had been dark, rather than lit by the early evening summer sun.

But the biggest difference was that in January Robert

## SATISFACTION

hadn't known what caused the rift between him and Jesse. This time...he knew exactly. Because it was totally his fault.

God, he'd been such an ass.

After Jesse had left the house on Saturday, Robert had wanted to go after him, but Jesse was right, what else was there to say?

That had been only one of many mistakes Robert had made, because the reality was, there had been things that still could have been said. Things that Robert *should* have said to make it right. But instead, he'd been so fucking paralyzed by fear as he'd listened to Jesse give a much deeper and more thoughtful insight into Robert's psyche than any therapist Robert had ever had, that he'd done what his self-preservation instincts had demanded he do, what he'd always done in the face of his own messed up issues over intimacy...he'd evaded.

He'd known for weeks there were problems, Jesse had been giving him signals that all wasn't well and he was unhappy, but rather than address the issues, which was something Robert was damned good at when it came to his job, but apparently lousy at in his personal life, he tried to ignore it, he'd stalled, and then when it had finally reached the breaking point for Jesse and he'd brought it up, what the hell had Robert done? He fallen back on the same old tired lines he'd been using on himself for years, like a hack politician making campaign promises that were never going to be kept.

He'd been wracked with guilt ever since. Because for the first time in his life, he wanted something more than he wanted to hide behind his crutches

## *SATISFACTION*

He and Jesse had talked on the phone Sunday morning, briefly. Robert had tried to apologize, but he'd still been caught up in his same old rhetoric at the time, still full of denial about what was really going on. Jesse had stopped him, saying maybe it was best if they just took some time off from each other and didn't talk while Robert was away. Robert's only comfort had been that at least Jesse was still at home. He'd been sick with worry that Jesse might have come back Saturday, packed his things, and moved out.

The past few days since then had been the longest of Robert's life. He'd never felt so utterly alone. And considering he'd traveled all over the country and other parts of the world by himself for business, and had spent almost more time in hotels over the years than in his own home, he was pretty damned used to being alone. This, however—being completely out of contact with Jesse, whose presence was the one thing he wanted more than anything else—was like nothing he'd ever experienced. It felt as if a huge cavern had been carved out of his insides, leaving him with a vast gaping emptiness.

It had taken two days of wallowing and bemoaning his fate before he'd finally begun to embrace the silence and realize that painful though it was, it had a certain motivating cleansing power. He wanted a life with Jesse so badly that for the first time in years, he found himself able to detach from the monkey mind thoughts that had become the staple of his existence, constantly engaging him and making him question and doubt and fear. He was suddenly able to view his life

## *SATISFACTION*

without blinders, and what he saw wasn't pretty. He was a hell of a business man, successful in all the ways that counted in the material world, but his inner life sucked because he'd let old fears taint everything he did.

It had been an epiphany for him. But it still didn't make everything right because the truth was, he wasn't absolutely certain how to stop those damned fears from ruling him. They'd been so much a part of him for so long that he'd never lived his adult life without them. It was kind of like discovering the world you'd been living in wasn't real, but you'd done it so long it felt real. Then when you were suddenly yanked out of it and thrust into the actual world, it was terrifying. You had to figure out how to start from scratch and relearn everything you'd thought you already knew.

Robert felt a lot like he was flying blind now. He knew what he'd been doing wrong and knew he had to change. But figuring out how was another challenge. One thing he was certain about, though...Jesse was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and that's where he had to start.

So for the first time ever, Robert cut a business trip short. NYMS was still waffling back and forth, deciding if they wanted to partner with Bauer MicroSystems or another company they were checking out. It looked like they might continue to do so, asking for additional meetings and facts right through the weekend. My God, how had he ever put up with crap this like all these years? This morning, Wednesday, Robert had told them if they decided on his company they could hash out the rest of the details via a conference call with

## *SATISFACTION*

his vice president of programs next week. And if they had any questions in the meantime, he'd make sure his VP had all the appropriate files.

Then he'd called the airline and gotten the next flight back to Colorado.

He sped off the exit ramp of the interstate and drove into town. It was almost five, but the bustling college town's rush hour traffic wasn't too bad. He headed for BJ's Pub. Jesse would probably already be there since he started work at five. The pub wasn't an ideal setting for a heart to heart, and he honestly wasn't sure how Jesse would feel about seeing him, but he was hoping Jesse would be able to take a break at some point during the evening and he could at least let him know that he didn't want to lose him and would do whatever it took to make things right.

When he pulled into a parallel spot on the street in front of the pub, it surprised him that Jesse's red and white Blazer wasn't in the small employee lot on the side of the brick building. He looked at his watch—three minutes to five. Jesse was always prompt, usually more than prompt. He always tried to be at work fifteen minutes before his shift started. Robert scanned the street, but didn't find the Blazer there either. He looked for his Wagoneer, too, just in case. If Jesse had had car problems, he probably would have driven the Wagoneer. But it was nowhere to be found either.

Worry gnawed at him. Jesse should be here. His regular nights off were Sundays and Thursdays.

A knock on his window startled the hell out of him.

## SATISFACTION

He found one of the other bartenders from the pub standing next to his car, a gangly bleach-blond young man named Allen who had some kind of obsession with flirting with Robert whenever he saw him. Of course Allen had a tendency to flirt with pretty much anyone who'd let him get away with it. Robert usually found him alternately funny and annoying with a dash of strangely likeable thrown in on the side.

He let the window slide down.

"Hey there, gorgeous!" Allen cooed, leaning against the car. "My friend Justin was dropping me off and I saw you and wanted to say hi!" He was dressed tonight in tight black skinny jeans and an even tighter, if that were possible, royal blue shirt. His golden eyes were lined in smoky liner and his nails sported black polish. And, Robert noticed, he'd added black tips to his blonde hair since the last time he'd seen him. "What brings you out to pub land tonight?" Allen asked.

"I came by to see Jesse." Another weird flash of *déjà vu* hit him. Back in January, he'd come to BJ's looking for Jesse, too, and had ended up talking to Allen about it. "You don't happen to know if he's working tonight, do you?"

"Ooooh, you are just so cute!"

Robert stared at him. *And...?* Good God. He didn't think he'd ever had a normal conversation with the guy that managed to stay on topic. "Um, thanks?" he said, hoping it would spur Allen to actually answer the question. "Jesse?"

"I swear, Robert, haven't you and I had this same conversation before, where you lost your honey and came

## SATISFACTION

looking for him all sad eyed like a cute puppy?”

*A cute puppy?* Not real great for his already flagging ego.

“Anyway, he’s not here tonight. I’m working the night shift.” Allen reached into the car, dragged Robert’s wrist up, peered at his Omega watch, and gasped. “Ohmygod, I’m running late! Benny’s going to flog my sexy ass if I’m late again.” He leaned into the car and air-kissed Robert on both cheeks, then like the Energizer Bunny—except gay and emo and wearing eyeliner—he started to bolt away.

“Wait, Allen?” Robert called after him.

He paused and turned to look back at Robert, a hand on his hip.

“If Jesse’s not working tonight, do you have any idea where he might be?”

Allen rolled his eyes. “He’s your squeeze, not mine! Do I *look* like his keeper?” With a toss of his head, he turned and made a dash for the pub’s door.

Robert dragged in a deep breath wondering why every time he had an encounter with Allen he always came away from it exhausted?

Well, hell. Jesse wasn’t working tonight. Why? Again, Robert felt a twinge of worry. On the other hand, if he wasn’t working, then maybe he was at home. Which would be better anyway because then they could really talk.

He missed Jesse so much it hurt and wanted to see him in the worst way.

He swung a U-turn in the street—probably illegal, but he wasn’t really in the mood to care right now. On the way

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through town, headed toward home, he decided to swing by the art center in case Jesse might be there. Jesse liked to go to the center after hours because he had the pottery studio to himself and could work on his own pieces without interruption. He was an amazing artist, and one of Robert's favorite things to do was watch him work. Especially when he had a chance to do it without Jesse knowing he was watching. When he was lost in his work, creating pieces of pottery on the wheel that quite often boggled Robert's mind with their beauty and complexity, it was one of the most sensual things Robert had ever seen.

"God I miss you," he murmured, his chest aching.

But as with the parking lot at the pub, the lot behind the art center was empty of Jesse's Blazer also.

Robert picked up his BlackBerry from the console and almost called him to find out where Jesse was. But then he stopped. Jesse had said he didn't want to talk on the phone. And their last conversation hadn't gone well. Plus, if he called to find out where he was, he'd have to confess he'd already been to the pub and the art center looking for him, and that might come across to Jesse like Robert was keeping tabs on him or something. *Shit.*

Okay. He just needed to go home. Jesse was either there right now or he'd be there eventually.

*If he hasn't moved out while you've been gone.*

"Oh, God. I fucking hate this," he whispered, wishing for all the world that he could take back their whole conversation Saturday morning and replace it with one where he'd given all

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the right answers and told Jesse to hell with Buffalo and traveling, and promised him he'd be right there for him forever.

With a sigh that felt like it was dredged up from the sludgy bottom of the barrel of his life, he turned onto the side street that ran next to the art center. The art center sat on the corner of the side street and one of the main drags that ran through the university. Across the street was a large green grass park with a duck pond at its center. It was a favorite hang-out for students in the warm weather months. On the street on the other side of the park sat the huge hospital that was the town's main medical facility and also the teaching hospital for the university medical school.

As Robert pulled up to the red stop light at University Avenue, signaling a left turn, his gaze idly drifted over the park while he waited for the light to change. On a warm summer evening like this, the big park that spanned a full block was crowded with families feeding the ducks, joggers, dog walkers, summer students stretched out on the grass with their backpacks and books, couples walking around the pond hand in hand.

When was the last time he'd been home long enough to even go for a walk with Jesse?

Robert closed his eyes and rested his head on the steering wheel for a moment as guilt washed over him again. *Christ.* Over and over for the past five months he'd looked at Jesse and felt a constant sense of astonishment that Jesse was his. That out of all the men he could have had, Jesse had chosen

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him. And yet, in spite of all that starry-eyed wonder and pride he'd felt, instead of making sure he was worthy of Jesse, and working to ensure he nurtured and cared for the man and their relationship, he'd taken him for granted. Like how he'd asked him to move in with him, then deserted him. When Jesse had confessed how alone he felt living in the house with Robert gone all the time, it had almost broken Robert's heart. He'd thought he was showing Jesse how committed he was to him when he'd asked him to move in, but once again he'd been wrong. There was a difference between living in someone's house and living *with* them. Robert knew that's part of what Jesse had been trying to tell him. That and so many other things.

The loud blast of a horn behind him jolted Robert upright, and he saw the arrow had turned green. He waved an apology at the person behind him, and stepped on the gas.

As he made the turn, however, his gaze locked on something across the park. Was it...damn, it was! Jesse's Blazer. It was parked on the street not too far from the duck pond.

Robert immediately pulled into the right lane and made the next right turn, and then another, bringing him onto the street that ran between the park and the hospital. He eased into a parking space, got out of the car, and crossed around it to the grass. But then he paused. He couldn't be certain Jesse was at the park—a line of small shops and eateries were just a block over, near the hospital. Or, God forbid—another flicker of worry assailed him—Jesse might be at the hospital itself. But

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the hospital had its own lots, so it didn't make sense he'd be parked here on the street.

His gaze slid over the park again, looking for the tall, gorgeous bearded man he loved.

It didn't take long to spot him, and when he did, Jesse was much closer than he'd thought...just a few yards away, walking around the pond, approaching Robert.

But he wasn't alone.

Robert stood frozen, his heart suddenly pounding like a jackhammer in his chest.

Jesse and the good-looking thirtyish black man walking next to him appeared to be deep in serious conversation. Jesse's arm was around the other man's shoulders, and the man's was wrapped around Jesse's waist. They both looked at the ground as they walked and talked so Robert couldn't make out too many details of the man's face. But every now and then Jesse would glance up at the guy with such emotion in his expression it tore through Robert's heart.

The two of them looked...comfortable with each other. Close. Intimate. Like they could be a couple.

They stopped and turned toward each other, and as Robert watched, Jesse pulled the man into an embrace. The man hugged him in return, his hands clinging to Jesse's muscular back. Clinging to him in a way that said he didn't want to let him go.

*Oh, God.*

Robert couldn't watch anymore. He turned away, his chest so tight every breath was a torment.

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He'd been afraid if he kept leaving Jesse alone, Jesse would find someone else who *would* be here for him. He didn't want to believe it might actually have happened, like some kind of self-fulfilling prophesy. But right now, his emotions on edge because he didn't even know where *he* stood with Jesse, he couldn't seem to find a way to disbelieve it either. And the thought left him sick to stomach.

He needed to get out of here. *Now*.

He somehow managed to get to his car and clicked the lock open with the key fob.

"Robert?" Jesse had spotted him.

*Fuck*. Robert didn't look up. He couldn't talk to him right now. Not this way, not with the other man as an audience. He fumbled with the door to get it open, then slid behind the wheel.

"Robert, wait up!"

Robert started the engine, put the car in gear, and unintentionally peeled out of the parking spot, laying rubber as he went. His heart pounding, he dared a glance in the rearview mirror to find Jesse standing where the Jag had just been, staring after him, a shocked expression on his face.

It tortured Robert all the way home.

He pulled into the garage and dragged himself out of the car, trying with all his might not to remember what had happened in here on Friday night. Trying not to remember Jesse's deep voice, thick with desire, murmuring commands and endearments to him as he stretched him out nude over the Jag and took him to a place he'd never been before. Tried not

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to remember how Jesse's hands had felt all over his body, spanking, then stroking him with a gentle touch until Robert had begged and begged for more. Tried not to think about how Jesse had held him against the door, kissing him deeply as his impaled Robert on his thick shaft and fucked him senseless, then took him inside and washed him in the shower with such a tender, loving touch it had turned Robert's heart inside out.

How could Jesse be with somebody else? How could he have done all those things here with Robert over the weekend, and now be holding another man?

*You have no one to blame but yourself. You kept leaving even when Jesse practically pleaded with you to stay, including on Saturday when he bared his heart to you and told you point blank if things didn't change your relationship was in trouble. You could have stayed, you could have anted up and been the man he wanted you to be, but instead, when he needed you most, you deserted him again. What did you think was going to happen if you kept pushing him away?*

The words settled in his gut in a writhing knot.

He got in the house, but only just made it out of the laundry room and into the kitchen before his legs gave out. He sank to the floor, his back against the cupboard, and buried his face against his drawn up knees trying to breathe through the nausea roiling in his stomach.

The door between the garage and laundry room opened. "Robert!"

Robert tensed, his hands clenching into fists. He didn't lift his head from his knees, not wanting to face Jesse with

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damning tears in his eyes. But he didn't need to see him to feel his presence nearby.

"Robert?" It was spoken more softly this time, in a worried tone that twisted Robert's heart. He felt Jesse crouch in front of him. "Babe, what's going on? You're scaring me."

One of Jesse's hands settled on Robert's shoulder, the warmth seeping through his shirt. A part of Robert wanted to take comfort in it, wanted to spill his heart, and let Jesse and his gentle voice and warm touch wipe away all his fears. But another part of him couldn't stop seeing Jesse's arms around that other man and the way the man had hung on him. The vision caused a new surge of nausea in his gut.

He shrugged free, hurt and confused, but also furious at himself for leading them into this mess in the first place.

Jesse's eyes widened at his rough pull away. "Robert, what the hell is going on?"

Robert could only stare at him, at the sculpted beauty of his face now twisted in hurt anger that mirrored what Robert was feeling inside.

"You have to ask?" Robert asked, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah, apparently I do. I have a lot of things to ask. Like what are you doing home so soon? I thought you expected to be gone all week. When did you get back? What were you doing at the park, and what the hell was going on with that whole smoking rubber and driving off like you were a batshit crazy man?"

"I cut my trip short and got back this evening. You weren't at the bar, so I went to the art center, and instead I found

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you..." He looked away.

"You found me what?"

Robert's chest heaved. "I saw you, Jesse."

"Saw me?"

"With him," Robert grated out. "The man at the duck pond. The one you were hanging all over."

Jesse's eyebrows shot up and his jaw slowly dropped as Robert's words clicked. "You..." He huffed out a breath as if he couldn't even find a way to say it. "You think I...? Jesus, Robert." He lurched to his feet, grabbed the edge of the granite countertop, and leaned against it heavily. "Why? Why would you assume something like that?"

Robert dragged himself to his feet as well, needing to be face to face with Jesse for this, not on the floor below him. "Because you two were in each other's arms. Because the way you looked at him, Jesse...like...like..."

"Like I cared about him?"

"Yes."

"I do, damn it."

"Christ!" Robert rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and fought back a sob. He sagged back against the counter. "This is all my fault. Because I'm the one who fucked up and pushed you away and into someone else's arms."

"I don't mean I care about him like that. The man you saw me with was my friend Eric. We get together and hang out probably once a week or so and have for months. You know this. I've always told you about him, where we've been, what we've done. I've even invited you to come along, but you've

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never been able to.”

Jesse *had* told him about Eric. He was a nurse at the hospital and they’d met when he’d taken a pottery class from Jesse a year or so ago as way to relax from the stress of his job.

“Are you...sleeping with him?” The words were like sawdust in Robert’s throat.

Jesse’s mouth opened in shock again, and hurt glimmered in his blue eyes. “I can’t believe you just asked me that question.”

Robert dug the heels of his palms into his eyes and rubbed. “I can’t either,” he whispered, feeling like crap for even thinking it was possible. And yet he couldn’t shake the damned fear. “But I don’t know what else to ask when I come home and find the man I love in someone else’s arms.”

“You’re supposed to trust me. You’re supposed to ask me why I was hugging my friend in the middle of the park *before* you jump to conclusions.”

“Okay...why were you hugging your friend in the park? Please tell me what was it I saw.” A deep exhaustion suddenly weighed Robert down. He’d been so on edge for days and it was all catching up to him.

“Eric just found out this week that his lover of ten years has been sleeping around on him with every young hot piece of gay ass in town. He found out because his lover disappeared over the weekend and the police came knocking at his door asking questions about a seventeen-year-old boy whose family reported him missing over the weekend. They

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found them shackled up in a sleazy motel in Denver. Eric, needless to say, is devastated. I'm his friend. I listened and offered comfort, because that's what friends do."

"A friend who's so important you'll take an evening off work just to *comfort* him?"

"And again with the assumptions. Damn it, Robert. Did it ever occur to you that my reasons for not working tonight might have nothing to do with Eric and everything to do with *you*? With us?"

"How could it possibly have anything to do with me? I wasn't even supposed to be here, remember?"

"Jesus. You're a damned stubborn fool sometimes, you know that? Sometimes it feels like I'm beating my head against a wall. But you know what I really can't understand? What cuts me to the bone? After everything we've been through together, especially after what happened between us Friday night, Robert..." Jesse dragged in a shaking breath. "How...how could you *ever* think for even a second think that I would be unfaithful to you?"

The raw pain in Jesse's voice hit Robert straight in the gut. Jesse's eyes glistened with tears and were awash with a hurt that ran so deep Robert wasn't sure it could ever be erased.

The sight almost brought him to his knees. And suddenly, he knew without a shadow of a doubt, that he'd been wrong about everything tonight. That Jesse was telling the truth, and because of yet another of his paranoid fears, he'd pushed Jesse away all over again. *Oh, Christ*. Why couldn't he get this right?

## *SATISFACTION*

Robert suddenly thought he might throw up. He bent at the waist, his hands on his knees, breathing hard.

"I don't know. I don't know, Jess," he said as a sob shuddered through him. "Because I am a damned fool. Fuck! I have everything I want right in front of me, I love you so damned much I can't think straight, and then it's like...I don't know, like I'm so afraid of losing you, that I keep pushing you away so maybe I'll stop caring as much and then it won't hurt as bad if I do lose you. It's so fucking twisted even I don't understand it."

He stood and dragged a hand over his eyes, no longer caring that it came away wet. He paced away a few steps. Stopped. Bent over again. "God, what the hell do you see in me? Because, honestly, I've gotta tell you that after spending the past few days looking back at my life, my track record, and my hang-ups that have tainted all my relationships, I don't even like myself very much right now."

"Why did you come home early, Robert?" Jesse asked quietly. "In all the time I've known you, you've never come home early."

Robert stood, made his way around to the breakfast bar, and slouched onto one of the stools. He propped an elbow on the countertop and buried his face in his palm.

"Because all I could think about these past few days was you and us and the things I should have done differently. I should never have left you on Saturday, I should never have gone to Buffalo, or on most of the other trips. I'm tired of running, Jesse. I don't want to lose you. I just wanted..."

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Robert's voice choked as he struggled to get out the words. "I just wanted to come home and make it up to you. To tell you that I finally understand what you were trying to tell me on Saturday. To let you know that you and what we have is the most important thing in my life. I can live without Bauer MicroSystems, but I can't live without you. Instead, though, I came home and made everything worse."

He sighed and scrubbed his palm over his face. "I know at this point it's probably too late to ask for forgiveness, but I am *so* sorry. I can't even begin to express to you how sorry I am, Jess. You were right. About everything."

## CHAPTER 6

His heart thrumming so hard it was making him lightheaded, Jesse circled the breakfast bar, captured the face of the man he loved beyond reason, lifted it, and kissed his warm, parted lips.

Robert blinked in surprise, his eyes red-rimmed and damp. “Jess?”

Jesse sank onto the stool next to Robert and turned so they were facing each other and their knees pressed together. He wanted, *needed* to keep contact between them because the past few days had been fucking wretched and lonely—for both of them, obviously. And he’d learned during the time they’d been together that they did much better, stayed emotionally closer,

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when they were touching. He twined his fingers through Robert's as well.

"I can't live without you either, Robert." His voice shook. "And I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have taken off on Saturday. I shouldn't have told you not to call. I shut you out and I promised myself I'd never do that again. I don't want you to think for even a second that I was trying to lay all the blame for any of this at your feet."

"But you should lay it at my feet because it's mine. I've screwed up in so many ways." He grimaced. "I can't believe I accused you of..." His voice caught again. "You're right. I didn't think, didn't ask. I just jumped to a stupid, paranoid conclusion. And I know better. I do trust you. More than I've ever trusted anyone in my life. How can you even forgive me for assuming the worst?"

"Because I'd be the world's biggest hypocrite if I didn't. Remember what happened back in January? You pulled that little bottle of oil out of your coat pocket and I made the instant, no-questions-asked assumption that you were going to use it to drug me? I ordered you away, Robert. I yelled at you, treated you like a criminal, told you I never wanted to see you again, and hurt you in the process."

"But I understood. I knew why you reacted that way."

"And I understood this."

Robert swallowed hard. "Actually, you don't. Not all the way. I...I haven't been completely honest with you about something, and I need to get it off my chest because I don't want to have any secrets between us."

## SATISFACTION

A shimmer of fear spread through Jesse, making his chest tight and his stomach knot. “You haven’t been honest with me about what?”

Robert sighed. “About relationships. There...there was somebody once.”

*Oh, crap.* Jesse didn’t know why those words made him sick with worry, but they did.

“We were together for three years.”

“You said you hadn’t been with anyone long-term.”

Robert swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple sliding up and down his throat slowly, as if it hurt. “I know. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you the truth. I don’t know why I didn’t until now. I just... It’s hard for me to talk about, so I pushed it to a far corner of my mind long ago and have tried not to go there. But now...it’s important, I think.”

“What happened?”

“He was someone I met when I started grad school. I was living in Indianapolis at the time. His name was Steven and he was working on his masters degree also. It was...serious. At least I thought it was. We lived together—I moved in with him. Everything seemed fine, then one night I came home after work—I had a job as a computer tech in the evenings—and all my stuff was packed and sitting outside the front door.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Jesse whispered. Just like what had happened with Robert’s parents when they’d kicked him out and left his suitcases on the front porch.

“He already had someone new living with him...someone

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he'd obviously been seeing for a while at least. He packed my stuff and dumped me and moved the new guy in all in one evening. The worst part was, I never saw it coming. I was naïve. We'd been together three years and I thought I knew him."

"Did he say why?"

"Just that he was done. He was ready to move on and he didn't love me anymore."

Jesse swore softly. "He didn't love you to start with, is more likely. You don't just stop loving someone." Jesse reached out and rubbed a hand over Robert's stubbled cheek. "What did you do?"

Robert shrugged. "What could I do? I loaded my things in my car, went to a cheap motel, and stayed there for the next month until I finished my degree. Then I left. That's how I ended up in Colorado. I needed to be away from Indiana. Nothing good had ever come to me there. So I found a place that was supposed to be good for the soul, in a town that was known for being liberal, and I pretty much ran here as fast as I could. And you know the rest... I started my company, worked my way up...and I made damn sure I didn't get involved with anyone else. Until I met you."

Suddenly a whole lot of puzzle pieces fit together. "Are you..." Jesse could barely speak past the tight lump in his throat. "Are you afraid I'm going to desert you, too? Like your parents and Steven did?"

Robert dragged in a deep, ragged breath. Then another. "Jesse, I..."

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“Just tell me.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “But before you say anything, it’s not because of anything you’ve done wrong, and not because I don’t trust you, okay?” He squeezed Jesse’s hands. “The fear’s irrational, leftover from days long gone, and I’ve let it rule my life for too long. That’s part of why I’m telling you. Because it’s time to pull the damn beast out of the closet, into the light, and put an end to it once and for all.”

“The traveling all the time?”

Robert nodded. “You were right, the traveling was an excuse for me...but I used it for so long I didn’t even realize it anymore. When I first moved here I worked long hours and traveled a lot to stay busy, so I wouldn’t have to feel so alone in a new place. And then it became convenient with lovers, so I always had a reason not to see someone again, so I always had a reason not to commit to anyone. And with you...” He sighed. “I think maybe traveling so much helped me keep up a barrier between us. If I wasn’t home a lot, then...” His voice caught, and the sound tore at Jesse’s heart.

“Then, like you said earlier, you wouldn’t get too attached to me, in case I left you.” Jesse’s eyes burned as he finished Robert’s thought.

Robert nodded, his face twisted in a raw, emotional mask of vulnerability. “I’m so, so sorry, Jesse, that I did that to you for so many months. I never intended to hurt you, I wasn’t doing it on purpose, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that I did hurt you. I swear to you, it ends now. No more running. I know what I want and it’s right here. Because even though I

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might have been trying to hold you at distance so I wouldn't grow to care for you too much...it failed miserably."

"What do you mean?"

Robert reached up and brushed a long lock of Jesse's hair back from over his eyes, and even just that simplest touch was electric, making Jesse shiver with pleasure.

"It didn't stop me from falling deeper and deeper in love with you. I don't think anything could have stopped that."

The damned lump was back in Jesse's throat. "Have I told you yet today just how damned much I love you?"

"I don't ever get tired of hearing it. And you know what? I'm going to be around to hear it and say it to you a whole lot more from here on out."

"What does 'a whole lot more' mean exactly?" He didn't want to get his hopes up too high and was determined to be grateful for whatever extra it might be.

"I've already made arrangements with my VP of programs to take over a good chunk of the traveling and contract acquisition."

Jesse's breath caught in his chest. Holy crap. He'd *already* made the arrangements? That meant...he had to have done it before he ever left Buffalo. "You have?"

"I have. Dan's smart, young, not married, eager to see the world. He'll love every minute of it. I'll still have to make a few trips, but he's going to do the bulk of it and I shouldn't have to be gone more than a handful of times a year. I'm also officially on vacation for the next three weeks."

"What?" The shock in Jesse's voice was palpable, and he

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couldn't even describe the strange, fluttering feeling in his stomach.

"I'm all yours twenty-four/seven," Robert said softly. "If you can forgive me and you still want me."

The tight band that had become Jesse's almost constant companion over the past several weeks, suddenly slipped free. The rush of air to his lungs was dizzying. He looked at Robert through watery eyes. "I told you, already forgiven. And there will never be a day, an hour, or even a minute of my life that I won't want you, Robert Bauer."

He stood and pulled Robert to his feet and against him until their bodies were flush. Their lips touched lightly.

"And, Robert, I'm not going to desert you. Even while you were gone this time, after telling you I didn't think we could go on like we were, there was never a moment when I considered actually leaving. I love you too damned much to be without you."

Robert's chest shuddered, and he leaned his forehead against Jesse's. "God knows I don't ever want to be without you either. I won't take you for granted anymore, Jesse. I promise."

"So it's settled then...you're stuck with me." Jesse smiled.

"There's nothing I want more."

Then, with a wealth of pent-up passion, Robert grasped each side of Jesse's head, angled it, and kissed him.

Their clothes slowly disappeared, leaving their hands and mouths free to taste and touch at will.

"I can't get enough of you," Robert murmured between

## *SATISFACTION*

sizzling kisses that had Jesse panting.

"Then you'll be glad to know I've switched to some days at the bar," Jesse whispered, as Robert's mouth teased its way up to his ear, and his fingers twisted Jesse's nipples. "That means that we'll have most evenings and nights together."

Robert leaned back to look at him, eyes wide. "Jess...you didn't have to do that. I know how you feel about earning more on nights."

"But you were right...we're a couple. This is a partnership. You shouldn't have to make all the sacrifices. I was complaining about your work schedule, but wasn't willing to budge on my own. And that's not what it's all about."

"But what about school?"

"I figure if it gets tight when it comes time to pay my tuition in the fall, maybe I can offer to do some sexual favors for my hot, well-to-do boyfriend in exchange for some tuition help."

Robert's smile seared straight to his heart, and Jesse knew then that just as much as Robert's reduced travel was the best gift he could give Jesse, apparently, letting Robert have a chance to offer him some financial support was an equally appreciated gift for Robert. Damn, the man truly was a wonder.

"Your boyfriend is a lucky man," Robert said, his voice a husky murmur.

"I'm thinking not as lucky as I am."

Their mouths crushed together again, and their hands sought to caress eager flesh with even more intensity than

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before, fondling and kneading, stroking and teasing, until their cocks strained hard and leaking against one another, and they were both groaning and struggling for air.

“Kitchen or bedroom?” Jesse growled.

Robert sucked at Jesse’s neck, then rasped in his ear, “As fond as I am of the kitchen, and for some reason I’m suddenly having a spectacularly X-rated vision of you sitting in one of the kitchen chairs while I ride you...”

“Jesus, that’s hot.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve been missing our bed. More specifically, I’ve been missing us in our bed.”

Jesse curled a hand around Robert’s cock, and pressed several more kisses against his damp, sensual lips. “I’m sure I can think up something equally X-rated for you in the bedroom,” he promised. With a wicked grin, and without letting go of Robert’s dick, he started walking backward, towing Robert along with him. “Mmm, I like this. Leading you around by your dick. Now *I’m* having a vision.”

“Of what?” Robert’s smile was sexy as hell.

“I’m thinking a shopping trip is in order at some point in the near future...for a cock strap and leash.

Robert’s eyes went half mast and darkened with desire. “Fuck,” he moaned.

Jesse smiled in secret pleasure. After their incredible encounter in the garage last weekend, he’d wondered how Robert might feel about adding some other accouterments and adventures to their sexual repertoire. Clearly the ideal appealed to him.

## *SATISFACTION*

Oh, yeah...his man was a beautiful well of complexity, and Jesse couldn't wait to spend the rest of his life exploring every nook and cranny and finding out just how deep it went.

## 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](http://www.mlrhodeswriting.com). She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at [ML@mlrhodeswriting.com](mailto:ML@mlrhodeswriting.com).

\* \* \*

**Don't miss *The Elf and Shoemaker*, by M. L. Rhodes  
available at [AmberAllure.com](http://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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