



Never Let Go

*A Torquere Press Arcana
by Jourdan Lane*

"No, no, no! The green wire, Shane!"

A quick glance at the timer netted fifty seconds left. I blew out a quick breath and traced the leads on the green wire. It wrapped up and through a second bundle of wires and seemed like the right choice, but something was off.

Thirty-two seconds.

I tried to loosen the bundle just enough to make sure that green wire wasn't booby-trapped in some way, but the timer on the bomb beeped. I froze and Jeff waved at the rest of the bomb squad to get the hell out of the building.

Twenty-four seconds... But the timer had stopped.

"It stopped."

"What do you mean it stopped?" Jeff shook his head. "Did you cut it?"

"Didn't touch a fucking thing!"

Adrenaline coursed through my body and I tried to get a grip on my shaking hands. This wasn't right. Timers didn't just stop...unless it was a trick. The timer beeped and flashed fourteen seconds on the screen.

"It's still counting down! Cut the wire, Shane!"

"It's not right!" I found the green wire and was just about to cut it, but it was wired to a red one set deep in the bundle. "Not the one!"

Red was bad.

Red was always bad. I traced wires like mad, knowing that there were mere seconds left. If this bomb went off, it wasn't just this building that it affected. The damned thing was rigged with enough C-4 to take out the entire block -- and then some.

Seven seconds.

Blue!

The blue was clean, clear, and seemed way too obvious. But it was right. I knew in my gut it was right. And if I'd learned anything in all my years of this crap, it was to trust my gut. Sweat dripped into my eye, but I set my clippers, held my breath, and squeezed.

There was a quiet snick and the timer display went black. The system had been disabled with three seconds left to go. I hadn't had a call this close in a while and the idea of nearly being blown to bits shook me to the core.

I looked up at Jeff, shaking my head. "Blue."

"But--"

"Yeah, I know--"

A Tarot card popped up out of the middle of the unit, like some kind of makeshift jack-in-a-box. I stared at the card, trying to make out the image. It wasn't a card our serial bomber had used before and I wondered if he was about to start changing up his pattern.

The screeching of another alarm made my heart slam into my chest. Oh, God, I'd screwed up. My gut instinct had failed and *I* had failed. And now my team and the rest of the people that the police were still trying to evacuate from the block were going to die.

We were *all* going to die.

I bolted upright with a gasp and it took me a moment to figure out where -- and who -- I was. In bed and definitely not Shane. Thank God. I hated it when my own fictional characters invaded my dreams. But that was the price of being an author, I supposed.

Sweat poured off me and I panted like I'd been running for miles. My phone vibrated on the bedside table to indicate I'd received some kind of message. Maybe that had been what had triggered falling into my own character's world with a bomb to defuse.

I tried to get my breathing back to normal and reached for my phone. The moment I touched it, it rang. I squinted at the too-bright display in the dark and groaned.

Devon Ashford.

The most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on and one of the most talented photographers in the world. Six months ago, he'd been my best friend and roommate...and the very guy I'd been in love with since the first day of college.

He wasn't in love with me, of course, but that didn't stop him from wanting to fuck around with me when he was lonely or wanted to get laid. I pushed the button to answer the phone. "What?"

"I need you to come get me."

His voice was hushed and I had a feeling there was someone else near him that he didn't want to wake. This wasn't the first time he'd called me after he'd been stranded after a quick fuck that lasted a little too long.

"What's wrong?"

"I left my car at--"

Jealousy and hurt hit like a punch to the gut. This shit was getting old. Every time he called me like this, it hurt so much more. Especially given he knew how I felt about him. I'd made a promise to myself that I wasn't going to be available like this. I wasn't going to be there for him to walk all over and take advantage of.

Not anymore.

I just... couldn't.

"You in trouble?"

"Trouble? No, I just left my car and I need a ride to pick it up. I called a cab, but no one's showed up, and I don't want to be stuck here 'til morning."

"Devon..."

"I didn't expect this to take as long as it did and now I just need a ride." He was pleading now, and I knew by the disappointment in his voice that he knew that I wasn't coming. "Come on, Grant."

"No," I said softly. "I can't, Devon."

"It's not what you think."

"Yeah?" I lay back on the pillows and sighed, clenching my teeth to try to stop the emotion that was trying to make its way to the surface. "It's never what I think though, is it? You've always got some excuse why the situation is somehow better than it really is."

"Why are you being such an asshole?"

"Because I'm tired." I swallowed hard. "So goddamned tired of being the one you run to when your world turns to shit -- and being the first one you abandon when things are going right. I love you more than anything in this world, but..." I needed to end it, but I just couldn't. "Call another cab, Devon."

I pushed the button to hang up the phone before he could say another word to have me give in. I suddenly couldn't breathe and had to get up out of bed. I paced the bedroom for a good fifteen minutes, fully expecting Devon to call back.

When he didn't, I wondered just how badly I'd fucked up. Deep down, I guess I'd always had this hope that he'd see how good we'd been together and he'd come to his senses. But after this, it was going to be the end of us.

I just knew it.

I shifted in the uncomfortable, straight-backed chair, feeling like a bug under a microscope. I was, of course, being looked at a little too closely for comfort. But then again, it came with the territory.

If the situation wasn't bad enough, I was fighting off yawn after yawn. Benefits of being awakened only a couple of hours after I'd gone to bed. There was probably nothing worse than yawning during an interview. I had a feeling it'd pretty much guarantee that I wouldn't get the job.

"Mr. Caldwell," Adam Garza started as he leaned back in his chair on the other side of the desk and looked at me. "You are probably the most qualified applicant I've interviewed yet. However, I don't feel like you are a good fit for this position."

Huh? In less than thirty seconds, he'd said that I was qualified and that I wasn't a good fit? I must have looked as confused as I was because he continued on.

"In your last position, you were the supervisor to those doing this exact job."

"I was, yes, which goes to show that I can do the job."

"You wouldn't be happy in this position."

"In all honesty, I don't need to be happy." Knowing the interview was over, I bent to retrieve my briefcase that sat next to my left foot and stood. "I need to be able to pay my bills. What I don't understand is, that if you had my resume and knew my qualifications, then why schedule me for an interview?"

His entire demeanor changed and went from professional to personal in two seconds flat. "It was an opportunity I just couldn't pass up."

"I don't understand."

He opened a desk drawer to his left and brought out a hardcover book -- a familiar book, *my* latest book -- and stood, walking around the desk toward me. "Would you mind?"

"Excuse me?" Anger hit hard and fast. It became crystal clear that he'd never intended to hire me. "You brought me here under the guise of a *job interview* to get me to sign a book?"

He smiled, clearly not understanding how pissed I was. "I have all of your books and am biting the bullet to see if Shane catches the bad guy. Will there be another b--"

"Give me the book."

I took it from him and pulled a pen out of my jacket pocket. I opened the cover and paused at the title page. My agent was going to fucking kill me over this, but so be it. I started the inscription:

For Adam Garza...

You're a dumbass and fans like you suck.

Grant Caldwell

I finished off with a quick drawing of a fist with the middle finger raised and closed the book, smiling as I handed it to him. "There you go."

He didn't open the cover and read the inscription, which kind of disappointed me. He just smiled and put the book back on his desk and moved to show me out. "Thanks, Grant!"

"Oh, you're *quite* welcome," I said, aggravated even more that he thought we were on a first name basis. "You have a good day, *Adam*."

After I left the building, I headed for the bus stop a few blocks away. I hated taking the bus, but I hated driving downtown even more. The entire morning had been a fucking waste of time. I could have been filling out applications for other jobs. Hell, I could have been at home writing on my next book.

It wouldn't have netted money for another few months, but I'd have still been paid eventually. Once all of the department heads signed off on it and the paperwork went off to accounting and accounting got around to doing their own paperwork in order to cut me my check.

How much longer could I keep up without a job? The meager severance package from my former company and two book advances had kept me going for the better part of a year, but my funds were getting lower and lower. When Devon had moved out and stopped paying half the rent and utilities, things had gotten really difficult, really quickly.

The hard truth was: I needed a job... and I needed it months ago.

Someone on a bike zipped down the sidewalk and his backpack whacked me on the shoulder, sending me stumbling. I ran right into a little store's outside shelf and the contents scattered across the sidewalk.

"Shit!"

I looked from the decks of cards and trinkets to the guy on the bike. Little white wires ran behind his neck and ended at his ears, and I knew yelling after him and calling him a jerk would only make *me* feel better. I bent to start picking up the items, gathering them in my hands. The plastic shelf had come apart, though, and there was nowhere to put anything.

A woman knelt beside me and placed a woven straw basket between us. "Here, just put them in the basket."

The familiar voice made me smile and most of my aggravation eased, just as it usually did whenever Jillian was around. I wanted to smack myself for not realizing what part of the neighborhood I was in. I dropped the items from my hands to the basket and looked up at her.

Her long, dark red hair was pulled back in a twist and held loosely by a claw clip. The noon-day sun highlighted the slight smattering of freckles across her cheeks, making them seem much darker than they truly were.

She smiled, blue eyes almost sparkling. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I'm so sorry, Jillian."

"It wasn't your fault," she said. "I saw that jerk's pack hit you."

"Whatever happened to not riding on the sidewalks?"

I reached for another pack of cards, looking at them for the first time. Tarot cards. That was the last thing I needed to be touching right now -- especially with the way my life was going. I tossed them in the basket quickly, as if just touching them could make a reading spring forth out of nowhere.

Jillian laughed. "What are you so afraid of?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's not the cards you have an aversion to, it's the truth." She chuckled and placed the remaining decks of cards into the basket. Standing, she nodded toward the collapsed shelf. "Would you mind bringing the shelf in for me?"

"Well, since I was kind enough to knock it over, I suppose it's the *least* I could do."

I grabbed the shelf and walked into the shop after her. It was a neat little place, full of all kinds of eclectic things: masks, stones, jewelry, more decks of cards, sarongs, clothing items, and so much more.

The first time I'd walked into her shop for research help on Tarot readings, I'd fallen in love with the energy of the surroundings. Jillian and I had become close friends over the following years, even if I still didn't understand all of the Tarot stuff.

"Put it over there," she said, pointing to an empty table near her register. "It just needs to be put back together."

I put the shelf and my briefcase down and when I turned back around, she was gone. "Jill?"

"Be right back," she yelled from the back room.

I pulled a chair out at the table and sat down. When she didn't come right out, I started fiddling with the shelf. She'd been right. The shelf wasn't broken; it just needed to be snapped back together.

Jillian walked into the room just as I snapped the last piece into place. "You didn't have to put it back together."

"It was either that or wander around and touch things. I know how much you enjoy it when I do that."

"If you didn't break the things you touch it wouldn't be so bad."

"Picky, picky."

She smiled and held out a large, brown shopping bag. "Got something for you."

I took the bag from her and peered inside. There were dozens of square boxes and it took me a moment to figure out what they were: more Tarot cards. "Oh, look, just what I always wanted."

"Now don't be an ass, Grant," she said. "Look at them!"

I put the bag on the floor and took out one of the decks. When I saw the design, I was both shocked and humbled. The design was a collage of the artwork that had been on the first three novels in my series and another that I'd only seen mockups of -- my fourth and final book.

"Oh, Jillian..."

"I figured since this next book of yours was the last one for this series, you should have a little something to commemorate it."

"These are awesome." I stood and went to her, pulling her into a tight hug. "Thank you!"

She laughed and hugged me back, sighing and hanging on a bit. "I didn't do it on my own, though. Your publisher and agent helped. All I did was find someone to print the decks."

"I haven't even seen the final cover for the fourth book. *Is* that the final cover?"

Jillian stepped back and nodded. "Your agent assured me it was."

I stared at the deck of cards. "Wow."

"Speaking of the book... How's it coming along?"

"Ugh." I sat back down and rummaged through the bag, still stunned at the kind gesture. "You know, I dreamed that I was Shane last night and was defusing a bomb."

"Good sign."

"I guess." I shrugged. "It's been a while since I've been this far into Shane's head that I dream

bomb squad scenarios in his point of view. Tell me why I opted for writing thrillers instead of romance again?"

"Because you don't like girly bits?"

"There is that."

She went to the chair opposite me and sat down. "What else is bothering you, honey?"

I stared down into the bag for a long while, not wanting to turn around and face her. She could always see right through me if I tried to hide something from her. After a while, I sat back in the chair and glanced at her. "Devon called me this morning."

"I take it that it didn't go well?"

"He wanted me to pick him up after one of his flings, Jill."

"Sure it was a fling?"

"It was a little after three," I said. "I'm pretty sure I know exactly where he was. Well...what he'd been doing, rather."

She just nodded, as if considering the facts and Devon's history. "Did you go?"

I shook my head slowly. "No."

"Wow." She got up and started toward the back room. "I need some tea. You want a cup?"

And just like she could see through me most of the time, I knew when she was changing the subject because it made her uncomfortable. I got up and followed her.

"You're changing the subject, Jilli."

"No, I just want a cup of tea."

I grabbed her by the elbow and stopped her, turning her to face me. When she had a hard time looking me in the eye, I knew I'd been right. "What's going on?"

"Grant--"

"Don't *Grant* me... Just tell me what you know that I don't!"

"It wasn't a fling for him last night," she said softly. "He was doing test shots."

"Right," I scoffed. "He takes pictures of porn stars for a living, Jillian. I know exactly what each and every one of those *test shots* leads to. Some fucking twink bares his ass and Devon's the first

to tap it -- and I don't mean with his camera."

"You still think I fuck anything that moves, don't you?"

I turned around to see Devon standing in the doorway, lean body accentuated by the sunlight behind him. He was dressed simply in a pair of jeans and a short-sleeved button down shirt. His dark, curly hair was windblown and his green eyes held a wealth of anger like I hadn't seen in years.

"I find it amazing that one person could be so fucking judgmental," he said when I found no words to answer his initial question. "You, Grant, of all people..."

"It's not judgmental if it's true, Devon."

"Would that be the actual truth or Grant Caldwell's version of the truth?"

"Guys, don't--"

"Doesn't matter, it's all the same."

"All the same?" Devon shook his head. "That's such a load of shit, Grant. You see things that aren't there--"

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to this again. You two want to fight, you go ahead and fight," Jillian said, stepping between us as she headed for the stairway to her upstairs apartment. "But if you break anything at all, I'll curse both of you."

I waited until Jillian started up the stairs and then turned my attention back to Devon. "So what are you going to tell me? That I didn't see you fucking your latest *test shot* only a few hours after we fucked and I told you how I felt about you?"

"Wasn't fucking him," Devon said with a shrug.

"Bullshit!"

"My dick was nowhere near his ass," he said simply.

"In his ass, in his mouth, it's all the same, Devon!"

"The hell it is."

Aggravated, I turned my back on him, closed my eyes, and started counting, no end number in sight. He was being so nonchalant about all of this that it just made me want to explode. How could I have been in love with such an uncaring, egotistical fool for so many years? And what

did it say about *me* that I couldn't just let him go?

"Look, I..." He sighed heavily. "I've apologized more times than I can count and I meant every word. At some point you're either going to have to accept that and let it go or we just need to go our separate ways. What is it that you want from me?"

What did I want from him?

The last thing I wanted or needed from him were more lies and more excuses. In fact, I was sure that if given half the chance that was all he'd give me anyway. And I just couldn't go there.

"Nothing," I whispered, then steeled myself and turned so I could say it more definitively. When I did turn, Devon stood right in front of me. I hadn't heard him move, hadn't realized he was so close. He looked at me expectantly and I swallowed hard. "I don't want anything from you."

"Grant--" He reached for me and I pulled away. If he touched me, I might not be able to do this. He stepped closer, trapping me between him and the wall. "Don't do this."

"Don't do what?" I shook my head. "You say *this* as if there's really something to end between us."

For the first time ever, I saw fear in his eyes. "All of these years as friends and you'd just walk away?"

"I have to."

"No... Grant, baby--"

"Don't!" I glared at him and pushed at his chest, trying to move him back so I could get away from him. He moved a couple of inches, but not nearly enough to let me by. "Don't you dare fucking call me that. You lost that right a long time ago."

"Yeah, I suppose I did," he said after a few minutes. "I never meant to hurt you, Grant."

"But you did." I looked away so he wouldn't see the tears trying to build up. "It wouldn't have been so bad if you'd have just told me you didn't feel the same way I did." Fuck it. Let him see just how much he'd hurt me. I looked up at him, letting my guard down completely. "You told me you felt the same way. That you thought we'd be good together."

"I didn't lie when I told you that."

"And then I come home and find your dick stuffed down some other guy's throat just a few hours later?" I shook my head. "That hurt, Devon."

"I know." He leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead, then pressed his fingers beneath my chin and tilted my head back so I'd have to look at him. When our eyes met, he gave a sad smile.

"I need to make it right."

"There's nothing you can do that would make it right."

"Nothing?"

His body pressed against me, lips brushing mine softly. There was a half-second pause where I knew I needed to push him away. But I also knew that once I walked out of here, that we'd never touch again. And some part of me wanted this.

Wanted this one last kiss...

I leaned up into him, taking the kiss he offered. His taste was intoxicating; a hint of mint and coffee, but mostly just Devon. He pulled me into him, his hands skimming up my sides, leaving a burning trail of desire everywhere he touched.

The kiss intensified the longer it went on and I soon realized that I was rubbing against him like some kind of slut. This wasn't supposed to be about sex, but goodbye. Reluctantly, I broke the kiss and pulled back, willing my body to get itself under control.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?"

I shook my head and, heart in my throat, pressed one last kiss to his cheek. "I wish you the best."

"What?" He seemed confused as I moved away from him and started out of the room. "What the _"

I continued walking, refusing to turn to look at him. If I did, I wouldn't be able to leave. I'd get sucked back in to talk -- or something equally damaging. There was no way around this. Devon was... well, Devon, and it was clear that even though we had chemistry, we would never be a good fit.

I highlighted the last page of material that I'd typed up and hit delete. Nothing sounded right. Shane was giving me hell, trying to lead me down the same path I'd already decided was a dead end. I knew who the stupid serial bomber was, but damned if I could translate that to the page.

Guess I couldn't blame my character. Finding out your partner -- the one you'd trusted with your very life and those of others -- was responsible for the deaths of so many people...

The doorbell rang, drawing my attention away from the manuscript. I contemplated getting up, and then decided it wasn't worth it. I wasn't in the mood for company, especially company whose sole purpose was to make me feel better by talking it out.

Fuck that.

I didn't want to talk it out. I wanted to be angry and hurt and I wanted to wallow in those feelings for as long as I could. A long-awaited royalty check had come in the mail a couple of weeks ago and after I cashed it and paid the bills, I'd paid a visit to my local liquor store.

Me and the eighteen-year old Glenfiddich had become great friends in the time since, and I was sure anyone else at this point would just be a disappointment. I refilled my glass and ignored the doorbell as I drank over half the contents in one long swig. The burn was stout, but good.

It rang again and again, and I responded by finding my earphones. I opened up my music program, found Yo-Yo Ma, and turned the volume on high as I set the track to play. The scene I'd been trying to capture was right there, just out of my grasp.

I closed my eyes and tried to visualize it all, hoping that if I saw it first, I might be able to get it right. Something helped, whether it was the music or the Scotch and I soon found myself typing away, working through the scene that had eluded me all day.

Things were coming together.

Shane was pissed and high on revenge, going after his partner. He still had a hard time believing that his partner could betray him like this. That he'd hurt him and so many other people. Hell, that his partner had tried to *kill* him with that last bomb.

Something flashed in my head and I went back to a dream I'd had weeks ago. What was it about that Tarot card that was so different from the rest? It wasn't supposed to be in the bomb itself; the bomber always mailed it after. Had he wanted Shane to see it before the bomb went off?

Jesus.

What was I thinking?

It was a dream, not something I'd plotted out for the book. I sat back, sighing. But there was something about it. Was my dream a product of something my subconscious was trying to tell me? Had I missed something in the outline? Was this something I'd planned but then forgotten?

I found my notes and started flipping through the pages. There was a thick envelope stuck between two of the pages with my name on it and I frowned when I recognized the handwriting.

Devon.

I stared at it for a good few minutes and then dropped it in the trashcan next to my desk, unopened. And then I realized that I'd just been through these same notes only a few days before and the envelope hadn't been there.

That fucking asshole had been in my house!

I ripped the earphones out of my ears and stood, grabbing the phone as I did. I was just about to call the local PD and report... Report what? That my ex-roommate had broken in to leave me a letter?

I threw the phone so hard that it crashed into the wall and fell to the floor in pieces.

"What did the phone ever do to you?"

I jumped and turned in shock to find Jillian standing in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, a coffee mug cradled between her two hands.

"What the fuck is with you people? Give you an emergency key and you think it's an open invitation to just waltz in whenever you please?"

"I'm worried about you, honey," she said calmly. "My spreads for you have been all over the place."

"Oh, yeah, that's *just* what I need to hear." I stalked past her into the kitchen and found she'd made a pot of coffee. There was a spread of Tarot cards on the kitchen table and I frowned when I turned back to look at her. "How long have you been here?"

"A while," she said as she settled back into her seat at the table. "You seemed into whatever you were typing, so I decided to leave you to it."

"I see."

She gestured to the chair across from her. "Come over here and sit."

"No." I poured myself a cup of coffee and glared at her as I took a sip. "You might have wormed your way in, but the last thing I need--"

"Either you get read or I'm calling your mother." I knew her threat wasn't just that. She'd totally follow through. "I'm sure she'd be interested to know just how many Glenfiddich bottles are in your trash can."

"Damn it, Jilli..."

"Come on," she said gently. "At least let me put my mind at ease."

"Unless you can make Death jump out of the deck for me, I'm not interested. I'm relegated to the same old shit. Nothing ever changes."

"Only because you won't allow it."

"Huh?"

She chewed at her bottom lip nervously as she shuffled her deck of cards. "What happened with you and Devon that day at the shop?"

"Ask him," I said with a sigh.

"I did, but he won't talk to me." She handed me the deck. "Do some shuffling, babe."

I took the deck and started shuffling the cards. "Why've you been reading for me?"

She just looked at me.

"I was going to call you back--"

"When? Last week, the week before?"

"I've been trying to get this book finished, Jill." She didn't seem convinced. "And I wanted to wallow in my misery."

"Now see? That's what I've been getting. You're punishing yourself for what happened." She took the deck from me and started laying out the cards. "Why are you doing that? You fought, you parted ways--"

"He said we parted ways?"

"Cards did." When I raised a brow, she shrugged. "I've been reading them for both of you."

"You need to get out more."

"And you..." She studied the spread, shaking her head. "You need to stop dwelling on the past, baby. It's keeping you from moving on. See this here?" She tapped one of the cards. "You know what this means?"

"What is that? A cup?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "And really, whether it's in upright or reversed, it still fits with what you're going through. What's throwing me, I think, is that I keep getting cups for both of you."

"And cups are good? Bad?" She huffed and I reached out and touched her hand. "This is your thing, Jillian. I respect it, but I don't know it -- don't want to know it -- like you do."

She sat back in the chair and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Cups are relationships, emotions... matters of the heart."

"I'm done," I said as I rose from the chair. "I'm not going to sit here while you fabricate some fucking reading just to talk to me about my non-existent love life."

"You honestly think I'd do that?"

Her tone of voice told me I'd just fucked up. And royally, at that. I turned and put my hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"Hey, if that's what you think..." She started gathering up the cards and I knew I'd hurt her feelings. "I think it's time for me to go."

"Jill?" I sank to one knee so that I could look her in the eyes, but she wouldn't look at me. "Jilli, I'm sorry."

She bit at her lip and glanced over at me, tears welling up in her eyes. "I just want to help you."

"Baby girl," I pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "Sometimes things just can't be fixed and no amount of readings or spiritual insight is going to change that."

"He loves you," she said softly.

"In his own way I'm sure he does." I sighed and pulled my chair over and sat beside her. "But love for me and love for Devon are two totally different things. Me? I'm not a fan of finding him screwing around with other guys."

"I don't think that's something he wants anymore, either." She was silent for a few moments. "I swore I wouldn't say anything, but..."

When she didn't elaborate, I gave her a nudge. "I won't tell."

"He quit doing porn shoots right after you kicked him out."

"What?" He'd made damned good money in the porn industry and was one of the most well-known photographers. "Why would he do that?"

"Said that he knew you looked down on him for it--"

"It wasn't the porn I looked down on," I said quickly. "It was finding him with some other guy just after..." I broke off, knowing that going on any further wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. "So, if he was doing a test shoot a couple of weeks ago, what the hell was it for?"

"Some big ad company," she said. "They paid him a pretty penny for just the test shots and then offered him a full-time gig."

"Wow."

"He turned them down."

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"Because he'd have had to move to New York. He said he wasn't ready to leave here yet. Not until he made things right with you." She turned those bright blue eyes up at me. "At least talk to him."

"There's nothing else to--"

"There's always *something* else to say," she said, cutting me off. "Talk to him. *Listen* to what he has to say. And don't judge him so harshly, Grant. Change takes time and he's done an awful lot of it in a few short months."

"I'll think about it," I said, more to change the subject than anything else. "You hungry? Want to stay for dinner?"

"Where are you ordering from?"

"You wound me."

"That's funny; your cooking would do the same for me!" She laughed and stood. "Pizza?"

"No, I had pizza last night."

"Chinese?"

"Mmm... General Tso's chicken and some pot stickers. Maybe some... oh, I don't know. Some of those wonton thingies with the cream cheese and crab?"

Jillian grinned. "Where's the menu?"

"On my desk," I said. "If you'll order, I'll go shower, and we can watch a movie, too. I've been up to my neck in trying to get the last book finished and I really need the break."

"Sounds good to me!"

I headed for the bathroom and started the shower, then stripped off my clothes. I'd just finished taking a piss when Jillian burst through the door. I grabbed a towel to cover myself. "Jesus, Jillian! What the--"

"Did you even look at these?" She thrust a handful of what looked like pictures at me. "This, Grant, isn't something you can just ignore and hope it'll go away."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just *look*!"

She held a picture up for me and it took me a moment to realize that I was looking at myself. I'd

been sitting at my desk, apparently deep in thought. My hair was messy and I had what looked to be three days worth of stubble on my cheeks. They should have been the most unflattering pictures in the world, but they weren't.

Jillian flipped through more of the pictures and I stopped her when she came to one of me in bed, sleeping. The blanket covered me enough that none of my junk was showing, but the image was so...sensual.

I took the pictures from her and slowly went through them, shaking my head. "Why would he send me these? They don't even look like me."

"There's a letter in the envelope, but I didn't read it." She sighed and headed toward the door. "I'm going to leave you and your... bits to process this."

She glanced down and it was only then that I realized I'd dropped the towel to take the pictures. I snatched another towel from the rack and glared. "Go order food, naughty bitch."

After the door closed, I heard her cackling as she walked down the hall. Curious, I looked in the envelope. There was a folded piece of paper inside, just as Jillian had said. I pulled it out and unfolded it to read.

Grant,

In all the years I've been taking pictures of people, these are, by far, the very best. There's something about you that's missing with everyone else. One of these days, I hope you find the man that will treat you like deserve to be treated.

I screwed up and don't expect you to forgive me.

Just know that I love you.

Devon.

I re-read the last line over and over again, wondering just how he meant that. Loved me as *he'd* always loved me? Or loved me as *I'd* always loved him? I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

After my shower, I slipped into the bedroom and picked up the phone. I sat down on the bed and let my gaze go from the phone to the letter and back to the phone again. Heart in my throat, I started entering Devon's number into the keypad.

The phone rang three times and I was about to hang up when it was answered by an unfamiliar male voice. "Devon Ashford's phone."

The fact that someone else was answering Devon's phone threw me for a loop and I suddenly didn't know what the hell I was going to say. I opted for something simple. "Can I speak to

Devon, please?"

"Uh...hang on." There was a rustle, as if the guy on the other end of the line had held the phone against him. "Ah, sorry. He's in the shower."

Right.

Of course.

Some stranger was answering Devon's phone while Devon was in the shower. It didn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together. That whole line about him loving me?

Well, I had my answer.

"Hellooooo..."

The guy had obviously asked me something. I cleared my throat. "Sorry."

"Can I take a message?"

"No," I said. "No message."

I hung the phone up and stared at it, shaking my head. Why I'd expected anything different from Devon...

"Grant?" Jillian called from the living room. "You going to come help me pick out a movie?"

"Be right there!"

I stood and gave the letter one last glance, then dropped it and the pictures in the trash can beside the bed. For what it was worth, at least I had my answer.

Sleep had eluded me once again. Instead of tossing and turning and trying to find my way back to dreamland, I'd gone to my desk and pulled up the latest chapter I'd been working on. I'd managed to get back on the right path somehow and was now kicking my Muse's ass. The bitch owned me most of the time, so having the upper hand for once was nice.

But I needed more coffee.

I went into the kitchen and started putting on a fresh pot. Just as I was pouring the water in, the doorbell rang. I glanced at the clock on the microwave. Had to be Fed-Ex. They hadn't shown up to pick up my outgoing packages the day before and I was seriously pissed.

I picked up the packages on my way to the door and as I swung it open, I froze. It wasn't my

Fed-Ex guy, it was Devon. I started to close the door, but Devon stopped it with his hand.

"I tried calling you back last night."

During the movie, he'd called at least a dozen times and left four messages. I found that out once I'd plugged the phone back in this morning to call my editor. I hadn't, however, been stupid enough to listen to the messages.

"Ah, so your newest toy actually mentioned that I called?"

"What?"

I rolled my eyes. "Forget it."

"No, I won't forget it," he said. "I want to know why you called last night."

"Random bout of stupidity, I guess."

I backed away from the door, knowing he wouldn't leave without saying what he needed to say. After I set the packages down, I went back into the kitchen to wait on the pot of coffee to finish brewing. Devon followed along behind me.

"Grant, come on."

"No, *you* come on, Devon." I turned to face him, shaking my head. "I'm done playing games, okay? Just say what you came to say... and then get the hell out of my house."

He sighed and leaned against the doorframe, and I suddenly remembered dozens of early mornings that started with him standing in that same spot, shirtless and looking sexy as hell with his hair all tousled. Those early mornings usually came with boring conversations that led to us fucking around and then falling asleep for half a day afterward.

"What were you just thinking about?"

I looked away and started pouring my coffee. "Nothing."

Devon walked further into the room and was suddenly behind me. I spooned some flavored creamer into my coffee and started stirring, trying to ignore the fact that he was so very close. So close in fact, that his lips were right at my ear.

"Thinking about all the times we used to get ourselves back to sleep by wearing each other out first?"

"Stop it," I growled.

He sighed and rested his chin on my shoulder. "Did you find the pictures I left for you?"

"Yeah, I did. Got your letter, too." I turned my head just slightly, even though I knew I still wouldn't be able to see him. "I guess I read it and thought that... that maybe you meant the words the way I *hoped* you'd meant them. But once again, I was only making a fool of myself."

"How so?"

"Getting your newest *friend* on the phone instead of you--"

"Matt?" Devon actually had the nerve to laugh. "For God's sake, Grant, he's Laura's fiancé, not someone I'm sleeping with."

"What?"

"I've been staying at my sister's place while I look for somewhere to live." He took the spoon from my hand and placed it on the counter. "So, why don't you tell me why you called?"

"I wanted..."

"Wanted what?"

He kissed just below my ear and it took everything I had in me to stifle the moan. "Wanted to know what you meant when you said you loved me, I guess. Your kind of love... or mine."

"I don't even know where to start." Devon turned me to face him and slid his hands up to rest around my neck, thumbs slowly stroking the length of my throat. "I've made so many mistakes..."

I swallowed hard.

The nearness of him had my heart pounding in my chest, my stomach doing somersaults so massive I felt nauseated. I went to push him away, but instead found myself wrapping my arms around his shoulders and holding on tight.

"I can't..." I clenched my teeth, trying to get a handle on my thoughts. "I can't be the one you run to when you want a quick, no-strings fuck."

"There've always been strings with us, Grant." He leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. When I didn't respond, he caught my face between his hands and met my gaze. "I'd like the strings to be a little -- hell, a lot -- tighter."

"What do you mean by..." I trailed off, realizing just what he was saying. "Don't screw with me, Devon. This is serious!"

"So am I," he said with a smile.

I just stared at him, unable to believe that he'd just said what he had. After all of the years of me wanting him -- wanting to be with him -- he'd finally said the magic words. I was so stunned; I didn't have a clue what to say.

After a few moments, he frowned. "But... I did fuck up big time, so I understand if you don't want anything to do with me."

"I shouldn't," I said. "I shouldn't want anything to do with you after what happened."

"Please let there be a *but*."

"But I love you and I guess that when you love someone -- and they love you in return -- that you should at least *try* to work through the bad shit." I leaned in and kissed him. "I'm willing if you are."

"Oh, God, yes... I am."

He gathered me up and kissed me and in that moment, I felt *it*. The very thing that had been missing in all of our times of playing around together. There'd always been strings, but there'd never been this deep of a connection. It was as if things had finally clicked into place, with both of us knowing exactly what we wanted from the other.

His hands slipped up my shirt, fingers playing up and down my sides. Goosebumps rose over my skin and when I shuddered, Devon paused to pull my shirt up over my head. The pause was only a matter of seconds because he was soon kissing me again, his lips leaving a burning hot trail across my jaw and down the side of my neck.

I untucked his shirt and started unbuttoning it from the bottom up, fingers shaking the entire time. Once his shirt was open, I slid my hands up his chest, stopping to roll both nipples between my fingers.

Devon shuddered, breath leaving him in a rush. "Stop that."

"Really?"

The smirk on his face said it all, but before he could answer, his cell phone rang. He ignored it, moving in to kiss me again. I went with it, but the continuous ringing was driving me insane. I pushed him back, laughing.

"Either answer it or turn it off."

He sighed and pulled the phone out of his back pocket, answering it without even looking at the display. "This is Devon."

An odd expression passed over his face when whoever was on the other end of the line spoke. I'd seen it a dozen times over the years, an unexpected call usually meant something had fallen

through, and he wasn't going to get paid or credited.

"Yeah, I know," he told the person on the phone. "I saw that before I left this morning and didn't call them back for a reason." He paused, listening to that person speak, then frowned. "What did-
-"

The doorbell rang and I moved past Devon to walk out of the kitchen to go answer it. He caught me by the waistband and pulled me back for a quick kiss, mouthing the word "sorry." I just shook my head and smiled, giving him another kiss before I walked away.

As I walked out of the room, Devon's tone changed entirely. Though his voice was hushed, his words were short and direct. I peeked out the door and saw my regular Fed-Ex guy standing there waiting, clipboard in hand. When I opened the door, he did a double-take and I suddenly realized I was shirtless.

He cleared his throat. "I had a note that you have outgoing packages."

"That I do," I said. "They were supposed to be picked up yesterday but no one ever showed up. Can I get a refund on my two-day delivery?"

"I'll put in the request for it," he said, "unless you want me to bump it up to overnight for two-day charge."

"Hey, that'd be great. I'd appreciate that."

He filled out a short form on his clipboard, had me sign it, and took the packages. He cast a glance behind me, nodding a greeting at Devon who'd just walked into the living room. "Y'all have a good day."

"You, too." I closed the door and looked over to find Devon sitting on the edge of the coffee table, staring at the display on his phone. I walked over and sat down on the couch opposite him. "Everything okay?"

"Looks like your publisher wants new pictures for a magazine spread and has just hired me to do them," he said as he closed his phone. He winked. "Couldn't ask for a better subject."

"You know how much I hate sitting through a photo shoot, Devon." I knew, he knew, and everyone else in my publishing circle knew it, too. Apparently, it was just one of those necessary evils. "Weren't there extra pictures from the last shoot we did a couple of years back that I can send instead?"

"Oh yeah, there were extras. You know why we didn't send those in?"

"Uh, because we had enough already?"

"No, because they sucked. The color was all wrong and there were shadows in all the wrong

places." He paused, glancing toward my office. "You still have the ones I put in with the letter?"

"Sort of."

I got up off the couch and went into the bedroom to get the pictures from the trash. They were right where I'd dropped them the night before and I pulled them out, stacking them neatly. When I turned around to leave, Devon was right in front of me.

"You threw them away?"

"I was pissed," I said. "Hearing some other guy's voice on your phone..."

"Hey, no... I get it." He sat down on my bed and pulled me over to sit in front of him. Chin resting on my shoulder, he slipped his arms through mine and took the pictures. "I think these are the best pictures I've ever taken."

"They don't even look like me."

"These are of *my* Grant," he said softly, going through picture after picture. His breath hitched as he stopped at one of me standing at the kitchen window, cup of coffee in hand, my gaze trained on something far beyond the window. "I don't think I want to share these."

"Come on, don't make me--"

"We'll do something different from the last time, I promise. Do an outside shoot, maybe something on the steps of the courthouse or you in the coffee shop."

"Courthouse doesn't sound too bad," I said.

"No, and you know what? I've caught a few shots near there around sunset and the light is just--" The ringing of his cell phone interrupted him and I felt him move to retrieve the phone from his pocket. "Shit. Let me up for a minute, would you?"

"This is Devon," he said, answering the phone as I stood to let him up. He got that same look on his face as he had when he talked to whoever called the first time. "This... No, I get that, but... Look, this really isn't a good time..." He walked across the room, silent, listening as the other person spoke. He faced the wall, one hand rubbing at the back of his neck. "Well, if that's how you feel... Right... No, no, I understand." The longer the conversation went on, the worse his body language became. "Well, I appreciate it, but... Right, right. I'll let you know."

Devon sighed heavily and stared at his phone after he hung up. "I hate these things. People can find you anywhere, any time... God forbid they should ever have to leave a voicemail and wait a few hours for you to call back."

"Something wrong, Devon?"

"Guess it depends on how you look at it," he said after a few moments. He turned and held out his hand for me to take it. "But I could use a cup of coffee first."

Devon hadn't said a word since he'd sat down at the kitchen table. He cradled the fresh mug of coffee between his hands, slowly moving it back and forth. After ten minutes of silence, I finally got impatient.

"What is it?"

"I've been offered a contract." He cleared his throat when I kept looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to elaborate. "Did Jillian tell you I wasn't doing porn stuff anymore?"

"She mentioned it."

"I started shopping my portfolio out about a year ago, found a few pretty nice gigs." He chewed at his bottom lip nervously. "And then when things with us really blew up, I applied for a long-term thing with a magazine. Didn't hear anything for a while and then about a month ago, they started calling with offers."

"What kind of thing? You're talking around this and not really telling me much."

"I'm not sure what it all entails, but it's for a combination study-slash-documentary type of thing. Supposed to last six months to a year, give or take a few months."

"That's not anywhere around here?"

He shook his head. "Not even close."

"I see," I said after a bit. "Sounds like a great opportunity for you."

"Yeah, but it scares the fuck out of me, Grant."

I reached across the table and put my hands over his, only to find him shaking. "Why?"

"Because if I go it's either you or the job." He kept shaking his head. "I know this with us isn't a sure thing. I mean, there's so much I need to tell you, so much I need to explain. Hell, we might not be able to get past what happened, but--"

"Don't give this up because of me."

"Grant, I--"

"If this is something you want to do, then you need to just--"

"I love you," he said, his gaze intense as he looked up at me. "I need you to know that I love you more than anything."

"I know." I might have doubted his sincerity before, but love wasn't a word Devon threw around casually. "And I love you, too, but that doesn't mean you have to sit at home and not do this thing."

"For me, it does."

"And why is that?"

"Because I've been without you for six months," he said. "We were in the same town and saw each other on occasion, but it was still one of the hardest things I had to deal with. I can't even begin to fathom being stuck deep in the Congo for that long -- or longer -- and not be able to see or hear from you."

"The Congo?" I stared at him in disbelief. "You do know that's still a war zone, don't you?"

"Some parts of where they're going are unstable," he said with a nod. "But they don't seem to be worried about conflict. From what I understand, this project will help a lot of people so the government is being quite easy to deal with."

"Not the government I'd be worried about," I said.

He nodded as if he understood. "I feel like I'm at a crossroads, Grant. If I don't take this, then I could lose God-only-knows how many opportunities in the future. I can't... I *won't* go back to doing porn shoots."

"Tell me something: why'd you suddenly back out of the porn stuff?"

"Honestly?"

"Well... yeah."

"Because I wanted more," he said simply. "It made me money and got me some invaluable time behind the camera, but that's not what I want to be known for, you know? I mean, there's nothing wrong with it... It's just not for me anymore."

I understood that completely. In the course of my writing career, I'd taken different paths as the inspiration led me. I definitely wasn't where I'd started anymore, and I would never expect Devon to keep on doing something he didn't love.

But this...

"How soon do they want your answer?"

"By the end of the week."

"And you'd leave?"

"As soon as I finish getting the required immunizations." He shrugged. "Don't know how long that'll take, but I assume it won't be too long."

Thoughts began swirling and percolating in my mind, and it wasn't long before I was figuring out just how much longer it'd be until I finished this last book. I had a chapter to write, maybe two. I could easily get that finished and get the book back to New York. Doing edits on the road wouldn't be ideal, but it would be possible.

"What's wrong?" Devon asked.

"Just thinking." I got up and went to the cabinet, getting out a new bottle of Glenfiddich. "I need a little help, though."

"We've been drinking coffee with Glenfiddich in the house?" Devon got up and got us each a glass, chuckling as he did. "What the hell is wrong with you, man?"

I poured us each a few fingers, downed mine in a single swig, and then poured myself another few. Before I could down it too, Devon took the glass from me and set it aside. I sighed and closed the distance between us.

"What are we going to do?"

"Well..." His hands slid over my hips and he pulled me tight against him. "For now, I think we should just..." He gave a tentative thrust, gaze locked with mine. "Oh, I don't know... not think about it?"

Blood rushed from my brain to my dick in record time, eliminating my ability to think anyway. I took him by the hand and pulled him along to the bedroom. He stopped me just before we got to the bed, pulling me back against him. His hands slid down my belly and came to rest between my legs.

Slowly, he pushed them apart, pulling me back toward him at the same time. The moment I felt the hard length of him pressed against my ass, I shuddered. Did I even *have* a fucking condom for this?

Devon urged me onto the bed. I went to turn so I could lie on my back, but he held me where I was. "Not yet."

"Devon?"

His fingers smoothed down my belly and paused to unbutton and unzip my jeans. Slowly, he pulled them down my hips, breath hitching as he exposed my ass. He kissed down the middle of

my back, each kiss slow and easy.

Just lingering.

He paused after a short while to help me get my jeans off the rest of the way. Once I was naked, he cleared his throat. "I'd give anything to have a picture of you like this."

"Shut up."

He licked that spot on my lower back that he knew drove me crazy. And when I sucked in a quick breath, he laughed. "Come on, just for me?"

"No," I said with a groan. "Why do you need pictures if you have me?"

He made an odd sound and moved lower, tongue teasing the cleft of my ass. I jerked as he traced my hole, and then pushed back against him. He increased the pressure and I was suddenly rubbing myself against his tongue. After a bit, he moved even lower, pressing his fingers to the sensitive skin between my hole and my balls.

"You wanna come? Relax a little more?"

"No," I said quickly. "No fingers either."

"What?"

"I'll come and I'll come fast."

"Got plenty of time," he said softly.

I reached across the bed and pulled open the drawer on the bedside table. I couldn't see anything, but I managed to find a small bottle of lube. I shoved it back and reached in again, searching desperately for a box or a string of condoms. My fingers touched a foil pack and I breathed a sigh of relief.

One, single condom.

I pulled it out and tore the package open, but left it in the wrapper. "Just have one, unless you have some."

Devon took it from my hand. "I don't have any at all."

I blinked and looked back at him. "You? Don't have condoms?"

"Haven't exactly needed them for a while." He rolled the condom over the head of his dick and paused to look up at me. The pained expression on his face so didn't fit the moment. "It didn't take me long to realize just how badly I fucked up. Haven't been with anyone since..."

He trailed off and it suddenly clicked what he'd meant by that. Heart pounding, I turned and pulled him in for a kiss. I held him tight, drinking in the taste of him. He crowded me until I fell back onto the bed and he followed me down, working his way between my thighs.

I found the bottle of lube and poured some in my palm, then reached between us to take him in my hand. He hissed and jumped when I touched him. "Damn, that's cold!"

"Won't be for long." As I stroked him, he dropped his head to my shoulder and just...stopped breathing. I squeezed and his breath came rushing out. "Stop holding your breath."

"Afraid if I breathe, I'll wake up and this'll all be a dream."

"Yeah, and if you pass out, I'll be pissed," I said with a laugh.

He swatted my hand away and shifted a little so he could rub the head of his cock against me. "You're not playing fair," he said. "If I don't get to finger that pretty ass of yours, you don't get to play with my dick."

I lay there looking up at him, loving the desire reflected in his expression. It wasn't just a desire to get off; it was desire for me...for us. I spread my legs and scooted down a little. "Come on, Devon."

"Sure?" he asked, voice cracking a little.

I nodded, urging him with a pull of my leg. He braced himself above me on one elbow next to my head, and then looked down my body to watch as he pushed the thick head of his cock against my hole.

I fought like hell to relax, to not flinch when that first bite of pain hit. But the pain wasn't exactly the same as it had been in the past. It was there, but the feel of him stretching me open was incredible, exhilarating, and oh-so-perfect. He did everything right, pushing in a little then waiting a bit before going any farther.

It wasn't long before he was buried deep inside me and I was panting like hell, trying not to come. He sank down over me, holding himself up on his elbows on either side of my head. He licked at my lips, teasing.

"Slow it down or you're gonna come before I ever move." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly and he nodded in approval. "That's better."

I leaned up and kissed him to shut him up, arching my hips, using my legs to pull him into me. A long, low moan rose up from his throat and passed over his lips. I swallowed it down hungrily, wanting desperately to hear another.

He took the hint and pushed deep, using his elbows just above my shoulders to pull me onto him.

The head of his cock rubbed right across my gland, and the pleasure that shot through me was like a strike of lightning.

My entire body broke out in a sweat, and I rolled beneath him, hips meeting every thrust. Devon bent and licked at the spot where my neck and shoulder met, and I shuddered, breath suddenly coming hard and fast.

Heat spread through my balls and around my cock. He shoved deep, hips rocking in time with my breathing. He gasped and slipped one hand between us. It was still slick with lube and when he stroked my cock, I nearly came unglued.

He tightened his grip with his fingers, and then pressed his lips to my ear. Breath shaky and uneven, he whispered, "*Do* I have you now?"

"Yes!"

Devon groaned and after a combination of quick, hurried strokes and thrusts, I came. I clung to him, shaking, my body not wanting to let go of the pure pleasure I'd fallen into. He went still above me, sighing, kissing me on the forehead.

"I hate to tell you this, but..." He sucked in a ragged breath, and then blew it out harshly. "One of us is going to have to go to the store."

"For?"

"Condoms," he said with a chuckle. "Some lube. And food we can eat without getting out of bed."

Devon sighed and a soft snore escaped his lips. I'd been watching him sleep for well over an hour, thinking about everything that we'd talked about before he'd dozed off. He'd wanted to explain what was going through his head the day I'd found him getting sucked off by some model. Even though I'd told him I just wanted to forget about and move forward, he insisted it was important.

After hearing his side of it, I had to agree. Just watching his body language change as he went through the tale was amazing; as if getting it off his chest had rid him of the guilt that he'd carried over the past six months.

I understood now, what he'd meant when he didn't realize it was happening until it was too late. For Devon, working in the sex-related industry had numbed him so much to where sex and fucking were just things he did to pass the time. It was fun, there were no strings attached, and it was a way to relieve the stress after a long day of shooting.

Jillian had been right.

I'd have never believed it without seeing it for myself, but Devon had changed. The loss of our friendship and potential relationship had hit him hard and had apparently been a wake-up call of sorts. He'd thought long and hard about what he wanted... and went for it.

Which had brought us to where we were at this moment: Him wondering how he was going to leave me. And me, wondering how I was going to let him go. What I needed was guidance, and I knew the perfect counselor.

Devon rolled to his side and settled into a deeper sleep and I slowly inched my way out of bed, trying not to wake him. Once my feet hit the floor, I quickly tiptoed out of the room and headed for the phone.

I dialed Jillian's number and she answered on the first ring as if she'd been sitting right on top of the phone. She sniffled as she spoke. "Hey, baby."

"What's wrong, Jillian?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong," she said, though I wasn't sure I believed that. "What's on your mind?"

"God, what's not on my mind would be a better question," I said with a sigh. "I need help, baby girl. The kind of help that only you can give me."

"What do you need, honey?"

"Do a reading for me again? I mean, I know you just did one last night, but--"

"But things have changed, yes?"

"You could say that."

"Hang on a minute, let me lock the door so no one comes into the store and interrupts me." There were a few minutes of silence and then she was back on the line, humming softly as she shuffled the cards. "I want to do things a little differently this time."

"Okay."

"Think about everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. Think about what it is you're questioning, what you want to know... But don't tell me. Just let me lay the cards with you on the line and then we'll talk. You ready?"

Was I ready for this? I'd never put too much stock into it before, but I was desperate for answers and direction. And Jillian's readings had always been on point. With a deep, cleansing breath, I cleared my throat.

"I'm ready."

"Think, Grant," she said softly.

And I did.

I thought about the last twenty-four hours. So much had changed and for the first time, I didn't feel like I'd made a mistake. What happened with me and Devon had felt right; it felt like things had clicked into place.

But I was so scared of losing him, of letting him go. Who was to say that we'd find our way back together again if we both went our separate ways? I suddenly found myself in tears, wondering what it was all for if it was all going to end up in disaster.

"Grant?"

"I'm here," I said into the phone.

"I know." She gave a little chuckle. "Do you want me to read them like I do for everyone else?"

"No, just do it like you always do for me... If you don't mind."

"You'll be happy to know that Death finally stopped in to say hi. Got some changes happening, so that's good."

"Who'd have ever thought Death could be a good card. Is there a bad?"

"Shh," she said quickly. "We'll get to that in a minute. The main thing is that your cup... It runneth over in good things, Grant. Moving on, moving forward. Adventure? I'm not sure exactly what that means, but it's tied to a journey of some kind."

"What kind of journey?"

"I don't know, it doesn't *tell* me--"

"What else?"

"You know I kept getting Cups every time I read for you, but Lovers have never come along with it, which always confused me. They're here now, so I'm taking that as a very good sign. The road ahead of you isn't going to be easy, and you'll have to work hard for what you want, but you'll come out of it on the other side happy."

She was quiet for a long while, and I suddenly started to worry. "Is that it?"

"Follow your heart, Grant," she said. "It won't lead you astray."

"I did that last time."

"And see? It wasn't easy, but it did work out."

"I'm scared," I whispered.

"I know you are. But if you truly love him, you have to let him do this. This is his path, his future; if you don't allow him this, he'll end up hating you for it someday."

"So I just let him go?" The thought of ending it so he wouldn't have a reason to stay was so painful that my knees buckled. I grabbed onto the counter to steady myself. "Jillian, I can't--"

"You aren't listening, Grant."

"You just said--"

"I said let him *do* this, not *let him go*," she corrected. "Never let him go, baby. You hold on tight and you fight like hell to keep him, you hear me?"

"But how do I let him do this without letting him..." She sniffled and I realized she was crying. It suddenly became crystal clear what she'd been trying to tell me. "Yeah?"

"You know you'd be miserable the entire time he's gone." Jillian sighed. "I have customers at the door. Apparently they can't read the sign that says CLOSED. Come by when you get a chance, okay? And by that I mean way before you two leave town."

"I will," I said. "And Jillian?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"Stop it, damn it." She sniffled again. "I have to go before this turns into a sad, sappy movie-ending. You're not even gone yet and I miss you."

The line went dead and I smiled as I set the phone on the counter. Devon came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my chest. He kissed the side of my neck and sighed. "You okay?"

I nodded.

"What'd she say?"

"Who?"

"Jillian," he said. "I know you came in here and called her to read for you."

"You know, I think she stopped reading my cards pretty early in the conversation." I leaned back

against him, covering his arms with my own to hold him close. "But she had some pretty good advice anyway."

"Share it with me?" he asked. "'Cause I have to admit, I'm pretty much floundering here."

"You need to go," I said after a bit. "This is something you have to do."

"I think it is." He tightened his arms around me. "Come with me, Grant."

"Why couldn't it be Scotland or Ireland or...Cairo? Why the Congo?"

"I have a feeling it'd change the project drastically and wouldn't quite be what they envisioned," he said with a laugh. "Location *is* everything."

I turned in his arms to face him. "I couldn't possibly pay my way through--"

"If they want me this bad, they'll have to pay for my assistant, too. You know the ropes, you know how I work." He smiled and slid his hand up to cup the back of my neck. "And? Who knows what kind of inspiration might hit you once we get there. Plenty of time to write, I'm sure. What do you say?"

"I say this is too fast and totally not in the cards."

"Pick a card, any card, and it'll tell you a future. Pick the right card and it'll tell you yours."

"Devon?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I'm sorry."

"What the hell for?"

"For being such a dick over the last few months." He started to object, but I pressed my fingers against his lips to quiet him. "I was hurt and I was angry. If I'd just listened to you in the beginning..."

He shook his head. "Then you'd have heard a load of crap. I needed you to not be there for me for once in my life."

"That ends now, though."

"Absolutely," Devon said. He narrowed his eyes at me, smiling. "So. What d'you say, babe?"

"I say you've got some phone calls to make and I've got a book to finish." I leaned in and kissed him, sighing, content that the right decisions had been made. "Because *we* are bound for Africa."

Never Let Go

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-60370-738-1, 1-60370-738-7

Torquere Press, Inc.: Single Shot electronic edition / June 2009

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680