

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Package Deal

NIKKI SOARDE

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Package Deal

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Nikki Soarde

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Chapter One

Celeste stepped off the plane into a wall of warmth. Palm fronds waved gently in the breeze off the ocean and a golden sun sat high in a cloudless azure sky, the blue so crisp it almost seemed to crackle. It was the kind of sky that should be gazed up at, studied and admired, while lying in a field of grass or on a sandy beach – with a lover’s fingers entwined with hers.

Instinctively she reached out for Tanner.

He grasped her hand and squeezed. “So how do you like Jamaica so far?”

“It’s warm,” she said with a grin. “I like warm.”

His brown eyes laughed at her as the breeze toyed with his shock of mahogany hair. It was just a little too long and it gave him a slightly rakish look. Not that she found that displeasing, but because of his career he was usually very fastidious about his appearance.

He was supposed to get a trim before they left on their vacation but hadn’t quite found the time. Tanner worked fifty or more hours a week at the insurance agency, and then spent time at home preparing to set up his own business. He was so busy that he tended to forget things and couldn’t be trusted with the simplest chores like putting out the garbage or paying the electric bill. But somehow, even with her own crazy schedule, he always found time to make dinner with her, to hold her hand and make love to her. He might forget to pick up the milk on his way home, but how could she be angry when he showed up with a spray of lilacs or a bouquet of roses just because.

All things considered, Celeste preferred flowers to dairy products any day.

He planted a kiss on her cheek. “Compared to January in Toronto, Celeste, a meat locker would feel warm.”

"Well, I guess I should be thankful that you weren't in charge of booking this vacation then."

He winked. "I guess so."

The porter finished loading their luggage into the waiting shuttle and Tanner handed him a generous tip before threading her arm through his and ushering her to her seat.

He plunked down beside her on the bench seat and a moment later the shuttle, full of couples with grins plastered to their faces, pulled into traffic.

"So this is paradise," she said softly as the palm trees and brightly colored houses flashed by. "I can't believe I'm thirty-three years old and have never been here before."

"Well, *you* may never have been to paradise, but I've been living there for the last six years, babe."

She rolled her eyes and chuckled at his reference to their anniversary and the reason for this trip. "You're so bad," she said. "You can always twist me around your little finger with just a few well-chosen words."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "It's just so good to see you smile and hear you laugh again. I can't get enough of it, and I'll do everything in my power to make sure I keep on seeing it."

He brushed a wisp of midnight-black hair from her cheek. "A year is long enough, babe. We've mourned long enough."

She couldn't deny the pressure that built in her throat and the tears that stung her eyes at the reference to their loss. Annali had been part of their marriage—their family—for almost three years. Losing her had been a blow that left them both reeling with grief and scrambling to reorganize a world that had been left with a gaping void. "I still miss her, Tanner. I think I always will."

"I miss her too, but she wouldn't have wanted us to live in her shadow like this. Not for a year. Not even for a month. It's time to move on."

She nodded, wiped away the one tear that had escaped her defenses. "Yes, I know. It is getting easier. I think I'm finally ready for Hedo." She rested her head on his shoulder. "But this is just casual fun, right? We're both clear. We're not looking for anything more than that. I'm not ready to replace Annali."

"No one could ever replace Annali."

She lifted her head and stared at him. "You know what I mean, Tanner. I'm not ready for that sort of emotional investment. Not yet."

They had talked about the possibility of opening up their marriage to someone else again, and had decided that it was something they weren't willing to close the door on permanently. But for now they weren't ready. They needed time to heal, to regroup and find themselves again.

He smiled and kissed her sweetly and as always melted away all her anxiety, eased all her worries. "Of course. Neither am I. This is just casual fun. If we find another couple to play with, or another woman, or..." He shrugged, glanced out the window. "It doesn't matter. What matters is having fun, letting loose and relaxing. What matters is you and me and our commitment to each other." He lowered his voice to an earnest whisper. "What matters is that we came here to remember why we love each other so much."

She threw up her hands in exasperation. "See? There you go again. Making me all mushy inside."

He waggled his eyebrows. "I'd rather make you all wet and horny."

She laughed again, her tears forgotten. "No worries there. You don't even have to *try* for that one."

He cupped her cheeks in his hand and lavished a long, slow kiss on her. His mouth was hot, his tongue sweet, and the touch of his hands possessive.

When he released her she let out a long slow breath to try to calm her heartbeat. "See? That wasn't even trying. I pity all those women at Hedo. They don't have a prayer."

He wrapped his arm around her again and nodded, but this time his smile was a bit distant, perhaps a tiny bit sad, and she thought perhaps she knew why. And maybe there was something she could do about that while they were here.

But when he spoke again she heard no sadness. His voice was full of eager anticipation. "Damn, this feels good. It's been too long since we really let loose and played."

"Yes," she agreed as the resort gates came into view. "Yes, it has."

* * * * *

"Hey, Sheila!" yelled Ben as he loped across the resort's lush front lawn. "Wait up!"

Sheila Royson stopped under the shade of the awning and turned around very slowly. Clipboard clutched to her 32A chest and feet planted squarely, she watched Ben bound across the grass and come to a screaming halt in front of her. "Yes, Mr. Jarvis?"

Chest heaving from heat and exertion, Ben propped his hands on his hips and glared at her. "Sheila. I'm wearing nothing but denim cut-offs and flip-flops. My hair is bleached to within an inch of its life and hasn't seen a comb all day. I'm sun baked and scruffy because I haven't shaved in two days. Do I look like a Mister *Anything* to you?"

A pair of efficiently tweezed eyebrows pulled together in a confused frown. "But you're my boss, Mr. Jarvis," she said, as if it mattered. "You're the man-a-ger."

She said it slowly and succinctly, as if speaking to a three-year-old and he laughed out loud at the ludicrousness of it. "Oh Sheila," he said on a chuckle. "You're one of a kind."

"Yes, sir."

That brought on another chuckle. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her inside, through the Grand Foyer. "And you know, of course, that you're way too young for me."

She stopped abruptly, clutched the clipboard even more tightly to her chest. "Mr. Jarvis, I never thought —"

"I know you didn't." He wagged his eyebrows. "But I did. That reminder was intended for me, not you."

She bit her lower lip in confusion and he found himself wondering if he had ever been that young.

"Come on." He led her into his office. "And let's go over the list of arrivals for today." He hitched a hip on the corner of his desk that was clean and clutter free. It was so clean simply because he never used the thing. Then he rethought that. He *had* used it once—or twice—but not for writing on.

Sheila, ever the dutiful hostess and activities coordinator, sat down in one of the visitor's chairs and went over the list of guests who were arriving that day. There was a group of ten couples coming from Canada as part of a swingers' retreat that was being sponsored by a club in Vancouver. There was another, slightly smaller group of nudists from Maine. There was a smattering of single women traveling in pairs or groups, a group of three single men, and two couples who were here on a special "Anniversary Package" deal that Ben had dreamed up. And, of course, there were several couples who were coming for no other reason than that this was Hedonism and they intended to have fun.

If there was one thing Hedonism knew how to do, it was showing people a good time. And luckily, the swingers and nudists who frequented the resort had a lot to do with the atmosphere of anything-goes, free-thinking sexuality and spontaneous fun.

Ben liked to think he had a little bit to do with it himself.

"Do you have the info on the Anniversary Package couples?"

She nodded, handed him a couple of sheets of paper.

He glanced over the first and shook his head in wonder. This couple had been together twenty years. They'd been together that long and still knew how to have fun, enjoy each other's company and still be open to new things. He marveled at that kind of love and commitment. And he envied it.

On a sigh he flipped to the next sheet, noted that this couple had been together six years, and then he smiled. "These two are from Hogtown," he said aloud.

"Hogtown, sir?"

He winced but chose not to reprimand her for the formality—again. "Yup. Hogtown. Cabbagetown. Take your pick. They both refer to my old stompin' grounds. The city where I grew up. Toronto."

"Oh. Hogtown." She said it as if it meant something to her.

He laughed again. "You know, Sheila. You're growing on me."

"Okay."

He raked his fingers through his hair and smiled. "So these two couples..." He tapped the sheets. "When are their flights due in?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Conway are due in from Atlanta around five. And Mr. and Mrs. Reid—from Hogtown—" She glanced at her watch. "Their shuttle is due any minute."

"Great. I'll go meet them." The anniversary package had several amenities and special perks, one of which was a personal greeting and tour by the manager himself. Ben had tremendous respect for people who had the strength of will and character to get married and *stay* married for any significant length of time, and it was that respect and sense of wonder that had bred his idea for the Anniversary Package Deal.

He may never be destined to settle down and experience the white-picket-fence dream, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate those who had. He sighed deeply at the reminder of the wedding he'd attended just a few short months ago. His old and dear friend Trent and his beautiful bride Samantha had seen fit to include him in the ceremony. Ben had given Samantha away at the altar and, ironically, it had been one of the most emotionally charged moments of his life. He'd walked away from it feeling both joy and a deep lingering sadness.

Berating himself for dwelling on those thoughts, he hopped off the desk and followed Sheila, who was already stepping lightly on her high-heeled business-blue pumps toward the door.

With a quick maneuver he managed to beat her there and put his hand on the knob as if to open it for her. When he didn't she turned an expectant gaze his way.

"Sheila, have you ever been in the military?"

She beamed. "Why yes, sir. Five years with the US army. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess." He opened the door. "But one of these days we are *going* to get you to loosen up."

"Yes, sir. Loosen up."

He was still chuckling when he stepped into the hallway—and was immediately tackled by a buxom brunette.

"Ben," she cooed, her long French manicure raking down his chest. "I'm so glad I found you."

"Uh...well, so am I, Rita." He gave Sheila a dismissive wave of his hand, and despite her frown of concern—or perhaps disapproval—she marched off down the hall and left him to handle dear Rita on his own.

He grasped Rita's wrists and drew her into the privacy of his office. "Why don't we talk in here?"

"I'd rather head to my room," she said with a pretty pout. "Diane is out by the pool and we could grab her on the way. She didn't get nearly enough of those abs and shoulders either."

He kicked the door closed behind her. "Don't you think we had enough fun last night?"

"Definitely not." And with that she grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and peeled it over her head to reveal a pair of the most perfect, unenhanced breasts he'd ever seen. They were all natural. He'd made sure to check. Thoroughly.

He swallowed thickly as she sauntered toward him.

"This is my office. I don't like to mix business with pleasure."

Her breasts pressed up against his chest, the soft mounds of flesh and hard points of her nipples wreaking havoc with his self-control. "Bullshit." She grabbed his hand and maneuvered it beneath the waistband of her loose cotton shorts. He wasn't surprised to find that she wore nothing underneath.

His cock strained against his fly and demanded to be acknowledged.

"You play with guests all the time," she argued.

"Well...not *all* the time."

She ignored him. "You compliment and you flirt and you make sure *everybody* has a good time." She grinned. "No matter what it takes."

His fingers brushed over silky shaved skin and damp inviting folds.

She arched her hips against him. "Your business *is* pleasure, Ben Jarvis."

"Well, I suppose. If you put it that —"

She grabbed the back of his head and dragged him down for a deep, hungry kiss. She tasted of the champagne cocktails and strawberries that had been served for brunch that morning. And she tasted of sex and desire.

He kissed her back, ravishing her mouth with his tongue and losing himself in the absolute wonder of a beautiful woman.

A man had his limits, after all. There was only so much temptation a man could resist, and Hedon dished out temptation by the truckload. He didn't play with the guests all that often, but when he did he played hard. And he played well. If you were going to do something you should do it well—or not do it at all.

Giving in to her seduction and acknowledging his baser instincts, he cruised over her clit and found the source of the dampness that coated her pussy. He pushed his fingers inside her, retreated, pushed inside again.

She broke the kiss, nipped hard at his lower lip and kissed him again, moaning at the things he was doing to her with his hand.

"You do know how to kiss," she whispered, her hand slipping inside the waistband of his shorts and gripping his cock. It got even harder, strained against her hand. "I'll give you that."

"Oh I think you'll give me a lot more than *that*." And then her shorts hit the floor and he hit his knees, lapping at her pussy like a cat starved for cream.

"Oh God." She stumbled backward until she landed in the visitor's chair that Sheila had occupied just a moment before. He pushed her knees apart and bent to his task, giving it all the attention and finesse it deserved.

"Oh. Christ." She inched forward on the chair, granting him better access even as the wetness began to coat the Scotchgarded material.

He massaged her clit with his tongue, dipped inside her, enjoyed her flavor just as he enjoyed every woman's unique essence.

"Ben, please," she pleaded, reaching down to push him away. "It's happening too fast. I want —"

He grabbed her wrists and held them firm against the arms of the chair, not allowing her any say in the matter and not giving her a moment's respite from the sweet torture his tongue was dishing out.

"Mmm. You know what I want, don't you?"

But he didn't reply. His tongue had other plans.

"I think..." She moaned, squirmed under him. "I think...I'm coming!"

And she did. She let out a strangled scream and came in a gush that filled his mouth and dripped onto the floor. He took it all and grinned up at her as the last of the contractions faded away.

"I wanted you to fuck me," she whispered, her body draped over the chair like a pile of damp rags.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?”

And just as his cock stabbed inside her he remembered that he had intended to be there to greet the Reids when they arrived.

He’d catch them later, he told himself as he palmed those beautiful breasts and sank deeper into that extremely wet and highly fuckable pussy. The Reids weren’t going anywhere.

And heaven knew, neither was he.

Chapter Two

Celeste stabbed the last bite of cheesecake on her plate and placed it lovingly on her tongue. With eyes closed and every sense on alert, she drew the fork from between her lips and chewed slowly, savoring the rich creamy mixture of cheesecake, coconut and fresh pineapple. She groaned softly as the last bit of decadence slipped down her throat.

“Good Christ, woman,” said Tanner from the other side of the table. “Stop that. You’re giving me a hard-on and these shorts are way too tight for that.”

She opened her eyes and grinned. “Sorry, but this piña colada cheesecake is to die for.”

“That’s not the only cheesecake around here that’s to die for.” He tilted his head to the right and Celeste followed his gaze. It was now after nine o’clock and the crowd in the buffet dining room was thinning out. Celeste and Tanner had taken their time checking in, unpacking, reviewing all the resort’s amenities and taking a stroll down the beach before dinner. But in the corner, beyond a group of boisterous young women who had obviously had a fair bit to drink, a man and woman were sipping the last of their wine. They appeared to be in their mid-thirties, were smiling and obviously enjoying each other’s company.

The reason for the cheesecake comment was obvious. The woman, a tall luscious blonde, was extremely fit and attractive and very suited to both Tanner’s and her taste. The man, however, had thinning hair, a burgeoning paunch and an enormous dragon tattoo down the length of his arm.

She returned her gaze to Tanner and lifted an eyebrow. “She’s nice to look at, but that’s as far as it’ll go and you know it.”

He sipped from his coffee, shrugged. “I know. Just enjoying the scenery.” But she knew there was more to it than that.

For the three years they'd been involved with Annali, they'd remained exclusive. A committed triad that was fresh and exciting, and they'd felt no need to look outside the circle of their love. But before that they'd been involved in the Swinger Lifestyle for a couple of years. They'd made some good friends and played with a number of couples. They had learned many lessons, however, one of which being the importance of being *selective*. Celeste's bisexual tendencies aside, it was extremely difficult to find a couple in which the man was equally as attractive to Celeste as the woman was to Tanner. But as difficult as it was they'd also realized that, in a "full swap" situation in which the couples switched partners, that factor was immutable and non-negotiable. It was essential in order to guarantee a fun, positive experience for all concerned.

And this couple obviously did not fit the bill. Not saying they couldn't have a few drinks together, talk and have some fun, but that was as far as it would go.

"We just got here," Tanner was saying. "I'm sure we'll meet lots of great couples."

"Right. Of course." But Celeste had another hope for this trip. If she had anything to say about it they *would* have a sexual adventure or two. Just not the kind Tanner was referring to at the moment. She lifted her wineglass to her lips and considered just exactly how she would go about it. And how she would find the—

"Hi!" The bright, cheery hello startled Celeste and almost made her spill her wine.

She looked up to find the three women from the next table standing beside them. She smiled uncertainly. "Uh. Hi."

The woman who had approached them turned to Tanner. "Hi." This time her tone was much lower, sweet and seductive. "I'm Melanie."

He cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. "Hello...uh...Melanie."

She touched a fingertip to the table as her two girlfriends giggled quietly in the background. She kept her eyes riveted to Tanner. "It's beautiful here, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh."

Feeling rather mischievous, Celeste said nothing. Just sat back in her chair and enjoyed.

"We were wondering if you two are with one of the Swingers' clubs."

Tanner gave Celeste a pleading look.

She said nothing.

He frowned, glanced at the woman and her friends and then concentrated on his wineglass. "Uh. We do that...occasionally. But...no, actually. We're...uh...here on our own."

"Oh really? That's a shame."

"Yeah, well..."

"You're very cute. And sexy," she said again, the alcohol slurring her words just a little and obviously giving her the courage to be so forward.

A hint of pink touched Tanner's cheeks.

"And we like to play." She looked at Celeste and shrugged. "We're into women too. If that's what you like."

Although it just about killed her, Celeste held her tongue.

"Oh," said Tanner, obviously taken aback by their rudeness. "Well, I don't think —"

"Come on," said one of the other women who had rounded Tanner's chair and bent down to speak directly into his ear. "What do you say? We've got a huge room and —"

"We're not interested," said Celeste, his misery now too much to bear.

Tanner was a natural with his clients, his warm manner and casual intimacy putting them instantly at ease and endearing them to him in moments. With friends and family he was gregarious and quick with a joke and a smile. But certain social situations could set him on his heels, put him off balance. And dealing with overt and unwelcome sexual advances was one such situation. Celeste doubted that it was shyness so much as a hesitance to reject someone. Tanner was a very sensitive soul and never liked to cause someone else discomfort—no matter how much they deserved it. Unfortunately,

considering his appearance and inherent sexual appeal, unwelcome sexual advances were an almost daily occurrence, and his difficulty in dealing with that fed his insecurities. She kept hoping that someday, with enough practice, and with her there for support, he'd conquer that particular hurdle. Today, however, did not appear to be that day.

She added emphatically. "So thanks anyway but—"

"I think the hunk should speak for himself!" said Melanie, her speech deteriorating fast. She looked at Tanner. "Don't you, hunk?"

"I don't think—"

"Come on." The other one ran her fingers through his hair and he shifted away. "Don't you think we're pretty?"

"You're very attractive. But—"

"No buts." She moved closer. "Right, girls? If you like us then there's no reason not to."

"Please," said Tanner, obviously fighting with himself. "I'd rather not."

"You know you want to." Melanie touched his hand. "Just—"

"I *said*," Celeste rose from her chair, "we're not *interested*."

Melanie frowned. "You're just playing hard to get."

"This is ridiculous. If you three don't—"

"Hey, Melanie," said a deep, male voice from the other side of the room. "Shouldn't you guys be hitting the beach?"

"The beach?" Melanie blinked in confusion and Celeste watched in wonder as the man who had spoken walked up to their table, put an arm around Melanie and drew her away.

He was tall—easily six-two—with broad shoulders straining at a stylish pin-striped shirt. His legs beneath a pair of denim shorts were muscular and defined, and she could only imagine the rest of the physique that hid beneath his clothes. His eyes were a rich

Caribbean blue, his hair windblown and bleached blond by the sun. His skin had been baked to a rich cinnamon brown. All skin-cancer considerations aside, she didn't think she'd ever seen a more mouthwatering specimen of a man.

"Yes," he was saying. "They're just about to start the luau. And I'm pretty sure there's a limbo contest."

"I dunno..." But Melanie didn't fight him, allowing him to lead her and her two tagalongs toward the door. "Sounds like work."

"Don't be ridiculous. They're giving away some great prizes. And I saw Bob and Eric out there."

"Bob and Eric? I thought they left."

"Nope. Their flight got delayed. One more night."

"Oh!"

And before Celeste could blink twice all three women were out the door, giggling in eager anticipation of the treats that awaited them on the beach.

Once the women were gone, their knight-in-shining-armor returned to the table.

"I'm sorry about that," he said on a sigh. "Those three have been making a nuisance of themselves all week. But they're leaving tomorrow, so I can breathe a little easier."

"Well, thanks all the same. You handled that very smoothly."

He laughed. "Practice. Lots and lots of practice."

She extended a hand. "And to whom do we owe our debt of gratitude?"

"Ben Jarvis, resort manager." He accepted her hand and drew it to his lips for a light kiss. "And no debts here at Hedon. Only fun."

She smiled. "That's good to know. I'm Celeste—"

"Reid. And this is Tanner." He shook Tanner's hand, and Celeste took note of the sparkle that had sprung to her husband's eyes. "I know who you are, and that's why I'm here. I've been looking for you all evening."

"I'm Tanner Reid." He motioned toward Celeste. "But Celeste kept her maiden name. This is Dr. Celeste Ducharme."

"Tanner!" She gave him a scolding look. "You know I hate when you do that."

"Do what?" asked Ben.

"He likes to brag about me. Tell people I'm a physician."

"I think that's a good thing," said Ben. "He's proud of you."

Celeste motioned for him to pull up a chair and join them. "Maybe so, but it isn't always a good idea for people to know I'm a doctor."

Ben grabbed a chair and swung it around, straddling it and folding his arms across the back.

Perhaps it was odd, but Celeste found that gesture to be uniquely male and incredibly sexy. She'd barely met the man and already had to work at keeping her hands in front of her where they belonged.

She glanced at Ben's long-fingered hands and wondered...

"Ah, I see," said Ben. "People like to look for free second opinions?"

"Second opinions. Third opinions. Free wart removal." Ben's laughter made her smile. It was easy and natural and it made his eyes dance. "You get the idea."

"Yes, I do."

"Usually I don't mind. People are human and their health is important." She shrugged. "But it can get tiresome when I'm on vacation."

"I understand."

"So why were you looking for us?" asked Tanner. "I promise we haven't stolen any towels." He winked. "Yet."

Ben chuckled again. "No, no. I wanted to find you to apologize."

"Apologize?"

"Yes. I was supposed to meet you upon your arrival, give you a tour and a personal invitation to dinner tonight in the formal dining room."

"You were?"

"Yes. Didn't you read that in your packet of information?"

Tanner frowned at Celeste. "That was my wife's department. And I bet she didn't read all the fine print."

Celeste squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I did so. I just...skimmed it, that's all. Is it my fault if I have all this important doctor stuff on my mind? I can't do everything, you know."

"Doctor stuff."

"Uh-huh." She nodded grimly. "*Important* doctor stuff."

Tanner rolled his eyes and Ben chuckled.

Ben tapped the table. "Well, whether you knew it or not, that's what you were entitled to. I was very sorry that I got distracted by a guest, and then by a minor medical emergency and wasn't able to meet you, so I'm here to offer you a special gift to make up for it."

"A gift?" asked Celeste.

"Yes. The resort will happily offer you a complimentary day on one of our catamaran tours."

"Oh? And what does that involve?"

"It's a full day of sailing, snorkeling at some of the most scenic coves, fun and frolicking. There's usually about twenty guests on the boat, and all your needs are looked after by the crew. Frankly it's a big party. Lots of fun."

Celeste and Tanner glanced at each other.

"I see. That does sound like fun."

But Ben must have intuitively sensed their hesitation. "Or..."

"Or?" asked Tanner.

Ben seemed to be considering. "*If* you'd prefer something a little more...intimate, I'd be happy to take you out for a day of sailing on my own sailboat. It's a thirty-footer

with a large, luxurious cabin. We could pack champagne and brie, and lots of treats to celebrate your anniversary. I'd be your host, but you could have as much private time as you like."

"Really?" asked Celeste. "You'd do that?"

"Of course." He bowed his head slightly. "I'm here to serve."

She laughed and one look at Tanner told her he felt exactly the same way she did. "Well, honestly that sounds lovely. We want to meet people and enjoy a party as much as the next person, but for the first couple of days..."

"You're more into each other. I understand completely."

"It's a very generous offer," said Tanner. "But we don't want to impose."

"Don't be ridiculous." Ben stood and shoved the chair back in its place. "It's my pleasure. And my privilege."

"Privilege?"

"You two have been married a long time. I admire that. It *means* something."

"Six years isn't *that* long."

He smiled, but the expression struck her as slightly sad. "It's long enough."

Tanner covered Celeste's hand with his and squeezed. "Actually, not nearly."

Ben swallowed, cleared his throat. "Good. It's settled. So I'll see you at the boat launch at nine a.m. sharp?" He clicked his heels, which was a feat considering he was wearing flip-flops.

"Aye, captain," said Celeste. "We'll be there with bells on."

"Forget the bells. Just bring a bikini." He winked. "Or not." And with that he left them, and Celeste thoroughly enjoyed the view as he walked away.

"Wow," she breathed.

"Yeah. Wow."

* * * * *

Tanner glared at his wife across the foam and froth of their suite's balcony hot tub. "You were absolutely evil tonight."

She sipped loudly from her piña colada. She'd never liked the things before, but ever since that cheesecake she'd been downing them like soda pop. She was on her third.

She touched a finger to the center of her chin and batted her eyelashes. "Who? Me? I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

He set down his rum punch and floated over to kneel in front of her. He studied her as his chest brushed up against her knees beneath the water. He skimmed a hand along her thigh, and as always marveled at the perfection of her. Her skin felt like silk, her complexion a gently toasted almond in the soft light of the moon. Her clear blue eyes, gazing at him over the sugared rim of her glass, were filled with love and mischief.

"Oh yes, you do." He lifted the plastic cup from her hands and placed it on the ledge. "You deliberately threw me to the lions."

"Those weren't lions. They were very nice girls. More...kittens, really."

"Uh-huh." He stroked a finger down her cheek. "Saber-toothed kittens, maybe."

"You were doing just fine without me."

"I don't think so." He brushed his lips across hers. "I never do fine without you." He kissed her silky shoulder. "I always need you. You're part of me. The best part."

"Stop it." Her eyes rolled back as his hand cruised over her breast. "You're distracting me and evading the issue."

"Am I?" He thumbed a nipple. "What was the issue again?"

She caught his wrist and drew it to her lips to kiss his pulse point. "Ben. Ben Jarvis is definitely an issue."

The name startled him. It hit the pit of his stomach and twisted. He drew away.

"Tanner, don't be like that."

He shook his head. "It's pointless, Celeste, and you know it."

"You found him attractive. I know you did."

"Yeah. I'm not dead, am I? But that doesn't mean—"

"I know how rare it is for you to meet a man that you're attracted to sexually. And you were instantly at ease with him. It was obvious."

"That means *nothing*!" He was more upset than he wanted to be. Why did he have to feel this way? His life with Celeste was good. Wonderful. Perfect. It should be enough. So why couldn't he *make* it be enough?

"You and he had chemistry," insisted Celeste. "And God knows *I* felt it. When was the last time that happened?"

"Celeste..." He floated over to her again, grasped her hands between his own and willed himself not to care so much. It didn't work. "That's all true and it's wonderful. But what good is it if he doesn't feel the same way?"

"He might. We don't *know* that he doesn't."

Tanner shook his head in frustration. "He's about as alpha as they come, babe. It rolled off him in waves. How many men like that have bi tendencies? And even if they do, how many will admit it?"

"You do."

He grimaced. "I'm not sure I'm all that alpha."

She bit her lower lip and gave him a hooded gaze. "You are with me. You know you are."

He growled low in his throat.

"And you were with Annali." She floated off the seat and kneeled in front of him, her breasts brushing his chest, the water—and the energy—churning between them. "Remember that time at the ski chalet?"

He skimmed a hand over her shoulder, down her arm.

He remembered mountains and snow, and skiing until they were all exhausted. The women had fallen asleep in each other's arms on the couch and he had gotten the idea

to indulge them all in a little fantasy role-play. He'd tied them together while they slept, dressed in black, right down to the mask and gloves, raided the bag of toys they'd brought along and – "Oh yeah. I remember."

"You're just a little shy at first, that's all. But once you get to know someone, look out."

"Maybe." Her previous words rang in his head. With Ben it had been easy. Deceptively so. But dwelling on that just led to hopes – hopes that were destined to be dashed. So he chose not to think about that.

"And we'll have a whole day with him tomorrow. Just the three of us. Maybe –"

He pressed his fingers to her lips. "Maybe you should just be quiet, forget about all that and let me fuck you."

Her eyes went wide with surprise and then softened as the smile spread up from her lips.

"Good girl." And then he scooped her up out of the water and carried her naked and dripping into the bedroom. He tossed her on the bed and she landed with a loud squeal of delight.

She propped herself up on her elbows and grinned as he crawled across the mattress toward her. "Hey," she said with a grin. "You cheated. You put towels on the bed when you came in to use the washroom."

"Guilty as charged." He stopped, straddling her. His hands bracketed her head, his knees holding her hips immobile. "It's all part of a dastardly plot to take over the world by dominating its queen."

She flopped back on the towels and laughed. "I'm not queen of the world."

"You're the queen of mine."

"Oh G –"

His kiss cut off her words, his tongue plunging into her mouth as his wet body molded to hers. Her breasts ground against his chest, his cock rubbing against the

creamy-smooth skin of her belly. Her hands came up to wrap around his back, but because he knew she loved it, he grabbed her wrists and pressed them back into the mattress.

She squirmed, as if trying to free herself, but he held her easily, releasing her mouth and exploring every inch of her body. He nibbled her ear, peppered kisses down her throat. He kissed first one shoulder and then the other, lapping the moisture from her skin before trailing his mouth down to her breasts. His tongue circled her nipple, drew it into his mouth to suckle gently and then tease it with his teeth.

"Tanner, please."

He grinned, his tongue drawing a line down the center of her belly. He took a detour and nibbled on a rib. "Please what?"

She giggled, tried to shift away from him. "I don't know. Just...get on with it!"

"This is it and I'm already getting it on." He laved her bellybutton, cruised down toward her pussy. "I think you have to be more specific."

She groaned as he brushed the top of the neatly kept triangle of hair. "That," she breathed. "That's the 'it'."

He blew softly across her pussy. "This? Is *this* the 'it' you want? You want me to eat you out?"

"Mmm." She lifted her head to glare at him. "You know I hate that term."

He wagged his eyebrows. "Cunnilingus by any other name..."

"Sweet talker."

"Come on, babe." He teased the very top of her slit. "I want you to talk dirty to me."

"You know I don't do dirty very well."

"Come on." He kissed her hipbone, brushed his lips across the triangle of hair to kiss the other. "Try."

"That tickles."

"Does it?" He nibbled at her hipbone, tickled her skin lightly with his tongue.

"Oh for fuck's sake!"

"Good enough." Smiling, he bent to his task. His tongue cruised over her clit, massaging it hard, flicking it fast and torturing it mercilessly. The longer he worked, the more swollen and distended it became. He could almost feel the ache as it grew inside her, and her groans of pleasure only confirmed it. At last he dipped inside to truly taste her. "You're wet," he observed, sliding his hand beneath one of the towels and finding his surprise.

"It's from the hot tub."

"Uh-huh." He inserted the vibrating g-spot stimulator and flipped the switch. "If you say so."

Her head perked up, her eyes wide. "What? What the—" She sucked in a breath. "What's that?"

"A little something I found in the bathroom." The bathroom in the suite was stocked with an assortment of sex toys. Much like a hotel room mini-fridge, the "you open it, you bought it" assortment was wildly overpriced, but when he'd seen this one he hadn't even hesitated. Celeste always enjoyed his probing of her g-spot, but achieving orgasms that way for her were a sweet and precious rarity. He'd decided it was high time he...increased the odds.

The vibrations stimulated the outer edge of her pussy as he pressed the curved end high and firm against her g-spot. "How's that?"

"Oh. I...uh...good." Her head fell back on the mattress.

He turned up the dial a notch. "How about now?"

The pressure built inside her, the sensation exquisite, verging on uncomfortable. The vibrations made the whole thing torturous—almost overwhelming. "I don't know, Tanner. I—" She sucked in a breath. "I think you should stop."

"I don't think so."

He added his own adept movements to the mix, increasing the stimulation of his thumb to her clit.

"It's too much," she whispered, which was a miracle since she could hardly breathe.

"You can take it."

She shook her head emphatically. She felt like her whole body was on fire, the blue-white center of the blaze located low in her belly, just above her pussy. She also felt another familiar sensation. "Oh shit. It's gonna be..." She arched against him, seeking relief and release from the growing sense of pressure and fullness.

"Gonna be what?" He flattened the palm of his hand against her belly to enhance the g-spot experience as he ground his thumb against her clit. That was what it took.

She let out a primal scream, coming in a rush of adrenaline, pleasure and fluid. She felt herself gush, soaking the towels and drenching Tanner's hand with her cum.

"Messy," she said when he had withdrawn the toy and the contractions had finally calmed. "Really, really messy."

He crawled up her body, slipping his cock into her drenched pussy and pressing her firmly against the sweat-damp towels. "That's okay." He kissed her lightly, began a gentle rhythm that stroked her pussy and rekindled arousal. "I like messy."

"Really? Then you won't mind if I leave the dishes in the sink an extra day?"

"Well now," he said with a grin, his rhythm increasing. "Let's not go overboard."

Tanner was a bit of a compulsive when it came to his kitchen. He'd designed and built it himself, with his own specifications in mind. It was his domain and he liked it kept just so. She took great glee from creating a special beef tenderloin dish, her one culinary masterpiece, and leaving the pans to "soak" overnight. It made him crazy.

He kissed one cheek. "We'll discuss it later." And then the other. "After I've fucked you blind."

She arched against him, matching him thrust for thrust. "How will I do surgery if I'm blind?"

He laughed aloud. "So much for talking dirty."

Smiling, she wrapped her arms around his back and rode the wave of pleasure with him. The climb was slower this time, gentler and somehow sweeter. It didn't take long for him to come and, once again, drag her over the precipice along with him.

* * * * *

Ben lounged back in bed and tried to tune out the sounds of drums, laughter and frolicking that drifted to him through his personal cottage's open windows. Tonight was Hawaiian night and the luau was in full swing, complete with bonfire, poi, hula dancers and firewalkers. He should be out there, mingling and schmoozing and making sure everybody was having a good time.

But instead he had holed up in his home—if indeed one could call it that—with a pepperoni pizza, a copy of the movie *Aliens* and a bottle of thirty-year-old scotch. Tonight he was lonely and had decided to wallow in it.

He took a swig of scotch and tried to focus on Sigourney Weaver's battle with the enormous, evil, maternally motivated monster. He'd chosen this movie because it had lots of action, blood, gore and a sexy heroine. He'd chosen it because he'd hoped it would keep him from thinking about things he didn't want to think about. But it wasn't working.

Even a sweaty Sigourney, decked out in skintight muscle shirt and machine guns, couldn't eradicate the image of Tanner and Celeste from his mind. They were smart, sweet and so obviously in love. Not to mention attractive.

Celeste with her long, midnight-black tresses and vivid blue eyes was striking and exotic, and a poignant counterpoint to her husband's dark-eyed, softer-featured boy-next-door quality. Then again, he was no boy. He was quite well filled out for a boy-next-door. He wasn't quite as broad across the shoulders as Ben, but his chest and

upper arms showed definite signs of a healthy interest in the gym. And he had a really great smile.

Ben took another sip of his whiskey and tried to shake off whatever it was that had come over him.

At any rate, he decided they were one of the most attractive couples he'd ever met, and considering the crowd who typically frequented this resort, that was saying something.

But all physical awareness aside, they represented something that he'd spent the last eight years trying to pretend didn't matter. They were happy, in love and committed to each other – for life.

Oh he'd tried to fool himself these last eight years. He'd been living every bachelor's fantasy, mingling with the rich and the sexy, indulging in the occasional discreet encounter and generally enjoying the freedom that came with being a single man in a sea of sexually liberated guests. He'd spent the last eight years being ridiculously free and happy. Or at least telling himself that he was.

The trouble was, ever since he'd come back from his friend's wedding and walking sweet Samantha down the aisle to make her vows and commit her life to Trent, Ben hadn't been himself. He'd been restless, itching for something he couldn't quite name, and all too often found himself here – indulging in booze, old movies and self-pity.

Frankly, he'd also been a little out of control. Encounters like the one with Rita that afternoon had been happening with increasing – and somewhat alarming – frequency lately. Sure he indulged, occasionally but always discreetly, and always with at least some degree of forethought. Doing Rita in his office had been risky and stupid.

And yet he wasn't sure, if presented with the opportunity again, whether he'd be able to stop himself.

He didn't like feeling this way, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. Sure, he used to dream of finding the perfect woman, settling down and having a family. He'd gone to school, gotten his degree and had such grand plans for his future. He used to

dream of having a normal life—of “being somebody”, but those dreams had been dashed eight years ago. He’d finally come to accept the fact that he just wasn’t destined for the traditional “I’m home, honey” husband role, so he just better get used to it.

The trouble was, seeing couples like Tanner and Celeste who obviously had everything he’d ever dreamed of—and failed to achieve—brought it all crashing down around his ears again.

And now he had to spend a whole day with them. Alone.

Part of him relished the thought of getting to know them better. And part of him dreaded it.

He’d enjoy their company, share in the fantasy of their life, but at the end of the day he’d just have to come back to his beautiful seaside cottage, his collection of old movies—and his incredibly empty life.

Chapter Three

Celeste lay back on her lounge chair and soaked in the sun. Her brain was just mildly fuzzy from the champagne cocktails and her tongue was still reminiscing over the succulent strawberries, creamy brie and fresh croissants Ben had provided.

The boat rocked gently on the waves and the breeze caressed her skin.

"Mmm," she said softly. "How do you stand it?"

"Stand what?" asked Ben.

She opened her eyes to watch him top off her glass. He wore nothing but navy blue swim trunks, and his bronzed skin, lightly coated with sweat, glittered in the mid-morning sun. "This is beautiful," she said on a sigh, then turned her attention back to the sparkling water. "How do you manage to stay on land when you have *this* waiting for you?"

He filled Tanner's glass with orange juice, but Tanner shook his head at the offer of more champagne. Champagne and sunshine tended to do nasty things to his equilibrium.

She enjoyed watching the way Tanner's eyes followed Ben as he made his way back to his own lounge.

Ben added more orange juice to his own glass and sat down, straddling the chair, allowing the glass to dangle from his fingers. His eyes sparkled with laughter. "It's a little thing called making a living. Somebody has to actually *pay* for all this."

She allowed her head to loll back on the pillow and waved her hand vaguely in the air. "Details, details. Don't bother me with details."

Tanner laughed. "Somebody's feeling her liquor."

She grinned. "Well, since I'm the only one drinking, I figure I have a responsibility to do it well."

Tanner arched an eyebrow. "Well, that's a new take on 'responsible drinking'."

"Gotta love a creative mind," said Ben. "Not to mention a beautiful one."

She tossed him a sidelong look. "Are you saying my mind is beautiful? Or my body?"

He shook his head, held up his hand. "I plead the fifth."

Tanner leaned forward. "Oh come on. Don't forget who you're talking to here."

Ben shook his head. "You're right. I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget myself and think I'm back in the thick of corporate conservatism." His eyes on Celeste, he spoke to Tanner. "Your wife is one of the hottest women I've ever seen."

"Would you say she's fuckable?"

"Oh yes. Definitely fuckable."

"Good." Tanner nodded approval. "Glad we got that straightened out. I was almost offended there for a second."

The three of them exchanged a glance and then burst out laughing.

"You gotta love the Lifestyle," said Ben with a sigh. "Where else would a man get offended if another man *didn't* want his wife?"

"Well, it's not quite that bad." Tanner shrugged, still grinning. "But it's definitely...freeing." He gazed at Celeste. "To have the freedom to play with others, to share ourselves, and to still have the love and trust, and to *know* that at the end of the day we'll always go home together."

Celeste smiled, enjoying the way Tanner was looking at her. "People don't understand how we can't feel jealousy. But it's all about seeing our partner happy and enjoying life."

"Fascinating," said Ben.

"What? Us?"

Ben nodded. "Anyone who gets married and manages to stay that way is impressive enough. But people who can do that, and still have the kind of trust to explore relationships with other people, are a truly rare breed."

Celeste studied him over the rim of her flute as she sipped. "You've been hurt," she said simply. "You were married and she hurt you."

He studied her, frowned and then turned to Tanner. "She's spooky."

"You have no idea."

"So I'm right?" she asked.

The fact that Ben hadn't smiled and now dropped his gaze to study his glass confirmed it.

"You don't have to tell us," she said softly. "It's none of —"

"No, no. I don't mind." He shrugged. "It's just an old boring story. She married me too young, got restless and found someone else. Simple. Cliché."

"There's nothing cliché about a broken heart," Tanner said. "And nothing simple about mending it."

At that Ben lifted his gaze to Tanner's and held it, and in the moment of soft silence that followed Celeste could sense something pass between them. The hairs on the backs of her arms stood at alert, and her tummy did a little nosedive. The air crackled with an energy she was hard-pressed to define but was eager to feel again.

The loud buzz of an alarm cut through the moment and made Celeste start with surprise.

"What the hell?" Tanner's head jerked back. "Are we under attack?"

"No, no." Ben was already out of his chair and heading for the stairs. "It's nothing. You two relax. I'll be back in a minute." And then he disappeared below deck.

Tanner and Celeste shared a look.

"Did you feel it?" she asked.

He blew out a slow breath and raked his fingers through his hair. "Jesus."

"Go after him."

"What?"

"Go see if he needs help or something. Don't let that feeling slip away."

He stared at her, eyes wide. "Right." He nodded, blinking as if awakening from a dream. "Of course."

She smiled as she watched him drag himself off the chair and head toward the cabin door. But then abruptly he stopped, came back to her chair, bent down and cupped her cheeks in his hands. He bent low and crushed her lips beneath his, the kiss hard, fast and deep. "I love you," he said. And then he was gone.

"Wow." She took a long swallow from her cocktail and laid her head back on the pillow. If the energy she'd felt just a moment before was any indication of what was possible between those two...

She took another long sip, closed her eyes and smiled. "Wow."

* * * * *

Ben turned off the loud buzzing timer and yanked open the door to the small oven. He grabbed the baking sheet and immediately yelped, "Fuck!"

He'd forgotten to put on a hot mitt.

His fingers screaming in pain, he dropped the pan and rushed to the sink. He turned on the tap and stuck his hand under the stream. "Shit!" he yelled again a moment later when the water turned hot. He'd chosen the wrong goddamn faucet.

He reached for the tap to change the setting but found another hand already there. "Here," said Tanner. "Let me."

He turned on the cold water, grasped Ben's hand by the wrist and guided his tortured fingers under the stream of cool, soothing water.

Ben blew out a long, slow breath of relief and watched with interest as Tanner put the plug in the sink and allowed it to fill. "It's better to immerse it in water rather than just let the water run over it."

Because it felt so good, Ben allowed him to cradle his hand and immerse it in the couple of inches of water that had already accumulated.

Ben gradually became aware of a number of things. The strength in Tanner's hands surprised him, because although he wasn't a huge man, his hands were large and sinewy. The feeling of Tanner's bare chest rubbing against Ben's upper arm and shoulder. And he became aware of how very tiny the sailboat's cabin was. The ceiling was low, and the small room filled with furniture including a queen-size bed, table and appliances. The space had always seemed ample before, but now, with it occupied by two six-foot-tall men, it seemed to have shrunk to the size of a shoebox.

That had to be why Ben couldn't seem to breathe.

"There. That should do it," said Tanner. "Does it feel okay?"

Ben met his gaze, blinked—and ripped his hand out of Tanner's grasp. He stumbled backward, almost tripping over a chair, and stepping smack dab in the middle of a hot pastry that had been sent skittering when he dropped the tray. "Yeah, yeah," he said, struggling to get himself together and shed the unfamiliar feeling of being out of his element. "I'm fine. Thanks but—" He dropped onto the bed and peeled the pastry from his heel. "I'm fine."

Tanner just stood there, staring at him, his gaze at once concerned and suspicious. "You don't seem fine. You seem...upset."

"Well, I'm not," he snapped. "I just have to clean up this shit, damn it." He gazed at the carnage strewn about on the floor. The resort chef had prepared a special batch of petit pastries for him to bake fresh for his guests. And now it was so much fish bait.

"Here." Tanner bent down and reached for a Danish. "I'll—"

"No." Ben erupted from the bed and snatched the Danish out of his hand. "I'll do it. You go back up with your wife."

Tanner frowned. "I don't mind."

Ben stood, crushing the pastry in his fist and only barely aware of the fruit filling squeezing out between his fingers. "Well, I do."

Tanner stood, met his gaze, his face mere inches from Ben's. "I'd like to help."

What the hell was it about Tanner's rich brown eyes and softly authoritative presence that made Ben's stomach clench and his palms sweat? "I *said* I don't need your fucking help!"

Tanner just stared at him. "I see." And then he turned and left.

Ben stood there, breathing and watching the other man stride purposefully up the steps and out of the room. "Shit!" he said – and threw the Danish against the wall.

* * * * *

Celeste stood at the rail. Her hips supported by the sturdy steel barrier, she leaned far out across the water, watching as the hull slipped effortlessly through the crystalline waves. The water seemed so close. She thought she could almost –

"One nudge and I'm a rich man." But Tanner's arms had locked around her waist, holding her fast.

"A half million dollars hardly qualifies as 'rich' anymore," she said, referring to the life insurance policies they'd taken out shortly after Annali's death. She straightened and turned her head slightly in order to see him better. The wind had left his hair a tattered mess, and his cheeks glowed from exposure to sun and wind. And...did she see a glint of humor in those milk-chocolate eyes?

"Okay..." He rested his chin on her shoulder, gazed out over the water. "I guess I'll have to be satisfied with comfortable and ridiculously happy."

She frowned, studied him. Waited. "So...I guess it didn't go very well."

"I guess not. He swore at me and told me to get out." His eyebrow arched. "In no uncertain terms."

"Oh." She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of frustration. "I'm sorry I sent you after him."

But when she opened her eyes she was surprised to find him grinning at her. "Don't be. It's all good."

"Huh?"

But before he could clarify, they were both startled by Ben's presence. He tapped them both on the shoulder and placed his finger to his lips, to indicate that they were to be quiet.

"What is it?" mouthed Celeste, noting the odd look of excitement that glittered in Ben's eyes.

He just shook his head and motioned them to follow him toward the back of the boat.

They had never strayed too far from shore, always keeping the pristine, white-sand beach of the Jamaica shoreline in sight. The last hour or so, Ben had taken down the sail to allow them to drift aimlessly, and now Celeste realized they had drifted quite a bit closer to shore than she realized. A spit of land, or perhaps a sand bar, jutted out from the mainland, and at the end of that, about thirty feet off the tip, someone had constructed a large raft.

"The water's very deep here," whispered Ben as they gathered at the rail. "They normally use that raft as a diving platform."

Celeste nodded understanding, even as she acknowledged that diving was the last thing on the mind of the couple who currently occupied the raft. From their position about eighty feet away, they could make out the figures clearly.

The pair was young, perhaps mid-twenties, athletically built and baked a deep, golden brown by the sun. She had long, jet-black hair that hung like a curtain and obscured both her face and that of her lover. She lay on top of him, her bare breasts pressed to his chest as they shared what Celeste had to assume was a long, passionate kiss. The man's arms were wrapped around her waist, and as they watched his hands slipped lower, easing beneath the scant bikini bottom that was the only shred of material separating them.

Tanner's arm wrapped around her waist, and she felt Ben move in close too. His arm brushed hers and she shifted so that their hips touched. "We're intruding," she whispered.

But Ben shook his head, said under his breath, "They know we're here." He winked. "I think maybe they like it."

Celeste bit her lower lip and watched as the bikini bottom was pushed down over the woman's hips.

"Guess she doesn't wear that thing very often," said Tanner, his whisper rustling the hair around her ear.

"Mmm," she agreed. The woman showed no evidence of tan lines. Perhaps a nudist. She smiled when the woman sat up, cast a furtive glance their way and blatantly offered a breast to her lover. Definitely an exhibitionist.

The man, his hair and skin as dark as hers, laved her nipple once before devouring her breast greedily. Celeste could see his hand squeeze her ass briefly before skimming around her hips and easing between them.

The woman rose up on her knees slightly, her head falling backward in pleasure and allowing that waterfall of hair to cascade down her back.

Even from this distance the pleasure on her face was evident, and Celeste's awareness of the two men who sandwiched her became charged with sexual energy. The urge to touch Ben became overwhelming and she gave in to it, skimming her fingertips over his knuckles and up his arm before sneaking around his waist.

She felt his muscles tense, but he didn't protest. Didn't move away.

The woman on the raft raised her hips and impaled herself, ever so slowly, on her lover's waiting cock. As they watched, Ben's hand skimmed up Celeste's back, slid beneath her hair and rested gently at the nape of her neck.

Celeste's pussy was swollen, her bathing suit already wet from excitement, and she'd barely been touched.

The woman on the raft groaned as the man grasped her hips to guide her. The rhythm of their movements increased gradually, the woman's moans of pleasure growing louder with every thrust.

Celeste was completely lost in their lust when Tanner's hand brushed over her breast. He teased her briefly before slipping beneath the skimpy bit of material to cup her. He massaged her breast and the softest of moans escaped her lips. Her fingers, still fitted snugly at Ben's waist, curled in pleasure and scratched lightly over his skin.

Her breathing rapid and shallow, she turned her gaze his way. She found him looking at her, desire smoldering in his eyes. She parted her lips in invitation, but he hesitated. She saw him glance at Tanner and sensed Tanner's brief nod of permission a mere moment before Ben cupped the back of her head sealed his mouth to hers.

His kiss was hungry and commanding, his body firm and broad. She turned so her body was flush against him, was pleased when he wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her in tight. She gave herself over to his control, reveled in the sensation of her breasts being crushed against that broad expanse of muscle and sinew. Thrilled to the comforting warmth and strength of Tanner's body pressing against her back.

Tanner hooked his fingers in the hem of her bikini bottom and pushed it down, allowing his cock to ride the crease of her ass. And then he tugged on the tie at her neck and her top fell away.

With a soft growl of appreciation Ben palmed her breast. He broke the kiss to nibble along her jaw, nip at her ear and then pepper kisses along her collarbone. Tanner gripped her waist and her head fell back against his shoulder as he nuzzled her neck and pressed his cool lips to her burning skin.

Her body went limp, supported completely by the two rock-hard walls of muscle that enveloped her. When Ben's mouth finally found her breast she lifted her head to watch him, to watch his lips wrap around her flesh, his teeth scrape across her nipple. She sank her fingers into his mop of blond hair, and as his mouth continued to do sinful things to her body, she arched her neck and lifted her face to Tanner.

The kiss was brief but strong. Possessive but supportive.

"I love you," he murmured when his mouth left hers.

She wanted to respond but at that moment Ben's hand found her pussy.

"Oh Christ," she groaned at the touch of his fingers on her clit. He massaged and tweaked and then slipped inside. Only to retreat and repeat the process again.

Tanner continued to support her weight, one hand wrapped around her waist, even as the other fondled her breast. His lips brushed the skin of her neck and his tongue flicked out to taste her.

Ben's tortures continued and her eyes fluttered open. It was only a moment, but long enough to take note that the couple on the raft seemed to have finished with each other. They were snuggled together on a blanket, knowing smiles on their lips and their eyes trained very pointedly on the sailboat.

The knowledge that they were being watched merely added to Celeste's excitement.

She arched her hips, pressing her pussy more firmly against Ben's hand. "Oh for God's sake. Get on with it."

To her surprise, Ben grabbed her wrist and guided her hand to his cock. She wrapped her hand around it, found it as big or bigger than Tanner's and smiled in satisfaction. She opened her eyes to see that Ben had straightened to his full height and was gazing down at her.

The smoldering desire had turned to white-hot lust. "You want that?" he asked as her hand massaged him, her finger stroked the sensitive tip. The bead of cum felt slick against her skin. "You want that to fuck your pussy? You want me to fuck you right here?"

Tanner answered for her. His voice a low, rumbling growl, he said, "Do it. Fuck her." He kissed her neck. "Fuck that sweet cunt." Tanner rarely used that word. It only found its way past his lips when he was at the height of arousal and completely lost in

lovemaking. Hearing it, and knowing what it meant, sent a fresh gush of fluid to Celeste's pussy.

She saw Ben's gaze shift to meet Tanner's and hold it. In that instant she felt that same electricity sizzle in the air—just a moment before Ben grasped her hips, lifted her and drove his cock into her.

"Oh God," she said, her voice so loud it startled her. "I—" He thrust again, deep and hard, and if not for Tanner's support against her back, and his hand that had shifted to cup her ass, she might have fallen.

Apparently sensing something, Tanner whispered in her ear, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she ground out, wrapping her legs around Ben's hips. "More."

Ben accommodated, fucking her hard and fast. Driving himself into her, and using his thumb to massage her clit. She forced open her eyes and saw that the young couple had sat up, watching them even more intently as the action intensified.

"Fuck, she's sweet," said Ben, his voice strained and his body glowing with sweat.

"Shut up and do your job," said Tanner, the smile evident in his voice. "If you can't finish her, I guess I'll have to."

"Like hell."

"Well then?"

Ben growled something unintelligible. His attentions intensified, the pressure on her clit driving her mad as the thrusts of that wonderfully thick cock assaulted her pussy. She reached out, desperate to latch onto something, and found Ben's shoulders. She gripped hard, met him thrust for thrust and felt the pressure begin to build low in her belly, spreading down her legs.

"Oh," she panted. "Oh...*fuck!*"

The orgasm seized her and wouldn't let go because Ben refused to slow down. He ground his thumb against her clit and continued to batter her with his cock, milking contractions from her long past what she'd thought possible.

He came with a cry of combined anguish and pleasure, and at last she went limp – breathing hard and cradled protectively in her husband’s arms.

She closed her eyes and drifted on afterglow, the cheers and applause from the couple on the raft echoing in her pleasure-drenched brain.

Chapter Four

"Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

Celeste turned around to find Ben standing behind her. She regarded him critically. "The water here is so warm. Do you really need that?" she asked, referring to his wet suit. The bright blue and yellow neoprene suit hugged his torso like a glove, but the cut-off legs and short-sleeved design left his arms and legs bare. With the zipper still half undone, his chest exposed, and knowing he wore nothing underneath, she found the look to be surprisingly erotic.

At the far end of the boat they could hear Tanner grunting and groaning as he squeezed himself into his own suit.

"We have to go down fairly deep to get under the rock wall. The water down there is cool. And inside the grotto as well. Besides, even at eighty degrees, the water is cooler than body temperature. I don't like taking chances."

She studied him, wondering if he considered what had happened two hours ago "taking a chance".

"You didn't answer me," he said, joining her at the rail.

They both turned to look out across the ocean. How something could be so blue, so crisp and yet so warm and inviting never ceased to amaze her. A few hundred feet away a rocky cliff jutted out of the water, soaring almost straight up to more than fifty feet above the waterline. Sandy beaches were beautiful and peaceful, but this kind of stark, ruthless landscape had a startling beauty all its own.

"I've only gone diving a couple of times. My ears and the pressure change don't get along. And especially since you have to go deep to get into the grotto..." She shrugged. "Besides, I'll enjoy some time alone on the boat. Basking in the sun and listening to the waves lap against the hull is good for the soul."

"We wouldn't have to go into the grotto. I know a spot a few miles from here that's a great place to feed fish and explore coral. Or we could just go along the shore and —"

She pressed a finger to his lips, shook her head. "No. Tanner is really looking forward to this. I don't want to spoil his fun." She set her hand back on the rail. "And I really will enjoy some time alone. I don't get enough solitude." She closed her eyes and savored the heat of the sun on her face.

"That's important to you, isn't it?" asked Ben after a moment.

She opened one eye. "What? Solitude?"

"No. Tanner's happiness."

She frowned. "Of course. It's my top priority. Right after my own, of course."

He seemed to puzzle over that. "That comment could be construed as selfish."

"No. It's a simple fact of life. How can I worry about someone else's happiness if I haven't looked after my own? It's not like I always have to have what I want, or that I have to be gratified first. But in general...if I'm a happy, fulfilled person, then I'm that much better equipped to give to and support my partner. The fact that he's happy and fulfilled makes the whole process..." She frowned. "A true joy, I suppose. Definitely easier."

She heard Ben blow out a long, slow breath. "I've never met anyone like you two."

She laughed. "Oh I think you have. You just didn't realize it because you didn't spend as much time talking to them."

"I don't know." He glanced back at Tanner who had just zipped up his suit. A big, goofy grin plastered to his face, he looked at them and gave Ben the thumbs up. "You're pretty special."

"We feel the same way about you, Ben."

His gaze continued to rest on Tanner, and she wondered if he realized it.

She continued, "We may not have known you that long, but...you just get a feel for people. You know?"

At last he looked at her, mischief dancing in his eyes. "You got a feel for me this morning. That's for sure."

She brushed her hand over his cock that, strangely enough, had grown erect. The wet suit left nothing to the imagination. "And it was a good feeling." She squeezed him. "Very good."

He growled, took a step back. "You're evil."

"So they tell me."

Tanner waved and called out, "Will you stop drooling over my wife and get over here? If I don't get in the water soon this suit is going to rupture something vital."

Celeste grimaced. "You better go. We wouldn't want *that!*"

"We certainly wouldn't." Laughing, Ben turned and strode across the deck to join his diving partner.

Tanner had been certified two years ago, but opportunities for diving in metropolitan Toronto were few and far between. And the grotto that Ben had described had Tanner's eyes twinkling with anticipation. The fact that it was a plum opportunity for the two of them to be alone hadn't escaped Celeste either.

What was it Tanner had said earlier? They'd been interrupted and he hadn't had an opportunity to clarify his statement. He'd said that Ben had yelled at him to get out of the kitchen, but then he'd added that he couldn't have been happier about it. She couldn't imagine how that could be viewed as a positive development, but she trusted Tanner's judgment. He was rarely wrong about people. The thing was, too often, people were wrong about themselves.

As she watched them help each other don the rest of their equipment, she folded her arms, enjoyed the view of two well-muscled physiques—and hoped. She hoped that in this case *neither* man was wrong about the suave, sexy, sensitive Ben Jarvis.

* * * * *

Ben slid effortlessly through the warm, tropical waters. Each kick of his fins sent him farther into the wondrous, blue depths. Every swipe of his arms showed him a new perspective, revealed a new mystery.

There. He stopped, trod water and motioned for Tanner to join him. Tanner swam up beside him and studied the crevice Ben indicated. Despite the regulator in Tanner's mouth, Ben could see the smile when he caught sight of the vividly colored fish that was trying in vain to hide itself behind a bit of coral. Bands of purple and yellow gilded the small basslet, giving it an ethereal quality befitting its name.

Ben wished there was some way for him to speak, to tell Tanner the names of the fish and other marine life they would be seeing during their journey.

He was startled to feel Tanner tap his arm and then slowly make an intricate set of motions with his hands. Ben blinked in wonder. Not sure he had seen right, he replicated the motions himself.

Tanner's smile widened. "*You understand ASL,*" he signed again, using the abbreviation for American Sign Language.

Ben nodded, astonished. "*Yes.*"

Tanner pointed to the fish again and signed, "*Fairy basslet.*"

Ben was just as impressed with Tanner's knowledge of marine life as he was with the fact that Tanner knew ASL. Ben had learned it as a teenager in order to cope with his father's rapidly progressing hearing loss. He was a bit rusty on signing himself but was easily able to understand almost anything that was signed to him.

"*Impressive,*" signed Ben.

Tanner grinned and motioned that they should continue.

Their progress along the rock wall was steady but unhurried. They saw several clown fish, sponges in a variety of vibrant colors from lime green to baby blue. They stopped briefly to examine each one, and were thrilled to see a large lion fish drift by.

The light dimmed steadily as their depth increased, but it wasn't so dark that they couldn't make out the enormous jellyfish that barred the entrance to the grotto.

They watched in awe as it shimmered and danced through the water, all elegance and ethereal grace. It couldn't stay immobile for long, and eventually the currents shifted it out of their way, but they couldn't seem to take their eyes off it.

"It reminds me of Celeste," signed Ben, the thought a stray one that found its way to his fingers.

He turned to find Tanner gazing at him steadily. The other man nodded slowly and signed, *"Yes. Elegant and beautiful. She looks fragile but isn't. And watch out for her sting. It can kill lesser men."*

Ben truly regretted the regulator in his mouth because he wanted to laugh out loud. The comparison was so poetic and yet so apt. And exactly what he'd been thinking.

"You ready?" he asked, reaching for his lamp.

Tanner nodded, turned on his own light, and with one kick the two men glided beneath the jagged barrier of rock and coral. They had to follow a dark tunnel for several feet before it opened up into a larger space. They took their time but found there was much less marine life here to distract them. Soon the black began to gray, and they had the definite sensation of rising. They maneuvered around a rocky ledge, rounded a corner and were suddenly faced with bright sunlight.

They could see the surface about thirty feet up. Tanner headed for it, but Ben stopped him. *"Wait. Something to see down here first."* And he pointed to a coral-encrusted form that sat on a rock shelf on the far side of the cavern.

Tanner followed Ben, studying the object with interest. Only when he got to within a few feet did he realize what he was looking at. *"A treasure chest?"* he said, incredulous. It sat on its side, the lid hanging on by one hinge and leaving the chest open to the elements. There was nothing inside, and yet there was something about it...

Ben nodded. *"Emptied out long ago. But apparently someone tried to hide something of value in here."*

"Pirates," signed Tanner, intrigued with the fantasy.

"That's the legend."

Ben reached out his hand as if to point at something, when something in the background caught Tanner's eye. A dark shape slid through the water.

Tanner frowned, not paying attention to what Ben was signing at that moment. He squinted, trying to make it out. There was something about it. Something...foreboding.

Ben gave him a quizzical look and started to say something, but Tanner didn't have time to listen.

The shape took form, coming for them so fast that Tanner barely had time to draw the knife from his belt.

Hammerhead!

Bracing his feet against the rock, he shoved the startled Ben out of the way and dodged to the side even as he thrust up the knife and sliced it along the length of the shark's side.

Blood poured out of the animal, clouding the water and making it difficult to see.

His heart pounding, Tanner barely noticed Ben's frantic motions for him to follow. The infuriated beast was coming around for another pass. There was no way Tanner could make it to the surface in time, but he had to try. Swimming as fast as he could, his knife held out for protection, he tried to head for safety.

The shark seemed to be slowing down. Perhaps the injury was having an effect. But even so, the animal looked no less fearsome as its jaws came toward Tanner. He raised the knife, intending to slam it down into the beast's head, when Ben appeared. Seemingly out of nowhere he descended and rammed his knife into a spot behind the animal's left eye. He let go of the knife, grabbed Tanner's wrist and dragged him upward.

They could sense the shark thrashing in the water as it tried to dislodge the weapon from its body. But that knife had been sunk to the hilt. Nothing short of human intervention could save it. And these two humans had other lives on their mind.

They burst from the water and swam desperately toward the sandy shelf that led to safety. Crawling to safety, they spat out their regulators, tore off their masks and tanks and flopped back on the sand. They sucked in breath after breath of cool, damp air as they stared up into the cathedral-like space of the grotto.

It wasn't as bright as Tanner had first thought. It had merely been an illusion, the light being a stark contrast to the absolute blackness of the tunnel that had led them there. But weak sunlight did find its way here, filtered down through a rock-chimney that extended about thirty feet to the surface. The chimney was directly above where they lay, and Tanner could see a small circle of blue sky high above.

"Wow," said Ben. "I've lived down here eight years, and that's the first time I've seen a hammerhead."

"There aren't usually sharks around here?"

"Nurse sharks. Not hammerheads. Not on this side of the island anyway. There are occasional sightings on the other side. But even there it's rare."

"This one was injured." Tanner had noticed that one eye was mangled. "And it was small. Probably a young one."

"It was big enough."

Tanner nodded agreement, wondered if his pulse would ever slow down.

Suddenly Ben sat up, pulled up his knees and rested his arms on them. "Thanks, by the way."

Tanner sat up too. "For what?"

Ben turned to look at him, the intensity in those Caribbean blue eyes making Tanner's gut ache. "I think you may have just saved my life."

Tanner laughed but it did nothing to lessen the tension that was creeping over every inch of his skin. "No thanks necessary. I think we saved each other."

Ben nodded, clenched his fists and swallowed, the tension in his jaw evident. He turned away. No. He *dragged* his gaze away.

Tanner watched as he took a deep breath, unclenched his fists and then abruptly vaulted from the sand that covered the rocky shelf. He took a few steps away from Tanner, unzipped his wet suit and raked his fingers through his wet hair. "Well, there's lots to see here. We may as well take our time and look around to make sure that shark is either gone or dead."

Tanner pushed himself slowly to a standing position. With unhurried precision he undid his weight and tool belts and dropped them to the sand. Then, his eyes trained deliberately on Ben, he unzipped his wet suit to just above his navel.

He took several steps toward Ben, stopping barely a foot away. He'd decided the moment was now. Now or never. And he'd never been a procrastinator anyway.

"There's only one thing I want to see in here, Ben."

Ben stared at him, his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, the effort it took obvious. He didn't back away. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

In answer Tanner grabbed Ben, cupped his jaw firmly in both hands and dragged him in for a hungry kiss.

Christ, he tasted good. So different from Celeste, the contrast an aphrodisiac he hadn't expected. He drove his tongue into Ben's mouth, devouring him with a ferocity that surprised him. Damn it, he'd waited too long.

Ben didn't fight him. Whether out of surprise or outright shock, he allowed the kiss. Accepted Tanner's tongue, and to Tanner's infinite pleasure, even responded. Ben's tongue warred with his, the pressure from his lips increased. There was hunger there too. A demanding need that fed Tanner's own like gasoline on flame.

And just when Tanner released a soft growl of pleasure and frustrated desire – Ben tore his mouth away.

He placed his hands on Ben's chest and shoved, the force enough to send both men staggering and scrambling to remain on their feet.

"What the *fuck* was that?" shouted Ben. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Tanner sucked in a deep breath, made an effort to rein himself in. "I thought that was obvious enough." His voice was low, and not as strong as he would have liked. He could barely breathe. How could he be expected to talk?

"Yeah," whispered Ben, taking another step back and raking his fingers through his hair again. "It sure as hell was."

"You wanted it," said Tanner simply.

"What? What in hell would make you think that?"

Tanner just arched his eyebrows. He said nothing.

Ben's chest heaved. He shook his head emphatically. "No. You're wrong. You read me all wrong, buddy. I'm not gay."

"Neither am I."

"You know what the *fuck* I mean!"

Tanner moved forward, bridging the distance between them. There was something endearing – and intensely arousing – about seeing a man like Ben feeling so off balance. So out of control and unsure. Tanner had come to terms with his sexuality years ago, and that gave him the advantage here. As someone who struggled constantly with shyness, it was a good feeling. He reveled in it.

"Surely you're not a homophobe, Ben."

"No, no, of course not." He took a half step back, but only a half. There was a magnetism between them that was as real and tangible as if there had been a rope linking them together. "I've got nothing against them. To each their own, I always say."

"Okay then. You're just terrified of seeing that in yourself. It scares the hell out of you."

Ben looked at him sharply. "That's ridiculous."

Tanner closed the half-step gap. "You're afraid it makes you less of a man. You think it makes you weak or effeminate. And you're afraid of ridicule."

"Okay, okay. I know none of that's true. But...but maybe the ridicule would worry me. A little. *If* I actually did see it in myself. But I don't."

Tanner laughed. "You want me so bad you can taste it."

"You're delusional."

"You enjoyed that kiss, didn't you? You stopped because you enjoyed it too much." Tanner pressed his hand to Ben's bare chest, felt the rapid beat of his heart, the fine sheen of sweat. And the enticing ripple of muscle.

Ben dropped his gaze to Tanner's hand. He didn't move away, did nothing to evade the touch. When he spoke his voice was a raspy whisper. "You're crazy."

Tanner slid his hand farther under the neoprene, grazing over Ben's nipple before slipping farther to cup his rib cage.

"Jesus," rasped Ben. "Stop it."

"No." Tanner cupped the back of his head and kissed him again.

This time Ben returned it immediately, bracketing Tanner's head in his hands and holding him firm as he ravaged Tanner's tongue with his own. The suddenness and fierceness of his desire mirrored Tanner's, and suddenly it was a battle to see who could kiss harder. Who could get the upper hand. Who could take control.

Their mouths still locked together, Tanner grappled desperately, looking for the zipper fob for Ben's suit. When he found it he dragged it down as far as it would go, brushing his hand over the impressive bulge of Ben's erection before lifting his hand to push the material from Ben's shoulder.

Ben helped him, breaking the kiss only long enough to peel the neoprene from his arms. The suit still hanging from his waist, he grabbed Tanner by the shoulders and dragged him close for another fierce kiss.

With Ben now fumbling with Tanner's zipper, Tanner's hand managed to squeeze between them and slip beneath the suit. His hand found Ben's cock and wrapped around it.

"Holy Jesus," murmured Ben, the movements of his hands and of his entire body now stilled.

With his free hand Tanner grabbed Ben's suit and peeled it down, revealing Ben's thick cock and drum-tight ass. He ran his hand up and down the length of Ben's erection, lightly at first and then with more vigor.

Ben's eyelids drooped and his head fell back. "Fuck."

"Not yet," whispered Tanner under his breath. "That'll come."

As quickly as he could, Tanner shed the upper part of his own suit and then dropped to his knees in front of Ben. He took him deep in his mouth immediately, running his lips and tongue up and down that delicious length. Licking the bead of cum from the tip, milking him for more.

He let out a cry of frustration when the delight was ripped away from him.

He looked up to see that Ben had stumbled backward and was fumbling with his suit that still clung to his thighs, trying with uncooperative fingers to pull it back up and put it on.

"What the hell are you doing?" cried Tanner.

"I...I shouldn't do this."

Tanner leapt to his feet and crossed to Ben, grabbing his hands to hold him still. "Says who? Who says you shouldn't?"

Ben just shook his head, the torture on his face causing Tanner his own pain. "I...I don't know."

"It's just us here, Ben. Just you and me. Who are you trying to pretend for?"

Ben's chest heaved.

"I want you and you want me. It's simple. And it's our business."

When Ben said nothing, Tanner took a chance. He moved in closer, and this time his kiss was tentative. Tender.

His lips cruised over Ben's and his tongue eased past his defenses. Ben's groan of pleasure encouraged him and the kiss intensified. When Tanner's hand found his cock and Ben thrust his hips forward in search of more—he knew there was no going back.

Once again Tanner dropped to his knees and took Ben's cock in his mouth.

"Sweet Jesus," groaned Ben, stepping backward in search of the support of a large rock.

Tanner followed him, withdrawing his mouth but taking that opportunity to pull Ben's suit down the rest of the way. Ben stepped out of it, leaving him nude, wet—and gorgeous.

When Tanner bent down to taste him again, Ben stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Your suit."

Tanner arched his eyebrows in question.

Ben's eyes were hungry. "Off."

Tanner allowed Ben to help him strip, peeling the suit from his body, running his hands over Tanner's skin, and making soft murmurs of appreciation. A little boy unwrapping his first Christmas present.

Tanner almost lost his balance when Ben grabbed his ass and took his cock into his own mouth. "Hey," he protested. "I thought—" And then he abruptly stopped thinking.

Ben directed him, urging him to lean back against the rock that Ben had used barely a minute before. Tanner was glad of the support.

Ben's mouth was eager, hungry and surprisingly skilled. And watching him—watching those lips move up and down his cock, that tongue dart out to tease the tip, the clear blue eyes look up at him with undisguised lust...

It was enough to drive a man mad.

Tanner's fingers curled, clawing at the rock as if that could give him purchase or control. It gave him neither. He shifted his hands, grasping Ben's shoulders and latching on hard. The pressure was returned, with Ben shifting his hands up to Tanner's hips, and sinking in his fingertips hard enough to border on painful.

Tanner loved it.

Ben's tongue circled the tip, tickled the slit and then took his cock deeply into his throat. The pressure from his lips was strong. When he sucked, he sucked hard. "Ben," he ground out, using his hands to try to slow Ben down. "I...I can't stop it."

"Good," murmured Ben as best he could. "Come for me."

Tanner shook his head, fighting his own responses, trying in vain to prolong it. But when Ben released his hips to fondle his balls and add pressure to his cock, it was too much. Tanner came with a primal cry of release, pumping himself into Ben's mouth and hanging onto his shoulders, desperate for something he couldn't quite name.

Spent and exhausted, he released Ben's shoulders and wilted against the rock. Ben looked up at him, a sly smile on his lips as he wiped cum from his chin.

"You've done that before," accused Tanner.

"Never."

"Damn."

Their eyes remained locked, and it took mere seconds for Tanner to regain his equilibrium. He narrowed his eyes, calculated his chances, and when Ben uttered a puzzled, "What?" Tanner tackled him.

He bowled him over, knocking him to the sand-covered section of rock, holding him down with his weight. "Fuck, you're amazing," he said, running his hands over

Ben's shoulders, chest, abs. He bent low and lavished a long, hungry kiss on his lips. When he broke away, his hand found Ben's cock.

"So are you," whispered Ben as Tanner wrapped his fingers around it and began to pump gently. Tease. Torment.

"Am I?"

Ben nodded.

"So you want me then? Is that what you're saying?"

Want you? thought Ben. *Are you fucking kidding?* He studied the other man, really looked at him. Tried to figure out what it was. What was different about Tanner. And he was right of course. There had been something...something different right from the beginning.

"You gonna admit it?" he goaded. "Say it out loud?"

"Hell yeah!" He erupted from the sand, grabbed Tanner by the shoulders, turned him around and pressed him, chest down into the sand. "Yes, I want you," he growled, running his hands over Tanner's shoulders, across his back and down over his ass. "I admit it," he said, straddling the other man, his cock nudging the crease of Tanner's ass. Damn it felt good. So good his eyes wanted to roll back in his head. He rode the crease, adding pressure with his hand. "I want you now. Have since the moment I saw you." He bent over, dragged his tongue across Tanner's tanned shoulder. "Happy now?"

"No," whispered Tanner. "If you want me, then why not take me?"

Ben's cock jerked to attention at the implication. His pulse quickening, he skimmed his hand over Tanner's ass, eased into the crease and teased the edges of his anus. "We don't have any lube."

"I want you."

"Fuck." He eased a finger inside, was pleased when Tanner lifted his hips, pressing back against Ben's hand, urging him to go further. He was tempted. Very tempted. But he didn't want to cause pain. He wanted it to be good. For both of them.

"I want you, Ben." Suddenly Tanner pulled away, rolled over and sat up to face Ben. His lips only inches from Ben's, he whispered, "I want you so bad. I want you to fuck me."

Ben grabbed the back of Tanner's head and crushed his mouth beneath his own. He drove his tongue into him, thrilled to the feeling of Ben's hands cupping his jaw to return the kiss with just as much ferocity. They seemed to be fighting for something, the kiss so intense as to verge on violent.

And then Ben tore himself away. "No."

"No," echoed Tanner.

Ben kissed him more gently. "Not here. Not like this. I want you." He cupped Tanner's balls, began massaging his cock. "Believe me. But I want it to be..."

"Perfect?"

"Yes." And then he bent to take Tanner's cock in his mouth.

* * * * *

Tanner stared up at the sky, watched as a cloud skidded past the chimney opening high above. The walls were covered in colored sponges that he'd barely noticed until just a few minutes ago. The vibrant blues and reds gave him the odd feeling of surrealism. Like he was inhabiting a dream. But he reassured himself that it wasn't. It was all very real.

Lying there in the grotto, naked and relaxed with his hands stacked behind his head and his lover beside him, he felt happy and fulfilled. Comfortable and relaxed. He coveted moments like this and counted himself lucky because in his life he'd truly had so many of them. With Celeste, with Annali. With both of them.

"So how is it you know ASL?" asked Ben, his voice echoing softly in the cavernous space.

"Annali."

"Annali?"

Tanner turned his head to see Ben better. Even now he couldn't look at those vibrant blue eyes and athletic physique without feeling something twist deep inside. "Annali was our partner for almost two years. And she had sixty percent hearing loss, so we learned sign language. It often made things easier. And sometimes it was just plain fun." He smiled at the memory of some of their secret flirtations. In a crowded room the three of them could be talking dirty, flirting madly or setting up all sorts of outrageous sexual scenarios, and no one else had a clue.

Ben frowned. "What do you mean 'our partner'?"

"She lived with us. She was part of our family." He stared up at the sky, swallowed a lump that had risen unexpectedly to his throat. Celeste was the emotional one. It had been a long time since he'd felt that deep pang of grief.

"You loved her."

Tanner nodded. "We both did."

"And what happened?"

"Cancer."

The silence that followed wasn't empty or uncomfortable. It was filled with the sound of the breeze whistling through the chimney, the sound of waves lapping softly against the rocks and a strange sense of intimacy.

"I'm sorry."

Tanner sat up and sighed. "We should go. Celeste will start to wonder."

Ben sat up as well, the movement slow and deliberate as he drew up his knees and draped his arms over them. "You'll tell her about...this."

"Of course." Tanner placed a hand on his arm. "I know I said this was between us, but I assumed you understood —"

"Yes, of course. I wouldn't want you to keep it from her." He licked his lips. "She'll be okay with it?"

Tanner let out a short laugh. "Uh...yeah. I'm pretty sure she'll be okay with it." He glanced at Ben, tried to read the expression on his face and wondered if *Ben* was okay with it. What was Ben Jarvis thinking right now? Feeling? Tanner wanted to ask but knew Ben would need some time first. To assimilate. To adjust.

Instead he turned his gaze to the water. "You figure it's safe?"

"You kidding?" Ben stood, stretched and reached for his scuba gear. "Even if that shark's still lurking around, with you and me together...it doesn't have a chance."

Chapter Five

Celeste sipped her wine. "You're glowing."

Tanner pushed his plate away, a bit of bone all that remained of his peppercorn steak. He'd been famished and had polished off his dinner in record time. "I'm what?"

"Glowing."

He held out his arms, studied them and shrugged. "I must have gotten too much sun today."

"No. That's not what I mean and you know it. You're positively radiant."

He propped his elbows on the table and laughed. "Isn't that what you say to a woman who's pregnant?"

"No. It's what you say to someone who's beaming with happiness."

"It's that obvious, is it?"

She took another sip of her wine, listened to the clink of crystal and the gentle rustle of the breeze through the palms. Unwilling to see a day of sun, wind and sea come to an end, they had chosen to eat at the beachside buffet tonight. Tanner sat opposite her, looking toward the ocean, his face basked in candlelight and reflected moonlight. His hair was a wind-swept mess, his chin stubbled by a day's worth of beard. His deepening tan was accented by the pristine white of the golf shirt he'd chosen—and with that goofy grin plastered to his face, she didn't think he'd ever looked sexier.

"Yes, it's that obvious," she replied at last, sipping from her wine. "But there's just one problem."

He frowned. "There is?"

"Uh-huh. How am I ever going to put up with you now? You were annoyingly happy and well-adjusted *before!*"

He reached across the small table, cupped her chin and drew her in for a long, soft kiss. When he was finished he whispered, "Thank you," his lips brushing over hers.

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Don't thank me yet. I haven't even gotten started."

He sat back in his chair and gave her a questioning look. "What does that mean?"

"We have to get you two together again. I intend to see to it."

His smile was uncharacteristically wolfish. "No worries on that. It's already been looked after."

She leaned forward. "It has?"

"Uh-huh. I called him while you were showering. We're invited to his cottage tonight. It has to be late, after the bonfire. But he figures he'll be done by twelve-thirty."

Celeste's tummy twisted. "We? As in you and I?"

"Of course. You didn't think I could do this again without you, did you?"

"Well..." she hedged, already lost in the fantasy of being with these two sexy men again. She'd done it once and it had been good. Great. Amazing. But now, with this added twist... The shiver that passed through her was delicious. "I guess not. I just thought you might like a little more time alone first."

He grasped her hand and squeezed. "No. You're part of this. An equal part."

She sighed, shook her head resignedly. "Oh all right. If you insist." She swirled the wine in her glass. "The things I do for you."

Tanner just grinned — and checked his watch.

* * * * *

Ben propped his foot on the bar rail, sipped from his scotch and soda and stared into nothingness. The atmosphere around him was loud and festive. Glasses clinked, people laughed and music played, and yet he was barely aware of any of it.

Ever since they'd returned to the dock and he, Tanner and Celeste had parted ways, he'd been distracted and off-balance. He'd been unable to focus on anything for more than a few minutes because his thoughts would continually return to the grotto and what had transpired there. And then his body would flood with warmth, his palms would start to sweat, his breathing would accelerate and he'd be overwhelmed with an unparalleled need to see them again. To see Tanner again.

He'd been shocked by his own reactions, his own feelings. He'd had no idea he was capable of that, that he was even attracted to Tanner, let alone that he had the capacity to make love to a man.

Despite his reactions, he'd debated endlessly with himself in his mind. It was an aberration, a glitch, a tiny blip in the radar of his life, and it was over now. It had to be. He'd gotten it out of his system and he could move on. But then the phone had rung, he'd heard Tanner's voice and it had all come rushing back in a wave of heat that left him reeling. He'd heard himself invite the couple over for an evening of beer, nachos and a variety of other nibblies, knowing full well what he was implying and what they'd expect. He'd gotten off the phone and felt the giddy anticipation of an eighteen-year-old who is about to pick up the local prom queen for a trip to "the lake".

He still didn't quite know where all this was coming from, and he certainly didn't know where it was going. All he *did* know was that Tanner and Celeste both had a profound effect on him, and that at the moment he could no more walk away from them than he could stop the sun from shining.

"Hey! It's Ben!"

Startled, Ben scanned the room and spotted a hand waving frantically. It was attached to an old friend and regular here at Hedon.

"Hey, he's awake!" yelled Adam, a grin splitting his face. "Where ya been, Benny-boy?"

Returning the wave with a smile, he picked up his scotch and soda from the bar and threaded his way through the crowd to Adam's table.

"Hey, Adam," said Ben, raising his glass in salute. "When did you get in? I didn't know you were booked."

"I wasn't. Not until two days ago, anyway." He batted his eyes like a coquette and laid his head on the shoulder of the woman sitting beside him. "That was when Brandy here kidnapped me and dragged me here against my will."

The rest of the table of six all giggled hysterically as the buxom brunette rolled her eyes. "You are so full of it, Adam."

He sat up. "If you mean raw sexuality, then you're right on the money."

Brandy sighed and turned a bored gaze on Ben. "We had a sudden vacancy in our group and needed to fill up the space." She shrugged. "And Adam fills up space pretty good so we thought...what the hell..."

Ben laughed at Adam's low growl. "You got him pegged, all right." Ben grabbed a chair and pulled it up, straddling it. "So somebody actually *cancelled* on a trip to Hedo? What was it? Did he have Ebola or something?"

She snorted and the mood at the table seemed to shift. "Close enough."

Ben frowned. "I hope it's not something serious."

"Serious enough. I caught him fooling around and decided he was not the type of guy I wanted to spend time with."

Ben grimaced. "Oh. Well, I guess I can understand that. Screwing another woman behind your back isn't exactly —"

"Oh it wasn't another woman." She sneered. "*That* I could have handled."

"He was fucking her hairdresser," snickered a man from the other side of the table, obviously finding the whole thing highly entertaining. "Her gay hairdresser. How very *new millennium* of him, don't you think?"

Brandy's gaze turned icy.

"I told her she should have brought him anyway," said the man's date. "I hear bi guys can be a riot in the sack."

"Give me a break, Ellen," said Adam. "You practically throw up if we see two men holding hands at the gay pride parade."

"And those guys are just teeming with diseases," said Brandy. She shuddered. "It's bad enough I touched one. I wouldn't touch another with a ten-foot strap-on."

"Ah, come on, Brandy. It's not that bad."

"No, she's right," said the other woman. "They're freaks. Who knows where they've been?"

Adam shrugged, looked at Ben, seeming to separate himself from his younger, less tolerant companions. "I got nothing against gays, really. But I wish *these* guys would just make up their mind. It's like they give good, honest, heterosexual sex a bad name."

"What the hell is 'good, honest sex', Adam?" laughed one of the other men. "Brandy's right. You are full of it."

"God, Brent. If you would just—"

"Well, I hope you guys enjoy your stay." Although Ben was suppressing an urge to bolt like a spooked pony, he made an effort to remain nonchalant. He stood slowly, rolled his shoulders. "I have some manager-type stuff to look after."

"You're not going to party with us?" Brandy batted her eyelashes. "Adam said you really know how to party."

He landed a hand on Adam's shoulder. "Adam speaks the truth, but as much as I hate to admit it, sometimes work comes first."

Brandy looked him up and down, licked her lips. "How very...disappointing."

He backed away from the group. "I'm sure you'll manage to have fun without me."

"It'll be difficult, but we'll try."

And with a few parting sugarcoated niceties he managed to extricate himself from their collective grip. He stepped out into a cool evening breeze and once he was out of sight of the restaurant, wilted against the first available wall. He pressed a hand to his stomach and willed the churning to stop.

"What did I get myself into?" he whispered to the stars. "What the fuck am I going to do?"

* * * * *

Celeste raised her hand to knock, but the door opened before she could land the first blow.

Her hand hovering in mid-air, she smiled at Ben. "Hi."

He grasped her hand and drew it to his lips. "Good evening." He released her hand and returned the smile. Celeste noted with concern that it did not reach his eyes. "Did you two have a nice dinner?"

"Of course. Everything was perfect, as usual."

He nodded, the smile remaining firmly in place. Too firmly. It verged on wooden. And then he seemed to remember himself and motioned her inside. "Well, you better come in."

"Mm." She stepped across the threshold and was immediately charmed by her surroundings. Rattan and wicker furniture, together with the huge windows and soft earthy colors gave the cottage a casual, relaxed ambiance. Gauzy white curtains billowed into the room, teased by the strong tropical breeze that had wreaked havoc with her hairstyle. She could hear waves crashing on the beach and could see the moon glittering on the water just past the patio doors at the back of the cottage.

"This is lovely," she observed. "Light and airy, and homey."

"Thanks." He had retreated behind a small bar in the corner and was dropping ice into glasses. "I designed it myself."

She approached the bar and hitched a hip on a wicker-backed bar stool. She watched him fill margarita glasses from a large pitcher. "Tanner will just be a few minutes," she said, surprised that Ben hadn't asked. "He had to take a call."

Ben nodded, concentrated hard on his glass. "But you're on vacation. He shouldn't be working."

"It's not work. It's his mother."

He nodded. "Oh. I see." He swallowed, finally lifted his gaze to hers, and she saw something like misery in those glittering blue depths. "Mothers. I've got one too." He made a valiant attempt at a smile—and failed miserably.

"How was the bonfire?" She thought this room could certainly use a little spark at the moment.

"Fine." He stopped and then seemed to realize how hollow that answer sounded. "Good, actually. We had a local guitarist come down and wow the guests with his repertoire of Spanish love songs."

"That sounds lovely. Your idea?"

"All the good ones are." That familiar rakish smile made a brief cameo appearance before fading once again into oblivion. It was as if he kept reminding himself to *not* have a good time. That he had no business being comfortable in this situation, even though he had no good reason not to be.

He pointed to the living area. "Would you like to sit somewhere more comfortable?"

"No thanks. I'm fine here." She studied him, wondered how a man who was so strong and broad could look so vulnerable. Her heart melted for him all over again. She stirred her drink with her finger, slowly sucked it clean as she considered. "I don't suppose Tanner told you about my first experience with another woman."

He shook his head slightly, apparently startled. "Uh...no. Why do you—"

"It was only five years ago." She smiled at the memory. "The fact that I was attracted to women came as quite a surprise to me."

He leaned stiff-armed against the bar, studying her with unguarded interest. "You didn't always know?" It was the most genuine thing he'd said since she arrived.

"No. But to be honest I'm not sure I had ever even really thought about it before."

"So what got you started thinking about it?"

She sipped from her drink. "We were at a party, and I had a couple of drinks. Not that I was drunk, by any means, but I *was* very...relaxed. And this woman whom I'd known casually for a few months..." She shrugged. "She seduced me."

Ben leaned forward, rested his elbows on the bar. "How did she do that?"

"We'd been chatting and she mentioned what a deal she'd gotten on this new leather jacket. I said it sounded lovely and asked to see it. So we went into the host's bedroom where they'd laid out all the coats to look for it."

He was staring at her, mesmerized.

"We were about the same size so she suggested I try it on. I did, and when I was looking in the mirror admiring it, she came up behind me and began touching the leather. She commented on how beautiful I looked in it, ran her hands up and down my arms, and I found myself responding in unexpected ways to her touch." She took a deep breath and a sip of her margarita. "By the time she lifted my hair and began kissing my neck I was completely under her spell. Next thing I knew the coat was on the floor and..." She smiled, noting the way his eyes were glittering with excitement.

"And what?"

"And it was a one-night stand that I spent weeks agonizing over. I felt guilty because I felt like I'd cheated on Tanner and I didn't know how to tell him."

The disappointment at the interruption to the story was evident in Ben's expression, but to his credit he didn't press the matter. "But you did eventually tell him."

"Yes. Of course. I love him too much to keep something like that from him."

"And he accepted it? He wasn't upset?"

She laughed. "Let's just say I had worried for nothing. He thought it was terrific and immediately offered his services at setting me up with a good friend of his whom he knew to be bisexual." She winked. "On the condition that he got in on the action, of course."

He sighed, gave a half-hearted smile. "That's a great story, Celeste."

She reached across the bar and grasped his hand. "You don't understand. I'm not finished." She pressed her palm to his and laced their fingers together. "It wasn't as easy as it sounds."

"How do you mean?"

"I came from pretty conservative stock. Catholic guilt ran thick in my veins, and I had already spent years beating myself up for having sex before marriage."

"You're kiddin' me. You're an educated, progressive woman. How could you have issues with that?"

She shook her head sadly. "Things you hear as a child sink deep and aren't so easily uprooted. Logic and rationality have no place when it comes to guilt and self-image."

"So you felt guilty about desiring other women?"

"That, my dear Ben, is an understatement." She squeezed his hand. "I had a supportive husband and a progressive, liberal outlook—and it *still* took me a very long time to fully come to terms with who I was."

He studied her for a moment, blew out a long, slow breath and dropped his gaze to their hands. "How did you know?"

She touched his chin and tipped his face back up to hers. "It was scrawled in neon purple crayon all over your face."

He didn't even try to smile. He pulled away, picked up his drink and walked to the patio doors where a warm tropical breeze was flirting with the curtains. He leaned against the doorframe and gazed out across the moon-dappled water.

She followed, propped her back against the opposite doorjamb and sipped from her drink as she watched him. The breeze was a gentle caress on her skin, and the image of his face cast in silvery relief was one that would stay with her for a lifetime.

"I was in the bar tonight," he said at last, "and somebody...said something. They made some stupid comment about bisexual men being disease-ridden." He turned a tortured gaze on Celeste. "All my life I've been the guy everybody knows and likes. I

can walk into a party or a bar anywhere and within minutes have a knot of people laughing at my jokes. I feel at home just about anywhere. I've always felt socially adept and sexually desirable. I've always been at the top of the heap, in control of my life and —"

"And this has you feeling out of control."

He nodded, miserable. "It's like suddenly discovering I've got a tail. And I'm ashamed to admit it, but I don't like the idea of being the subject of ridicule."

"I know, Ben. It's never easy to go against the tide. To be your own person and go your own way no matter what others think. To be strong and independent in the face of persecution."

His eyes narrowed. "That's a low blow."

She shrugged, took a sip of her margarita. "I play dirty."

"You have no right to judge me. Society is *much* more accepting of female bisexuality. You only had your own stereotypes and guilt to deal with."

"And you've got the whole 'fag' image to contend with."

"Exactly."

She shook her head sadly. "I'm not judging you, Ben. I *know* it's not easy. But the bottom line is that the only opinion that matters is yours. If you accept who you are, embrace it and are proud of it, then it will no longer control you. You *will* be in control and people will sense that." Waves crashed on the beach and the echo of a woman's laughter reached their ears.

"You make it sound so easy. So simple."

"It's only as complicated as you make it, Ben." She sipped from her drink. "You just have to ask yourself one question, and be honest with yourself about the answer."

"And what question is that?"

"Do you want Tanner? Or don't you?"

He stared at her, his eyes shadowed and unreadable in the dim starlight. So she was startled when he abruptly tossed his drink out into the sand and advanced on her. He pressed his body against hers, trapping her between himself and the doorframe.

"Ben?" she breathed. "What are you doing?"

He cupped her cheeks in his palms and tipped her face up to his. His gaze was searing. "What if I want his wife?" One hand left her cheek and skimmed down over her shoulder to rest on her breast. "I had you once, and God knows that wasn't enough." He slipped his hand beneath the bodice of her flimsy sundress and tweaked a nipple.

She sucked in a breath in surprise and arousal. She'd had every intention of continuing sexual explorations with Ben, but not like this. Not only was Tanner absent, but Ben's sudden change of demeanor set off alarm bells.

Although her blood had flooded with heat and every instinct screamed out for her to draw him close and open herself up to him, she pressed a hand to his chest. "Ben, please."

He lowered his head until his lips brushed against hers and she could taste the saltiness from the rim of his glass. "Don't tell me you don't want me." He shifted his hips so that his erection nestled against her crease, sending wetness seeping down her thighs. "Because I know the truth."

"It's not that I don't want you, Ben," she said, raising her voice and pouring more strength into her arms to push him away. But he was like a steel wall. "It's just that this doesn't—"

He kissed her. He took her mouth like a Viking taking his first virgin. His lips crushed hers and his tongue plunged deep. Despite her best efforts her bones dissolved and it was only the pressure from his body holding her against the doorframe that kept her from falling.

But when, at last, he broke the kiss and moved on to her throat, she found her voice. Barely. "Ben," she whispered. "Please stop this."

"You want me." He pushed down the strap of her dress and moved on to her breast. "Admit it."

"No!" Finally, spurred on by disappointment and outrage, she heaved with all her might and pushed him away. "I don't!" Breathing hard, her breast bared and her face flushed, she glared at him. "Now get yourself under control and —"

"What the hell is going on?"

They both whirled to see Tanner standing in the sand a few feet away. He must have come along the beach rather than using the walkway.

"Tanner," she said, replacing the shoulder strap. "It was nothing. Just a little misunderstanding."

"Like hell it was." He strode forward, grabbing her and drawing her to his side. He leveled an icy stare on Ben. "What the fuck did you think you were doing?"

Ben shrugged, his demeanor casual. Almost too casual. "You were late, and I figured she was fair game."

"Oh you did, did you?" Tanner released her and stepped up until he was nose to nose with Ben. "You son of a bitch. If you think —"

"Hey, this is my turf and my game. You don't like my rules then you can just haul both your sweet little asses out of here."

Tanner sneered. "I had no idea you were such an asshole."

"I don't need to take that. Nobody talks to me like that."

"Well, I just did." Tanner poked him hard in the chest. "And you're an arrogant little fuck too." He poked him again and Ben took a step back.

"What the hell are you doing?" He slammed his hand against Tanner's chest, hard enough to send him staggering back several steps.

At last Celeste understood. She stepped back into the shadows — and watched.

"I'm just speaking the truth. You're an arrogant, insecure son of a bitch who doesn't know what the hell he wants out of life and doesn't have the courage to pursue it even if he knew."

Ben stalked toward him. "What? How dare you talk to me like that? You don't know me at all."

Tanner took a step back. "Oh I know you. I know enough. I know that you came down here because it was the easy way out. Your wife dumped you and you couldn't deal with it. You couldn't face the ridicule of being a cuckolded husband back home so you came down here to turn into a beach bum and hide from the real world."

They were standing nose to nose again, their chests heaving with exertion and rage.

Ben said nothing, but his eyes burned.

"Face it, Ben," continued Tanner. "You were running away then, and you're running away now. When life gets tough, instead of facing it, you just turn around and—"

Ben let out a cry of, "Fuck you," and tackled him.

The two men landed hard, sending up a cloud of sand and grunting and groaning as they rolled over and over, grappling for a hold. Ben's size and extra bulk, however, gave him an obvious advantage, and it wasn't long before he had Tanner pinned beneath him.

He straddled Tanner's hips and held his wrists to the sand. His chest heaving, he stared down at the man he'd made love to just a few hours before. "Damn you," he said at last.

And then he kissed him.

Chapter Six

Ben felt like his soul was on fire. The desire he'd felt for Tanner in the grotto had been startling and powerful. It had been unlike anything he'd ever experienced before, and he hadn't thought he could ever feel that way again. He'd been wrong.

If anything his desire had intensified.

Tanner returned the kiss, his hunger just as fierce as Ben's. Tongues warred and muscles strained. Tanner tried to dislodge Ben's grip on his wrists, but Ben merely shifted his hands in order to lace his fingers with Tanner's and take more firm control. He broke the kiss, locked his eyes with Tanner's and whispered, "If you fight me...you'll lose."

A knowing smile twitched at Tanner's lips. "There are no losers here."

His grip on Tanner's hands still firm, Ben traced his tongue along his jaw, felt the faint rasp of a day's worth of stubble. "Tonight I want to fuck you."

Tanner nodded, but it was Celeste's voice that he heard close to his ear. "As much as I'd love to watch you two boys go at it on the beach, there are some midnight swimmers stripping down just a little ways away." She kissed Ben's cheek. "I think you might want to take this inside the cottage."

Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded and released Tanner's hands. Celeste's hand on his arm urged him to stand and he held out a hand to Tanner to help him to his feet. Together they retreated to the privacy of the cottage. The doors were closed and the curtains drawn, but before he did anything else, there was something that needed to be said.

He turned to Celeste. "Celeste, I owe you an apology."

She pressed a finger to his lips and the smile that touched her lips was soft as the moonlight. "No, you don't. There's nothing to apologize for. I understand." She trailed a finger down his cheek and whispered, "I understand more than you know."

He shook his head in wonder and realized he believed her. "You're an amazing woman."

"And beautiful," chimed in Tanner. "Don't forget beautiful."

"How could I? I think she's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen." And it was the truth. With her ebony hair and fine-featured, exotic complexion, she had been striking before. But now, knowing her as he did, her beauty had taken on a compelling new glow.

"Why don't you kiss her?" asked Tanner, his hand on Ben's arm. "I mean really kiss her."

Ben glanced at Tanner, before resting his gaze back on Celeste. He stepped closer. "Would that be okay with you?"

"Yes. That would be very okay with me."

His eyes locked on hers, Ben slid his fingers into the silky strands of her hair to gently cup the back of her head and draw her close. But there was nothing gentle about his kiss. When he had her mouth beneath his he held nothing back, wrapping his other arm around her waist and dragging her against him, hugging her tightly as his mouth took absolute possession of hers. His tongue plunged deep, tasting tequila and sweet surrender as her body wilted against him.

Her hands stole around his waist and her fingernails dug into his back, fueling a passion that a moment earlier had been barely a spark of need.

He felt her breasts crushed against his chest, her arms hugging his waist, her crease seeking the ridge of his cock—and then he sensed something else. He broke the kiss and opened his eyes to see Tanner standing behind his wife, his hands on her shoulders and his eyes, stormy with desire, locked on Ben.

A quick glance at Celeste confirmed that she was smiling, her eyes dreamy with both desire and happiness. A miniscule tilt of her head answered the question he'd had in his mind.

Ben nibbled on her neck and whispered to Tanner, "You like that? You like watching me kiss her?"

Tanner's hands skimmed down her arms and back again, over Ben's hands and forearms. "Definitely." He bent low to kiss Celeste's other shoulder. "I like watching you do anything." His teeth sank into her neck just hard enough to elicit a low moan of pleasure from her. And then he added in a whisper, "You're a goddamn fucking demi-God and –"

He couldn't finish because Ben had stolen his breath, crushing his lips with another bone-searing kiss.

"Oh yeah," was Celeste's whisper. "Damn if I don't love watching you two too."

Ben broke the kiss and studied the man and woman before him, wondering silently how it was that he had found himself here, and how it was possible for one man to feel so lucky.

"Come with me," he said, grabbing both their hands and leading them to the bed on the far side of the room.

When they stood at the foot end of the mattress, he abruptly reached for the hem of Tanner's shirt and dragged it over his head before quickly following suit.

"Nice," said Tanner.

"Very nice," echoed Celeste.

But when Tanner stepped close as if to kiss him, Ben stopped him. "No. Kiss your wife."

Tanner's eyes narrowed, as if considering whether to follow what amounted to an order. But apparently he decided he liked the direction Ben was taking because he slowly turned around and reached for Celeste.

He skimmed his hand over her hair and lowered his lips to hers. Ben's hands settling on Tanner's hips, he watched closely, losing himself in the intimacy the two shared. There was such tenderness between them, and passion, and the kind of love Ben had once dreamed of. Celeste let out a low purr of pleasure as her husband deepened the kiss.

"Take off her dress," he whispered, his mouth next to Tanner's ear.

And as Tanner slipped the straps from Celeste's shoulders, Ben's hands sneaked around his waist and popped the button on Tanner's denim cut-offs. His fingers slid beneath the material and found nothing but a straining erection.

"Fuck," moaned Tanner as Ben's hand closed around his cock and Celeste's dress fell to the floor. She too hadn't bothered with underwear that night and stood naked before them.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" said Ben as Tanner's shorts fell to the floor. His hand working Tanner's cock mercilessly, he pressed his own ridge firmly against Tanner's ass. All that separated them was the thin cotton of Ben's swim trunks.

"Yes." Tanner admired her breasts, palmed them, kneaded them. "Gorgeous."

Ben's tongue traced the line of Tanner's shoulder, and he had to fight the urge to eat Tanner whole. "Is she wet?" he asked, knowing full well the answer.

Tanner's hand dusted over her tummy and slid between her thighs. Her head fell back on her shoulders as he worked her pussy. "Oh yeah."

Ben found the bead of cum at the end of Tanner's cock and massaged it into the rock-hard flesh. "You want her?"

"Yes," groaned Tanner. "God yes."

"Then take her."

Like a man possessed, Tanner grabbed Celeste by the shoulders and practically threw her onto the high bed.

She squealed in delight, flung out her arms and spread her legs – ready for him.

Before Tanner could do anything else, Ben grabbed her ankles and tugged her down until her legs hung over the edge of the mattress. "There," he said, quickly shedding his swim trunks and stepping over to his nightstand. He grabbed a tube of lube out of the drawer and came back to stand behind Tanner.

"Pull her to the edge of the bed. Take her on your feet." The bed was high, just the right height for that. Ben had made sure of it.

Tanner glanced at the tube in Ben's hand and a dusky glimmer of lust lit his eyes.

"Well, somebody better take me," said Celeste, writhing on the bed like a cat, "or I'll have to do it myself."

With a low growl Tanner tugged her down so that her legs hung over the edge. He hooked her knees over his shoulders and thrust his cock into her. She arched her back in pleasure and gripped a fistful of sheet.

"Slowly," said Ben, coating his cock with lube and admiring the movement of Tanner's body. The gleam of sweat, the way his shoulder and back muscles flexed, the rhythm of that amazing ass.

Ben cupped his ass and squeezed. "Do you want me?" he asked softly, his slicked fingers slipping between Tanner's cheeks and seeking out Tanner's anus.

Tanner's thrusts slowed still more and he bent low over Celeste. She moved her legs from off his shoulders and wrapped them around his waist. His chest brushed Celeste's breasts, granting Ben easier access.

Ben's finger eased inside, and he added another, working the muscles and lubricating the skin. "Do you?"

"Christ yeah," groaned Tanner.

He withdrew his fingers and pressed the tip of his cock against the tender flesh. The head slipped inside and he groaned in anticipation.

Tanner's head arched back and for a moment all movement ceased.

Ben felt like he was standing on the edge of a precipice—with the entire world at his feet.

Tanner's knuckles whitened as his hands fisted against the mattress and Ben could see Celeste's delicate fingers steal around her husband's neck. Tanner blew out a long slow breath and his body began to shift backward, but Ben gripped his hips and stopped him.

"No," he said softly, his grip tightening as he eased inside ever so slowly. "I want to savor this."

"Christ," mumbled Tanner. "You're killing me."

"Believe me," said Ben. "You ain't seen nothin' yet." And then he thrust deep.

"Damn," growled Tanner as Ben fucked him, and in turn Tanner's body echoed his rhythm and he took possession of his wife.

The sweat beaded on both men's skin, and the air filled with the scents of sweat and sex. Ben savored the feel of skin and bone and muscle under his hands, the feeling of undiluted power that coursed through his veins, the sheer rawness of it.

But he also savored what he saw in Celeste's eyes as she watched Tanner's face, and her body responded to his thrusts. He saw trust and adoration in her eyes—as well as desire.

"Are you all right?" asked Ben as a climax loomed and his thrusts intensified. He was suddenly afraid that he was losing control, that he might lose too much. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," whispered Tanner as he grabbed Celeste's wrists and pressed them back against the mattress. He kissed her, the motion fierce and possessive. He reared back up and added, "Harder. Fuck me harder."

With a low, feral cry Ben's fingers dug deep into Tanner's hips and he tossed inhibition to the wind.

"Yes," said Tanner, his breath coming in short, rasping pants. "Fuck *yes!*"

His orgasm struck Ben like a lightning bolt. With a final thrust and a guttural moan of surprise and ecstasy, Ben came, driving Tanner deep into Celeste's body, and finally collapsing in a heap of sweat-soaked flesh.

* * * * *

Lounging back on the pillows of Ben's bed and feeling quite decadent, Celeste accepted a sweet kiss and fresh margarita from Tanner. Ben walked up behind Tanner as he climbed off the bed and handed his lover a rye and ginger.

Tanner took a sip, his eyes shifting from Celeste to Ben. His gaze traveled over Ben's body from head to toe, his expression appreciative, his cock already semi-erect once again. Ben met his gaze levelly, his hand sneaking out to skim over Tanner's chest.

"You two are absolutely beautiful, you know that?" And they were. Naked, their skin still glistening with sweat and their gazes smoky with desire, she didn't think she'd ever seen anything quite so exquisite. The happiness that flowed from Tanner made it all perfect.

"Beautiful, eh?" said Tanner with a cockeyed grin. "I don't know how I feel about that description."

"Don't be so insecure," said Ben with a wink in Celeste's direction. "You can't let yourself be swayed by the opinions of others."

Celeste smiled, nodding approval. "Listen to him, Tanner. I think he might actually know what he's talking about."

"I do." Ben took a large swig from his own glass and set a feral gaze on her that made her tummy shiver. "And I also know a ravishingly gorgeous woman when I see one." He set his glass on the nightstand. "Wouldn't you agree, Tanner?"

"Definitely. And I also know an unsatisfied woman when I see one." He set his glass beside Ben's and stood shoulder to shoulder beside him. "And I think we need to do something about that."

Celeste gazed at them over the salted rim of her glass. "Now I may not have had an orgasm but I'd hardly describe myself as unsatisfied."

"No?" Ben crawled on all fours across the mattress toward her. "How is that?"

"Yes," said Tanner, following suit until they were kneeling on either side of her, their fingers skimming lightly up and down her naked chest. "Explain what you mean by that."

"Well," she said, trying to keep her voice even as Tanner's fingers grazed over her pussy, "seeing Tanner happy is immensely satisfying to me." And it was the truth. Seeing the way Ben had overcome his inhibitions and let himself be who he truly was, seeing Tanner's dream of finding a male counterpart fulfilled, and then to be granted the privilege of observing and being a part of their lovemaking... She sighed. It had been as satisfying and fulfilling as any orgasm.

Well...almost.

"I see." Tanner's hand crept between her thighs as Ben's cupped her breast. "Is there anything *else* that you find immensely satisfying?"

"Yes," she purred. "Many things."

"Such as?"

"Well..." In an effort to maintain the façade of nonchalance, she took a delicate sip of her margarita. "I love watching you two kiss."

Their hands froze in place, their eyes locking on each other as sly grins spread across both their faces.

"Is that a fact?" asked Tanner.

She sipped, nodded—and watched as they leaned toward each other and their mouths met above her. It was tentative at first, almost tender, until Tanner reached up to cup the back of Ben's head, and proceeded to devour him. Ben responded with equal ferocity and Celeste lost herself in their passion. When, without breaking the kiss, Ben's

hand joined Tanner's at the apex of her thighs, and both of them began massaging her clit, she almost spilled her drink as the electricity charged through her.

"Oh God," she said when Tanner's fingers slipped inside her. "You two are going to kill me."

"Perhaps." Ben lifted the glass from her fingers and set it aside. "But what a way to go."

"Mm-hmm," was all she could manage because how could she talk when both breasts were being devoured *and* her pussy was being assaulted.

She arched her back, encouraging them and asking for more, but when she lifted her hands to run her fingers through their hair, she found her wrists pinned once again to the bed.

"Hey," she protested, squirming. "I want to touch you."

Ben lifted his head and bobbed his eyebrows. "Which is exactly why we won't let you."

She narrowed her eyes and a retort formed on her tongue, but the words were lost on a groan when Tanner's mouth claimed her pussy. His tongue laved and flickered and generally drove her mad, as did Ben's. His focus, however, shifted from her breast as he had decided to nibble and lick and tease his way over her chest, along her collar bone and up her throat.

His hands never releasing her wrists, he straddled her in order to give himself better access to her neck. He kissed and nibbled and then sank in his teeth just hard enough that it verged on painful. "Christ," she groaned. "I want your lips."

"Your wish is my command." And even as Tanner's tongue continued to torture her pussy, Ben's ravished her mouth. He tasted of whiskey and lust and Tanner. He laced his fingers with hers and took absolute control of her body, sending her senses spiraling and stealing every thought from her mind.

Abruptly Ben broke the kiss and ran his tongue along her lower lip. "Do you want Tanner to fuck you?"

She sucked in a hit of much-needed oxygen. "I want you too."

He paused. "At the same time?"

She nodded.

"Oh baby." A fresh fire lit his eyes. "I think I'm in love."

"With me?" she asked coyly. "Or Tanner?"

For a moment something else flickered in those vibrant blue depths and he whispered, "With you both."

Something about his expression and his tone seared her, but before she could think about it too much she'd been grabbed by the shoulders and flipped over so that she lay on top of Ben's chest. Ben lifted her hips and eased his cock inside her.

"How does that feel?" he asked, as if there was any question. He filled her, touched deep sinful places and made her want like she'd only ever wanted with Tanner.

She didn't respond. Merely moaned, arched her neck and rode him, slowing only marginally when she felt Tanner's fingers gently begin lubricating her anus.

"Okay, baby," said Tanner who was now kneeling behind her. He gripped her hips and held her steady as the tip of his cock nudged her ass. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes," she breathed, knowing he just wanted to be sure since they had never attempted this before. "Definitely."

"All right." The head of his cock slipped inside her and he let out a rich curse when she received him.

At first her body protested and she felt her muscles tense. He stopped but with a little bit of massage and a few soft words she relaxed once again, felt herself open to him.

She whispered, "More. Please."

"Fuck," he groaned, thrusting deep. "I love you."

Her head fell forward and she opened her eyes when she felt Ben run his fingers through her hair. "Okay, babe. You take it from here."

She nodded understanding and began tentative movements of her hips, riding them both and finding the motion and rhythm that gave her the most pleasure. She'd never felt so full or so completely out of control, and she'd never felt so completely cared for.

Tanner's hands skimmed up and down her back and Ben's began a light massage of her clit.

"Oh God," she groaned as an orgasm loomed. "It's too much."

"No." Ben's attention to her clit intensified. "You can take it."

She shook her head, felt the pressure build inside her as she rode the men and their rhythm responded to her. It was so strong she felt lightheaded. She felt like she was riding a comet. She felt like the world was about to explode.

And then it did.

Chapter Seven

Tanner had gotten almost no sleep. His body was worn out and his eyes were bloodshot. He'd been used and manhandled, battered and bombarded. He felt glorious.

And ravenous.

"More eggs?" Celeste was incredulous. "That's your third helping."

He set down his plate, heaped with eggs, ham, pastries and fruit, and plunked himself into his chair. "I'm hungry. Great sex does that to me." He picked up his fork and dug in. "You know that."

She smiled over the rim of her coffee cup. "I do indeed."

He dug in, images of the last twenty-four hours running like cyclones through his mind. Ben was everything he'd ever dreamed of—everything they'd *both* dreamed of—and more. He was intelligent and confident, playful and passionate, not to mention caring and attentive. The fact that he was easily one of the most attractive men they'd ever encountered was merely a bonus. The sweet bit of gourmet chocolate left on the luxurious hotel pillow.

Tanner was lost in thought and had worked his way through half the plate before he realized that Celeste was unusually quiet, and had been for the better part of the meal. On the brink of sated and deciding that was a good place to stop, he set down his fork and reached for his cup that the waitress had just refilled with a rich Kenyan blend.

"You've been awfully quiet, Celeste." He stirred in some cream. "Is everything okay?"

She smiled again, but there was something in her eyes that bothered him. "Yes, of course. We had an amazing night with an amazing man. You've fulfilled a fantasy that you've been dreaming of for years, and I enjoyed two of the sexiest men on the island at the same time. What could possibly be wrong?"

He frowned. "I don't know. You've just seemed...distracted ever since we got up this morning." In actuality, he'd been fighting the sense that something was wrong ever since they left Ben's at around three a.m., but he'd been so caught up in his own euphoria and had been reluctant to let anything interfere with it.

"Well, we leave in a couple of days, and I guess my head is already halfway home. And halfway to St. Louis."

He nodded. "That's right. You've got that conference to prepare for in a couple of weeks."

"Uh-huh. I'm looking forward to it, but I'm also anxious about the symposium I'm giving."

"You'll do an amazing job. You always do." He laid his hand over hers. "But all the same, I wish I could go with you."

"But you can't. You've already taken enough time away from the agency with this vacation." She leaned back in her chair. "And besides, you know how busy I am at these things. I'd barely have any time to spend with you. *You're* the one who'll be bored and lonely in the evenings."

He smiled. "I'll manage. I'll just do more—" He blinked, stunned and excited by the possibility that had just hit him.

"What? You'll do more what?"

He squeezed her hand, the excitement shimmering through him. "I was going to say I'll get more work done, but then I had another idea."

"What's that?"

"Ben."

She stared at him. Frowned. "Ben?"

"Yes. Would you mind if Ben came up to spend a couple of days with me while you're gone?"

She kept looking at him, unblinking and strangely silent.

He kept talking to fill in the space. "He said it's been ages since he took time away from the resort and he's long overdue for a break. This would be the perfect opportunity."

At last she spoke. "I...I don't know."

He frowned, stunned by the reaction. "Surely you're not jealous, Celeste. You used to spend weekends alone with Annali all the time. You even took her along to Europe with you for a conference."

She pulled her hand away. "I'm not jealous," she snapped. "You know I care for Ben, and God knows I trust you. It's not about that." She stood. "It's not about that at all."

She turned and walked off the patio, leaving Tanner stunned and confused.

* * * * *

Ben stared out his office window and sipped from the last of his morning coffee. It was another perfect day in paradise.

The sun glittered on the azure blue water. Scantly clad people frolicked in the waves and lounged on the beach. Couples came here to explore their fantasies and fulfill their desires. The men were open-minded and the women lusty and uninhibited. It was perfect. A paradise. Every man's dream.

And he was sick of it.

His time with Tanner and Celeste had finally made him realize that fact. Perhaps Tanner had been right. Perhaps he had been running away from something, seeking escape in a fantasyland. And perhaps that hadn't necessarily been a bad thing.

He had run away but in the process he'd met so many amazing people. He'd enjoyed every moment of sunshine, savored every soothing lap of the waves. He'd discovered his talent for dealing with the public, for management and creative marketing. He'd found a niche, a purpose and a future. He *had* found healing here and he had no regrets.

But maybe it was time to move on. Actually it was probably long *past* time to move on, but he'd just never had any reason to consider it before. He'd had no reason to change what, at the time, had seemed like the ideal. But he used to have other dreams, and he was only now letting himself remember that.

He'd had dreams of a wife and a family, of sharing his life with someone and building a future together. Of course Tanner and Celeste hardly fulfilled the role of blushing bride and future life-partner, but they had reminded him how it felt to truly care for someone.

They'd shared of themselves with him, and cared enough to be honest with him and to not walk away when he acted like an asshole. And they saw things in him...saw him in a way that no one else ever had before. They'd touched him and let him know that he mattered to them.

They'd reminded him what it was to love. He didn't want to lose that, wanted to hang on to that feeling – in whatever way he could.

He wasn't sure exactly what that would mean, or how he would accomplish it, but he did know one thing. He couldn't do it from Jamaica.

His decision made, he walked to his desk and picked up his phone. There were people he needed to talk to.

* * * * *

"Celeste!" Tanner had to run to catch up to his wife as she strode quickly down the long stretch of deserted beach. At last he reached her, but had to grab her arm to stop her. He whirled her to face him. "What the hell is wrong with you? You never run away from me!"

Tears streamed down her face and he immediately regretted the harsh words. "Hey, baby," he said, wiping away the tears and pulling her into his arms. "What's going on? What did I say?"

She pressed her face to his shoulder and drew in a shaky breath as her arms latched around his waist. "I...I'm s-s-sorry," she sobbed. "I just...I just can't do this again."

He held her tight, stroked her hair. "Shh. Take your time. Can't do what?"

She lifted her head and gazed at him with red, swollen eyes. "Love, Tanner. I can't fall in love again."

He stared at her, trying to fathom what she was saying.

She shook her head and pulled out of his embrace, taking a step back and allowing the waves to lap at her feet. "I told you that when we got here. I said it very clearly."

"Said what? I don't get it."

Her fists clenched. "Annali meant the world to me. I loved her deeply and losing her just about killed me."

"I know that. Don't you think I know that?" He stepped closer, his temper bubbling and he wasn't even sure why. "And don't you think it hurt me too?"

"Of course it did. I didn't mean to imply that it didn't. But..." She shook her head and turned toward the water.

"But what?"

She took a deep breath and wiped away the last of her tears. "When I encouraged you to be with Ben, I thought it would be fun, a lark, a way for you to fulfill a sexual fantasy that you've had for years."

Tanner moved closer, stepping into the water and turning to face her. He waited for the words that he sensed he didn't want to hear.

"I wanted you to be happy. You've got to believe that, and God knows it was wonderful for me too. But it wasn't supposed to go any further than that. It was supposed to be a part of our holiday, a little bit of paradise that would stay here." She met his gaze. "In paradise."

Tanner swallowed, trying to grasp the enormity of what she was saying. "Are you saying you don't care for him? You don't see him as more than a boy toy and a hottie to fill out a threesome for our sex fantasies?"

She turned her gaze to the horizon. "No. I see him as more than that, and you know it."

"Well, then—"

"That's exactly the point, Tanner! I care for him. I care for him more than I ever thought I would. I care too much and that's exactly why I can't let him into my life."

"He's not going to get cancer, Celeste. That's ridiculous."

She whirled on him. "No? And how can you guarantee that?"

He set his jaw.

"And even if he lives to be a hundred there are other things to consider."

"Such as?"

"He's a young, attractive, single man who has made it very clear that he dreams of meeting the right woman and settling down someday. And what will happen when he does? Just what do you think will happen?"

"We're not talking about him moving in with us, Celeste. We're talking about keeping in touch. About staying friends and keeping him in our lives. There's no reason we couldn't stay friends even if he gets married someday."

"Come on, Tanner. Be honest with yourself. Do you honestly think that having Ben as a long-distance, twice-a-year acquaintance would be enough? Are you honestly saying that you haven't toyed with the idea of seeing him more often than that? Of having him in our lives more...*consistently*?"

He stared at her, hesitant to admit to her, let alone himself, the full extent of the possibilities he'd entertained with regards to a relationship with Ben. He swallowed. "Even if I had thought about that, the point is moot. Ben lives in Jamaica and we live in Toronto. We can't have more than that, even if we wanted it."

"You know better than that, Tanner. He has his job, but other than that he has no ties here. He could relocate in a heartbeat."

"And who's to say he'd want to? I think we're jumping to a pretty big conclusion here, don't you?"

She closed her eyes and dragged her fingers through her hair. "Last night he whispered that he loved me. That he loved both of us, Tanner. And I think he's the kind of person who goes after what he wants. In fact I know it."

Tanner felt weak. "He said that?"

"Yes. And the thing is I had to stop myself from saying it back to him."

Suddenly he didn't have the energy to be angry anymore. He barely had the energy to stand. He spoke in a whisper that was barely audible above the sigh of the waves. "So you do care for him?"

"Yes. Like I said...I care too much. And I know you do too. Which is exactly why we have to put an end to this now." She grasped his hands. "Maybe he won't get sick, and maybe he'll stay with us for a month, or even a year. But eventually he'll leave. When he meets the girl of his dreams, Tanner..."

"It could still work."

She shook her head sadly. "No. It couldn't. What woman would tolerate her new boyfriend, let alone a fiancé or husband, having a sexual relationship with another couple? Even if we vowed to never touch him again, that would be incredibly threatening to her, and I don't blame her. I'd grow to love him and he'd leave us, Tanner. I know he would. And I *cannot* live through that kind of grief." She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. "Not again."

He hugged her hard, allowing the reality of what was happening to sink in. He didn't know if she was right. He hated to accept the possibility that she could be, but there was one thing he *was* sure of. He loved Celeste and would do anything for her. She was his life and she was his wife, and he had committed himself to her. Perhaps he

was willing to take a chance on Ben, but if she felt this strongly he couldn't ask her to deny her feelings. He couldn't ask her to be something she wasn't.

He held her heart in the palms of his hands, and it was his job to protect it—no matter what the sacrifice. He had no choice.

He nuzzled her hair. "Okay, baby. It's okay."

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm not stronger."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're the strongest woman I know, and that's exactly why I love you so much."

The wind toyed with their hair and a crab skittered past their feet. At last she lifted her head and asked, "So what now?"

He tried to smile. "So now I go and talk to him."

"I should come with you."

"No," he said gently. "I need to do this alone."

* * * * *

"Thanks, Andy. You're a gem." Ben scribbled another phone number on his blotter. "You've given me some great leads, and I owe you."

"Are you kidding, Benny-boy?" laughed his friend. "After all the babes you hooked me up with on my last two visits down there? You don't owe me Jack."

Ben grinned. "Well, I'm sorry if I won't be here anymore to help pave your way to paradise."

Andy sighed. "Good point. That is a tough pill to swallow. But I think I'm a big enough boy that I can handle things myself from now on."

"I have no doubt of that, my friend."

"Well, I hope one of those positions pans out for you."

"Me too. More than you know."

There was a knock on his door.

"So thanks again, but it looks like I've got company."

"No worries. I'm looking forward to that drink at the Royal York you promised me."

"You got it."

And by the time he'd signed off, Tanner had stepped through the door and closed it firmly behind him.

"Hey!" said Ben, springing from his chair and rounding the desk in a heartbeat. "Am I glad to see you."

Tanner nodded. "Me too. I—"

But Ben cut off his words with a kiss. He grabbed Tanner, pushed him up against the door and crushed his lips beneath his own. Tanner's low moan of pleasure spurred him on and his tongue dove deep even as his hands grappled with Tanner's shirt.

"Fuck," he groaned, his mouth moving to Tanner's shoulder. "It's only been a few hours, and I want you again." Tanner's shirt hit the floor and they were chest to chest. Bare skin to bare skin. Muscle to muscle. Ben could barely breathe for the fire that raged through his veins. "How can that be? I've never felt this way before."

Tanner grasped Ben's shoulders and urged him back so that their gazes met. Tanner's eyes burned with desire as well. His chest heaved and his hands on Ben's shoulders were hot and possessive. "I don't know, but I feel exactly the same way."

"Good." Ben skimmed a hand down his chest. "Then do you think Celeste would mind if we had a quickie without her?"

"No, but..." Tanner's jaw clenched briefly. "But I can't. That's not why I'm here."

Something in his voice and the set of his shoulders put Ben on red alert. He released him and stepped back. "I don't get it. Why are you here?"

Tanner closed his eyes, raked his fingers through his hair, and when he opened his eyes again the misery in them was almost more than Ben could bear. "I need to talk to you, Ben. And I'm afraid you're not going to like what I have to say."

Chapter Eight

Three months later

Ben picked up the phone. "Ben here."

"Oh Mr. Jarvis, I'm so glad I caught you."

"Hi, Doris. What can I do for you?" He'd given up asking her to call him Ben six weeks ago.

"Antonio is throwing another tantrum."

"Ah fuck," he whispered. The hotel's head chef was notoriously eccentric and headstrong, and prone to fits of temper if his produce hadn't been picked that morning by the delicate hands of Sicilian virgins. But Ben put up with him because he was a genius in the kitchen.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. What is it this time?"

"He caught two of the waiters..."

Ben waited. "Go on."

"Well...he found them in the storeroom...uh...together."

Unfazed, Ben lifted an eyebrow. "Isn't Antonio gay? What's the big deal?"

"They were doing it in a bin of his imported semolina flour."

Ben barely managed to suppress his laughter. "Oh well, I see his point." He chortled again, silently congratulating the two boys for their...innovation. "I'll come down there and speak to them and calm Antonio down."

"Thanks, Mr. Jarvis. I'll tell him you'll be there shortly."

Ben signed off and stared at the phone for a moment, grinning at the image she had painted for him. But then, gradually, the smile faded. Suddenly weighted down with

emotions he couldn't begin to name, he stood and crossed to the wide picture window that looked out over the city.

It was spring in Toronto and the leaves had just begun to bud. The lake had begun to shimmer with the warmth of the strengthening sun and a few sailboats had even ventured out to test the waters. The city was slowly coming to life, waking from its long winter hibernation. It wasn't paradise but it still had its own brand of beauty and warmth.

If only Ben could appreciate it.

He leaned against the window, pressing his forehead to the cool comfort of the double-glazed glass. They were out there. Somewhere. And every day it took every ounce of willpower he possessed to not look them up in the phone book and go knock on their front door.

There was no getting around it. The pain of losing Tanner and Celeste still gnawed at him. He'd thought by now, after months of throwing himself into his new job, making new friends and carving out a new niche for himself at the exclusive Harbourfront Hotel, he would have been able to put it all behind him. Forget. Move on.

But it hadn't worked out that way. It still felt as fresh as it had been that moment three months ago when Tanner had said his goodbyes and stepped out of his office. Forever.

Ben had understood. Or he'd tried to. But all the understanding in the world couldn't dull the pain of losing something so precious. Something he'd never even realized he needed – until he'd found it.

Part of him resented them for that. For giving him such a wonderful gift and then snatching it away. For offering him heaven and then sending him into hell. But he could never stay angry for long. He just didn't have the energy to sustain it.

He'd told himself he'd stuck with his decision to come back to Toronto because it was a good career move. A good life move. Jamaica was, indeed, a beautiful place, but it

was also a dead end. He couldn't really grow there, couldn't advance his career and he couldn't build the kind of future he'd always dreamed of.

But part of him knew that the real reason he'd come back to Toronto was just for the security of knowing that he was that much closer to the two people he'd fallen in love with. The two people he could never replace.

Oh he'd dated. He'd seen several women since his return, even slept with a couple. But none of them had so much as sparked his interest, let alone ignited the flames of passion. Out of desperation, he'd even slipped into a couple of gay bars, wondering if that was where his future lay. But the results there had been even more dismal.

Perhaps he'd find someone...someday. But for now, with the memory of true passion and happiness still so fresh in his mind, he doubted that anyone could live up to his expectations. So he satisfied himself with the alternatives. He threw himself into his work, hit the gym five times a week, had taken up squash again and was trying to rekindle a relationship with the family he'd barely seen for the last eight years.

It wasn't what he wanted, and God knew it wasn't nearly enough, but it kept him busy and kept his mind occupied.

And for now...it was all he had.

* * * * *

"Some pie, Tanner?"

Tanner held up his hand. "No thanks, Helene. Normally I can't resist your strawberry pie, but I'm stuffed."

Celeste's mother turned a pleading gaze her way. "Celeste, what's wrong with this boy? He used to love my cooking."

Celeste set down her coffee and placed a hand lightly on Tanner's arm. "He's just watching his diet, Mom. His cholesterol was up a bit at his last checkup."

Helene frowned, and Celeste knew her mother could see right through her. "I see. Well, I guess I can't fault a man for doing exactly what I've been trying to get your father to do for ten years."

Celeste's father merely harrumphed and patted his burgeoning belly. "I've earned this waistline. I've worked hard for it and have no intention of giving it up."

"Listen to him. As if drinking wine and eating rich sauces is a sacrifice."

"Come on, Tanner," said Pierre. "The game is starting."

Tanner laughed, but it was hollow. As hollow as his laughter had been for the last three months. And every time she heard it Celeste died inside just a little. "I should help with the dishes."

"No, no. Don't be silly," said Helene. "Let us women do it, so we can have some time alone to talk about you."

"You heard her." Pierre urged Tanner from his seat and ushered him toward the family room. "You know better than to argue with your mother-in-law." And he winked at his wife just before they disappeared from view.

Helene began gathering plates. "Grab the rest and come with me. We have things to discuss."

Her heart as heavy as the stack of plates in her hand, Celeste followed her mother into the kitchen.

She'd barely set them on the counter when her mother laid into her. "Okay, so what the hell is going on?"

"Mom!"

"Well, excuse my language, but I've been watching the two of you mope around for the past three months, and it's slowly driving me insane. And now I swear Tanner is losing weight, and God knows he can ill afford it."

"We're fine, Mom. It's just stress from work."

"Bullshit."

Celeste wanted to laugh but couldn't work up the energy. She wilted against the large kitchen island. "I can't tell you, Mom," she said quietly. "It's personal."

"Are you two fighting? Is there trouble between you?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

Helene shook her head and grabbed a tea towel. She wound it around her hands. "Well, all I know is that the last time I saw you two this depressed was after Annali died. It tore me apart then, and it's tearing me apart now."

At the mention of that name Celeste lost it. She burst into tears and would have sunk to the floor if not for her mother's supporting arms.

"What is it, honey?" she cooed. "What could possibly be so terrible?"

"Annali..." she sputtered out. "You cared for her, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. She was a beautiful girl in every way, and you and Tanner were lucky to have her for a friend." Helene stroked her hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Of course I always knew it was far more than a friendship. I may be old, but I'm not stupid, you know."

Shocked, Celeste's tears dried immediately. "You mean...you knew?"

"That you were involved as a threesome? Of course I did." She frowned. "Or I guess I should say a triad. Isn't that the right terminology?"

Celeste could barely breathe. "You know what a triad is?"

"Yes. Once I figured it out I did some reading on the subject."

If her mother had sprouted a purple horn out of her forehead Celeste couldn't have been more shocked. "But...your beliefs. The church. How could you..." Words eluded her.

"People change, honey. And people grow. Maybe it took me a little longer than you to make up my own mind about things, but your happiness is the most important thing in my life. Annali made you happy, and in the face of that nothing else mattered."

At that the tears welled up once again. "Oh Mom. It's all my fault. I don't know what to do. I've made us both so miserable and I don't know how to fix it."

"Your fault? What on earth are you talking about?"

Celeste considered her mother. Considered all the hurdles that she'd had to overcome in her life, all the stereotypes and narrow-mindedness. If there was anyone in the world she could trust, surely her mother fit the bill. "Is there any wine left?"

"Yes, I think so. Why?"

"Well, for this one...I think we may need it."

* * * * *

Tanner stepped through the front door of their townhouse condo and set down his briefcase. He'd spent the afternoon visiting elderly clients, and although he normally enjoyed chatting with them and hearing the stories of days of yore, today it had been almost more than he could tolerate.

He sighed, slipped off his jacket and hung it in the closet. Who was he kidding? Lately there wasn't much he *could* tolerate. His temper had worn down to a nub, his appetite was suffering and he rarely had the energy to work out anymore. Even Celeste was suffering for it, and he truly regretted that. He didn't resent her for her decision. He loved her too much for that. But that didn't mean he could make himself feel differently either.

He stepped farther into the house, his shoes clicking lightly on polished maple. The late afternoon sunlight streamed in through the wide bay window, setting off the rich taupes and terra cottas that accented their décor. He and Celeste had decorated their house together, choosing furniture that was sleek yet warm, stylish yet homey, and the results of that partnership had been as successful as it had been in every other facet of their lives.

His life with her was rich and fulfilling, fun and exciting, lacking in nothing and providing him with all a man could ask for. He hated the fact that now it all seemed somehow...hollow.

He wanted to get over this so badly. He *needed* to. He needed to move on with his life and get back to being the kind of husband and lover that Celeste needed and deserved. But he just didn't quite know how.

"Tanner?" called a familiar lilt from the kitchen. "Is that you?"

And then he smelled it. If anything could lift his spirits it was his wife's special beef tenderloin in a red wine and Portobello mushroom sauce. She always served it with creamy mashed potatoes accented with roasted garlic.

"Yeah, it's me. Sorry I'm late." His mouth already watering, he started down the hall to the kitchen. "But Mr. Malone had the urge to tell me about how he lost his leg in the war. Again."

He stopped when he noticed the table. It was set for three. "What the—" He turned to Celeste. "You didn't tell me we were having a guest." And then he smelled it—the other thing that could set his mouth to watering like nothing else. Ben's cologne.

"I'm no guest," said a familiar baritone from the corner behind him. "I'm like family."

Tanner whirled to see the most beautiful thing he'd laid eyes on in three months. Ben lounged in the patio doorway, clad in jeans and a white cotton shirt that hung open to reveal the best set of abs Tanner had ever seen. His mouth fell open and his heart pounded in his throat.

"Hey, Tanner." Ben grinned. "It's good to see you too."

"But...I don't..." He turned to Celeste, and noticed that her eyes were shimmering with tears. "I don't understand."

"I realized I'd been an idiot, Tanner. I think I realized it a week after we got back, but it just took me a few months and my mother's unique wisdom to help me accept it."

Tanner's eyes went wide. "Your mother?"

She nodded, stepped forward and grasped Tanner's hand. "Yes. I confided in her, and believe it or not, it was the smartest thing I could have done." She extended her other hand to Ben and he crossed to her, accepting it.

"Your mother," he said, incredulous. "Your mother who attends mass every Sunday like clockwork and rides my ass about not going to confession."

Celeste nodded, smiled. "Yes, that's the one. She showed me that by being afraid of losing something, I had caused myself the exact pain I was trying to avoid." She shook her head in frustration. "I'm sorry. That sounded crazy. This is hard to put into words."

He squeezed her hand. "No, it's not crazy at all." He looked at Ben. "I think I understand."

"I realized that I can't change the way I feel, and I certainly can't change the way you feel. And she made me realize how precious that is, and how I should embrace it. Not fear it." She blinked away a tear. "There are no guarantees in life. We can't be so afraid of pain that we never allow ourselves to experience joy. And I should be grateful for the opportunity to love so deeply. Whether it lasts a day or a decade—it's worth the risk." She kissed Tanner's cheek. "You're worth it." She turned to Ben. "You both are."

Tanner felt lightheaded. This was all so much to absorb. "So what does this mean... exactly?" He looked at Ben, had to fight the urge to tackle him to the floor. "You're here for a visit?"

"No. I took a job managing the Harbourfront Hotel two months ago. I'm here to stay."

"When I called the resort they were nice enough to tell me how to reach him. I went to see him in person and was so relieved when he didn't slam the door in my face."

"Are you kidding?" laughed Ben. "You were the most beautiful thing I'd laid eyes on in months."

Still trying to absorb his presence, Tanner stared at him. Then shifted his gaze to Celeste and couldn't help but notice the huge grin that now split her face.

"Close your mouth, Tanner. It's spring. There are flies in the house again."

He looked from his wife, to the man he'd come to love, and back to Celeste. "I'm...overwhelmed. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to thank you."

"For God's sake, don't thank me, Tanner. I did this for myself as much as for you." She laid her head on Ben's shoulder. "And of course for him."

Tanner's heart filled, but still he was cautious. "Are you sure, honey? We can take this slow, not jump in with both feet quite so quickly. I don't want you taking any risks with your heart that you're not ready to take."

She sighed, touched his cheek. "See, that's why I love you. Because you're so damn sensitive." She winked. "Unlike Ben here who is a real cad."

With a meaningful lift of an eyebrow Ben moved in behind her, settled his hands on her shoulders. "You think I'm a cad, eh?"

"I do."

"I think I should be offended."

"Don't be." She kept her eyes riveted on Tanner. "It's part of your charm. It just...is."

"And you think you can mend my ways, is that it? Make an honest man out of me?"

"Well..." Her smile was at once sweet and suggestive. "Maybe not...completely honest."

He lifted her hair and said against her bare neck, "So you like a touch of the cad, then?"

"Mmm." Her eyes closed in delicate pleasure. "Perhaps."

"How about you, Tanner?" His gaze was hooded. "Do you think I'm a cad?"

"Absolutely."

"And you're not worried that a cad could take advantage of your wife?"

"Not at all," said Tanner, his hand cupping her breast and his lips brushing her cheek. He loved her so much his heart ballooned in his chest. Add to that the love he felt for Ben and he could barely contain his passion. Thank God he wouldn't have to anymore. "Celeste can take care of herself, thank you. She's stronger than both of us put together."

Ben's lips paused in their explorations. "On that point," he whispered, "I would have to agree."

Celeste's spirit soared.

Pressed between the bodies of two of the most amazing, tantalizingly sexy men she'd ever met, she felt happy, satisfied. Complete. Every whisper of lips over her skin, every touch of strong, possessive fingers, every caress and every hushed murmur reaffirmed her decision.

But for as much as her soul brimmed with passion and her body ached with need, none of that mattered. It was what she felt in her heart—and what she saw in Tanner's eyes—that meant the most. No matter what the risks.

She'd had to learn again that life wasn't about coloring inside the lines and doing things *right*. Life was about *living*. And living meant taking risks, diving in and putting your heart on the line. It was about doing what felt right for you and for those you loved. And at that moment, the happiness she felt in her heart and the utter joy that she saw mirrored in Tanner's eyes made it all worthwhile. The fact that she took equal satisfaction from Ben's happiness told her that there was no going back. If she got her heart broken again, so be it. She would survive—and be a better person for it.

Love was a dangerous game, but one that had to be played. And if you were going to play it well, you had to play it for keeps.

"Umm," she moaned when Ben's hand slipped around her waist and sought out the button on her jeans. "Aren't you guys hungry?"

Tanner whisked her t-shirt over her head and made quick work of the front clasp on her bra. "Whoever said there's no such thing as a stupid question never heard that one."

She laughed. "I meant for *food*."

"We can have mashed potatoes anytime." Ben's fingers slipped beneath her thong and parted the folds of her pussy, making her eyes flutter closed in ecstasy. "Right now we want you."

"We have to show our...appreciation." Lips found her breast.

"Express our undying affection." Her jeans and thong puddled around her ankles and Ben's erection firmly nudged her ass.

Surprised, she opened her eyes to realize with shock that somehow both men had also shed their clothes.

Tanner released her breast and straightened to his full height. He cupped her chin and lifted her face to his. "I love you, Celeste. I need you to know that."

"So do I." It was Ben's voice, whispered so softly in her ear that it sent shivers skittering down her arm. "And I hope you can accept that. I hope it's okay because I can't change it."

"Yes," she breathed, pressing a kiss to Tanner's lips before turning her head and lavishing one on Ben's. She gazed into Ben's face and felt something deep inside her sigh. "Yes, it's okay. Because even though it's crazy, I love you both, and I don't think I could change it even if I wanted to."

"Good." A smile crinkled the skin around Ben's eyes. "Then you don't mind if we make love to you." He winked at Tanner. "Right here. Right now."

"Well, I—" The rest was lost on a moan when Tanner's tongue touched her pussy. She wilted against Ben who wrapped those sinewy arms around her waist and buried his face in her hair.

"God, you smell wonderful," he said. "I'll never get tired of that scent."

"Grab a chair," directed Tanner, his fingers buried deep in her pussy. He grinned. "I'm gonna be a while."

Ben grabbed one of their pine kitchen chairs and settled himself into it before gripping Celeste by the waist. "Straddle me, baby." He urged her legs apart and guided her down onto his lap, his full, hard cock easing inside her and making her gasp with pleasure.

"Now lean back." He pulled her back against his chest, her head resting on his shoulder as Tanner knelt on the floor and began once again to minister to her with his tongue.

Ben played with her breasts and nibbled on her ear as Tanner's tongue did sinful things to her clit. She could sense that Tanner's hands, however, were occupied elsewhere. Ben's occasional groan of pleasure, and the frequent twitches of his cock deep inside her, told her that he enjoyed the attention Tanner was lavishing on the base of his cock and his balls.

"How does she taste?" asked Ben.

Tanner lifted his head. "Care to find out for yourself?" And then he rose and shared a deep, hungry kiss with Ben. Celeste's clit throbbed as she watched the passion that passed between the two men.

"Mmm. Delicious." Ben licked his lips, his eyes burning. "Like ambrosia."

Celeste wrapped her hand around Tanner's cock and squeezed. "I want to taste you now."

"But I wasn't finished with you," argued Tanner.

"Too bad." Celeste pushed him back to sit on another kitchen chair located behind him.

"Well, when you put it that way."

Celeste leaned forward and took him in her mouth, Ben's cock never having left her pussy.

He knelt behind her, his hands gripping her hips as she laved and sucked Tanner's cock. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked, his voice low and raspy. "Fuck you while you suck your husband?"

"Yes." She licked the length of Tanner's cock and circled her tongue around the tip. "I do."

Ben gripped her hips and drove himself deep, his cock a steel rod that nudged her cervix and sent her spiraling even as her mouth rode up and down Tanner's shaft.

"Christ," said Tanner, his hands gripping her shoulders, his fingers like velvet vises on her skin as he guided her movements. "This is crazy."

"Yeah. Crazy," echoed Ben, his fingers sneaking around to massage Celeste's clit. "But I'll take this over sane any day."

She felt an orgasm grow deep inside, and Ben's momentum built as his excitement grew.

Celeste used her hand to enhance the action of her mouth as her lips slid ever faster up and down the length of his cock.

"Jesus," moaned Tanner. "Sweet *Jesus!*"

He came in her mouth just as her own orgasm burst over her like thunder rolling over a mountain. Hard and intense, the echoes of it shuddering through her and milking Ben to his own bone-jarring climax.

Grinning, Celeste raised her head and reached for a napkin to wipe the excess cum from her lips. "Well, that was...explosive."

"She's going to kill us," grumbled Ben, flopping back down in the chair behind him. "I swear to God she's out to kill us."

Tanner just laughed and gazed at her with eyes full of adoration. "No," he said, reaching out to touch her cheek. "This is living, my friend. This is really living."

Celeste sat back on her haunches and shifted her gaze from one handsome form to the next and then back again. She smiled with satisfaction and reached for her t-shirt

that had been kicked under the table. “So much for the appetizer. Anybody up for a little...*meat?*”

The echoes of their laughter filled the kitchen – and spilled over into her heart.

About the Author

Nikki lives in a small town in Ontario, Canada. In the midst of the chaos that comes with raising three small boys, working part-time as a lab tech in a hospital blood bank, and caring for her ever-adoring husband, she dreams up her stories. Nikki's work is an eclectic combination of romance, mystery, suspense and humor with characters that have plenty of room to grow.

Nikki welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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